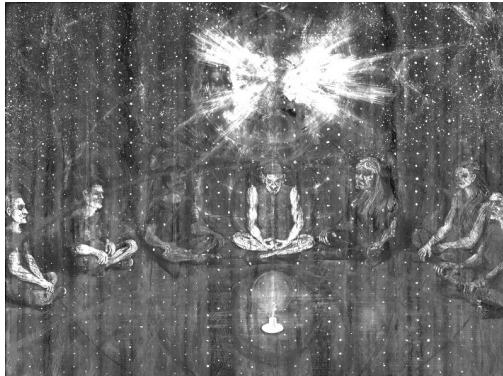


The Genesis Generation

A psychedelic novel



Lorenzo Hagerty

Reader Comments

A truly exciting book - gives hope for mankind! Great story and nice writing. I finished this book weeks ago and still think about it every day.

The *Genesis Generation* is a wonderful coming of age tale about a contemporary intellectual. The path we choose when we leave our childhood homes is seldom the one we stay on. Such was the case for the young man in this novel who discovered that the reality he inhabited was merely one of political and economic structures.

The Genesis Generation by Lorenzo is a life changing experience, not just a novel. I have listened to the audio book format of it 3 times now, and each and every time I get something new out of it. It certainly won't be the last time I listen to it. *The Genesis Generation* has had a profound impact on my development as a human being, as a spiritual being, and as a member of the psychedelic community. This book is amazing, you get both life changing revelations and an incredibly addicting story to boot.

I discovered Lorenzo as the host of the Psychedelic Salon podcast. After a few months of diving into the podcasts and buying a Kindle, this was my first book purchase. I was pleasantly surprised as I read *The Genesis Generation*. The characters reminded me of myself during difficult periods of my own journey through life, and the overall narrative was simply beautiful. I was both entertained and enlightened by this story and would recommend it to all the Others out there in cyberdelic space.

This book is a classical rendition of the hero's journey that is calling to all of us. It follows the main character, Will, through his own confusing time of initiation into a greater mystery and a bigger meaning, and we look on and cheer as he takes on the many

manifestations of cultural conditioning. It's a battle that I think we all must face if we hope to reach our full potential.

This story has a great message that we can all learn from. A lot of the ideas and concepts were right on. Lorenzo lays out a world that I would love to be a part of.

This book was a lot of fun. Not only did it present interesting ideas and perspectives for my stimulated mind to run off on tangents with, but I also cared about the characters and the story in general. I plan to revisit this and read it again sometime soon, because it really is a quick read, (even if you're baked).

If you've gotten this far, this book is probably worth checking out. First off, even at this point, it's surprising how few works of fiction are out there that attempt to capture the whole psychedelic subculture that is thriving around the world. It's a good story told in *The Genesis Generation*-prototypical-and it seems that there should be many similar novels out there, but as far as I know this is the only one. Lorenzo himself has a very interesting history as well that parallels this line, as he moved from the straight-laced conservative/military/corporate/legal structure to a place that puts his feet more firmly on the ground, ground that just happens to be hurtling through space. That experience certainly seems to form the basis of this story. Having listened to his podcast many times, I checked out the book, and there is definitely an additional layer of that territory presented here.

Excellent read, a great story and recommended to anyone. If your travels brought you to this page, you should give it a read.

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To
Ruth, Joe, Anne, Leo, Marycie
. . . and to my Muse!

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Prologue

The Lost Book of Thoth

Myths and legends only spare the nonbelievers.

Johannes' hands trembled as he carefully closed the old leather pouch containing the parchment pages that had been among his grandfather's most precious possessions, having been left to him by Giordano Bruno more than a half a century earlier. Although the bulk of the alchemical library of Rudolf II had previously been shipped to Vienna, it was the Winter King, young Fredrick himself, who had seen to it that this magical treatise remained well-hidden in Prague Castle, just before he fled to Holland, along with his young bride. That was around the same time that the Pilgrims were stepping out of their boats at Plymouth Rock. A generation later, Swedish troops were storming the castle gates, and old Johannes knew that the time had come for the mysterious leather pouch to be hidden in plain sight, so that it would not be destroyed in the looting that was sure to follow.

The wooden packing crate that he chose was carefully constructed so as to hide its false bottom. After placing the old leather pouch in the crate, and then securing the bottom's secret panel, Johannes packed some of the other remaining volumes of ancient occult knowledge into the crate, making sure that the top was left ajar, in hopes that it wouldn't be damaged when the raiders attempted to see what it held.

According to legend, even a brief glance at the pages now safely hidden in the bottom of that sturdy crate would cause the gods to rain down punishment upon an unworthy transgressor. However, not being a superstitious person, Johannes took a look anyway,

Prologue

and on numerous occasions. Much to his dismay, the secrets they contained were buried in a maze of unintelligible symbols that were even more obscure than the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians. Unfortunately, as it turned out, ancient Egypt had been the focus of much of Bruno's alchemical research, and this misled him into thinking that the documents were from an early dynasty. Little did Bruno know but that they were actually of much more recent origin, relatively speaking. Legends are slippery that way.

"I wonder," Johannes thought, "if anyone will ever find these ancient texts and discover their secrets." It amused him to think that the legend that followed these documents on the one hand promised immortality to anyone who could understand their meaning, yet on the other hand it threatened an unworthy reader with death for doing so. "It reminds me of the story of Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden," he said aloud, and then to himself, "But I need not worry, because I only studied them without understanding their meaning. So no harm should come to me."

Just then, a dozen or more soldiers broke down the door to the library, and within seconds, an arrow pierced Johannes' heart. Apparently, there was more to the legend than met the eye.

Chapter 1

Awakening in Palenque

JOURNAL ENTRY: I have come to the belief that we who are alive today are going to be judged not only by our own time but by all times. History is at such a pivotal moment right now that there is not a person alive who doesn't have the potential of becoming the butterfly whose tiny flapping wings seed a storm that grows so great that it eventually tips human consciousness into its next higher state.

In essence, that is my whole story, and if you already understand exactly what I mean, then there is no reason for you to read any further. But the only way I know how to help the rest of you truly grok what is happening right now is to tell the whole story, as best as I can remember it.

What it boils down to, I guess, is that I have actually come to believe the line in an ancient Hopi prophecy that says, "WE are the ones we have been waiting for." And for me, that means that I can gain no further benefit by living another lifetime on the sidelines, fervently hoping that the task now before us will fall to some future generation. I am now convinced that the day has arrived for each and every one of us (and you know who you are) to stand up and be counted. And if we are not willing to take that risk, then we should acknowledge the fact that we are passing up an opportunity that will not come again on this planet for another 100,000 lifetimes.

As has been my habit for a long time now, I keep a journal. And while I don't write in it every day, during most weeks I get a few lines in. What follows is an expanded version of the notes I made on a few of the more significant days during the most eventful twelve

months of my life, so far. I can't guarantee that I've recalled all of the conversations exactly as they occurred, but I have done my best to give you a sense of what it was like at the time these events took place.

* * *

November 22, 2003 - A campground near the Mayan ruins at Palenque, Mexico . . . Saturday night

*Humankind is being led along an evolving course,
through this migration of intelligences,
and though we seem to be sleeping,
there is an inner wakefulness that directs the dream,
and that will eventually startle us back to the truth of who we are.*

Rumi

I think that Rumi quote pretty much sums up my state of mind when I decided to step out of my comfort zone a bit and join a group tour to the ruins at Palenque. To be honest, camping isn't something I enjoy all that much. But my life had become so routine and boring that I knew something had to change. My job was interesting, but my life wasn't. Apparently that "inner wakefulness" that Rumi talked about was doing its thing. So when a friend from work suggested we check out some old Mayan ruins in Mexico, I jumped at the chance.

The trip was fantastic, even the camping. In many ways it was like being in a completely different world. I can't explain precisely what it is about Palenque that is so compelling to me, but for sure there is some powerful magic in that beautiful Mayan jungle.

For me, the magic began in earnest on the last night of our trip. We had been camping at a spot within walking distance of the ruins. Luckily for us, it wasn't too crowded the week we were there, and it was easy to make friends as we weaved our way to the road from the spot where our little group had pitched our tents. Up near the road there were a few small stone buildings that could be rented if sleeping in a tent wasn't for you. And it was at a party in one of those little stone huts, on the last night of our trip, that my life took a turn in a radically different direction.

Some traveling musicians had rented one of the huts to hold a going away party, as many of us who had been camping there all week were leaving the next morning. I was one of the last to arrive at the party because I knew that most of the people there were planning on taking Ecstasy, and I had to avoid that scene due to the fact that at the time my job required me to have a Secret-level U.S. security clearance. The last thing my career needed was a drug charge against me. So I did my best to stay squeaky clean in that regard. Alcohol and caffeine were my drugs of choice.

Needless to say, arriving late did nothing to shield me from the marijuana smokers. I had never seen such a thick cloud of smoke in a room in my life! And of course, when I walked into that wall of smoke, my level of self-induced paranoia went off the chart. I freaked out thinking that just the secondhand smoke alone would probably get me busted at the airport. But then, through the fog I saw my friend from work. He was sitting on an old wooden kitchen chair, quite king-like right in the middle of the room. And he had a woman on each knee with another one massaging his shoulders from behind. Without a doubt, he was

stoned out of his mind and obviously in his own little heaven. Until this trip I had never even suspected that Russ smoked pot. After all, his security clearance was even higher than mine. That was my first hint that there was still a lot for me to learn about how the world really works.

It didn't take long, however, for me to get into the rhythm of the night. After chugging down a couple of cervezas, I felt the paranoia quietly slip away . . . at least for about an hour. Then it returned with a vengeance!

In retrospect, it is easy to see that once I knew of the existence of communities of free spirits like these there would be no turning back for me. But at the time I was more than a little freaked out by all of their talk about drugs and what they called "journeys back to Source." Of course, back then I was "a geeky, know-it-all asshole," as Ralua so eloquently put it when she told me later what she thought about me that night. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I've always felt a little awkward at parties where I don't know many people, and so I did what I usually do in those situations and headed for the food. The cabin was a large rectangular stone box with a high ceiling. To the left of the door there was a sleeping loft that was held up by a couple of thin wooden poles, and on the right was an open, high-ceiling kitchen area. Mainly, it was a big open space with a fireplace opposite the door. There were several sofa beds and large cushions scattered around the room. A long table served as a kind of a wall on my right, and it separated the room into a food area and a conversation area.

The cabin wasn't all that big and seemed even smaller with forty or so people crammed in. And it sounded as if everyone was talking at the same time,

filling the space with an insanely loud buzz, making it difficult to hear the people playing their guitars up in the loft. You have probably been to a party like that yourself, where you had to shout to the person next to you just to be heard.

Soon I was filling my plate from dishes on the table, which was loaded with all kinds of delicious foods that I had never tasted before. Coming from Dallas, I was basically a meat and potatoes guy. So all of these new-tasting vegetarian dishes were a real treat for me, particularly since my campfire cooking left a lot to be desired. The truth is, I was close to ravenous, particularly for anything that didn't taste burned.

I'll say one thing about this crowd that few would argue with, and that is the fact that they really knew how to create a feast out of food that a lot of people wouldn't have thought of as being particularly interesting. I can still remember the taste of the raw chili peppers that were stuffed with finely chopped onion, carrots, and cilantro, all mixed into a paté-like filling that I later learned was made from sunflower seeds. Who would have thought anyone could make things like that taste so good? And how they achieved such an exquisite blend of flavors in dishes that came out of what appeared to be a dirty old campground kitchen I still can't figure out.

The table, covered with food and fresh-cut flowers, reminded me of one of those beautiful Buddhist sand paintings that are swept away shortly after they are completed. So I decided to do my part and sweep away some of the food.

As I was grazing this lovely feast, I commented to a woman standing next to me that I was surprised to see that someone had brought salmon paté to what

was billed as a raw vegetarian buffet. It was actually the best salmon paté I had ever tasted, and I didn't mean it as a complaint at all. But when I said that, she completely cracked up. As she laughed, some little pieces of food shot out of her mouth and landed on my arm, which, for some reason, just made her laugh even more. Then she tried to brush the food off my arm all the while shouting something about the salmon paté to an exotic-looking woman who was standing with her back to us at the end of the table.

It really isn't possible for me to do justice to a description of what Ralua looked like that night. She was wearing a long native-style dress in a color so bright it looked as if it was glowing. Her dark hair, topped with a small green beret, hung in dreadlocks all the way down her back. And while my impression was that her hair was drowned in dozens of precious jewels, the truth was that she had only one or two little feathers in it, along with a bead stuck here and there. It wasn't the little details that drew your eye to Ralua, though, it was her aura.

At the time I didn't know what an aura was, but if you had pointed her out to me and said, "See how she looks? Well, that's what an aura is," I would have understood immediately. Even to an existentialist geek like I was at the time, Ralua's aura shined through.

So here I was, transfixed, staring at this glorious being as she began to turn around. It almost seemed as if we were in a slow motion film. And all the while, her friend was laughing hysterically, rubbing my arm, and shrieking, "He likes your salmon, Ralua. So it's OK that you killed that poor little fishy." It would be months later until I learned that the joke (which was obviously amped up by the inordinate quantities of pot

everyone had been smoking) was that it wasn't actually salmon but a faux salmon made with wine-soaked almonds and carrots, among other things.

As this incident points out, the government actually did get one of their facts right about marijuana. They listed one of the only negative side effects of marijuana as euphoria. When you think about it, this really isn't a negative feature to someone who has just had a toke or two. Who doesn't want to be a little euphoric from time to time? However, for anyone who is not very happy and is in the middle of a bunch of euphoric people, well, euphoria can lose its charm quite rapidly. So while being high on marijuana can make trivial things seem funny, to a nontoker the same things will often seem stupid, or at least not worthy of such excessive glee as the smokers seem to enjoy.

So this manic woman is pawing on my arm and cackling something about salmon, all the while continuing to spit more little pieces of food on me, causing her to laugh even harder. Yet it was as if I was watching a video and the sound suddenly got cut off. I heard nothing (and barely noticed the pawing on my arm) while the divine creature at the end of the table slowly turned, broke into a huge smile, and when her green eyes met mine she screamed, "WILLIE!" As she rushed toward me, the tsunami of conflicting emotions washing over me in that instant was the first sign that my life was about to change forever.

"Laura?" I barely whispered as her arms wrapped around me in the most all-enveloping embrace I have ever experienced.

In a way, it felt as if I was having a near-death experience, the kind where your entire life flashes before you in a few seconds. Laura (as I knew her

before she changed her name to Ralua) and I more or less grew up together and had been best friends since we were three years old. In truth, there were a couple of times when I made passes at her, but the response was always the same, "I told you, Willie, we are going to be best friends for life, but never lovers. That's our line. Cross it and we're history."

The tragic death of one of our high school classmates on graduation night more or less brought our friendship to an unexpected end for reasons I'm still not clear about. But after I went off to college we went our separate ways and just gradually drifted apart. That was a little over ten years ago.

BAM! In a single instant I revisited hundreds of magical childhood memories. And in the same instant I again experienced the agony of those mind-numbing years in high school. Then BAM! Laura and I were saying goodbye as I left for college. Then BAM! Here we were in a Mexican jungle. Only slowly did it begin to dawn on me that this was the same person that her spitting, laughing friend was calling Ralua.

I guess you could say that, after finishing high school, both Laura and I had followed our parents' wishes. My parents wanted me to go to a small college, preferably a Catholic one, and so I did. Laura's parents were a little more enlightened, not that my parents weren't great. They just didn't see the world in quite the same way as Laura's parents did. One day she told me that when she asked her parents what would make them most proud of her, they said, "We want you to do what you came here to do, because that will make you happiest."

Have you ever had one of those experiences where you knew what words were about to come out of your mouth, but no matter how hard you tried to

stop them, they came out anyway? “So, how are your parents, Laura?” I asked in what I intended to be my coolest voice. With that, the two women embraced and nearly collapsed to the floor in hysterical laughter. “He likes your salmon, Ralua.” More hysterical laughter. “AND he likes my parents too!” More hysterical laughter. Then, as if some invisible switch had been thrown, the spitting woman held her friend at arm’s length, and with a stone-cold-sober-looking frown on her face asked, “Hey! Who’s this person called Laura?”

From behind her, a choir began to echo her chorus, “Who’s Laura? Who’s Laura? Who’s Laura?” until their chanting caught everyone’s attention, and in an instant most of the conversations in the room stopped. Then a wiry-looking man who appeared to be in his late 50s began to croon, “Tell us your stoorieeee, Laura dear Lo. Tell us your stoorieeee, we all want to know.” Instantly, I had the feeling that I was not going to like Laura’s friends, but like many of my other first impressions back then, I was wrong. As it turned out, that goofy old singer is now my mentor.

The next half hour or so is a little fuzzy in my memory. I know that Laura/Ralua introduced me to more people than I could possibly remember by name, and she may have told me then about why she changed her own name. But I only remember hearing her talk about that when she spent the night at my place in Dallas. It’s an interesting story, but too long to repeat here.

After a bit, Deirdre, the laughing-spitter-lady, began to call Ralua’s little posse together, “Attention! Attention! Here and now! Here and now! Come and meet a ghost from Ralua’s past. It’s ghost story time, everyone.” I wasn’t sure I liked being called a ghost

from the past, but it soon became obvious that any connection to Laura was worth more than gold. Old Joe once called her “the heartbeat of the Tribe,” and I didn’t hear anyone contradict him. For her part, Laura/Ralua assumed a beatific smile that let me know she was pleased to see me, but that this would probably be a good time for me to keep my big mouth shut.

“So, my young friend. Tell us about the land where you and the childhood incarnation of Ralua, the person you call Laura, once frolicked as carefree young innocents,” boomed the older guy whose singing had already irritated me. “Please give us a peek into the childhood of our dear goddess, Ralua.”

With the soothing voice of a mother speaking to a precocious but dearly-loved child, Laura said, “Now, Shadow, this would be a good time to practice being impeccable.” As she spoke, it seemed as if another channel of communication had opened between them, because I am sure they exchanged some silent understanding when their eyes met for only the briefest of moments.

“Of course. You are right as usual, Ralua,” he said in a less intense manner, although his eyes remained brightly focused on me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, offering him my hand “I’m William. I didn’t catch your name.”

“That’s because you didn’t hear it. Just call me Shadow, everyone does.”

“Shadow? Like a shadow on the ground?”

“You got it, my friend,” he beamed with a smile so wide that he almost looked crazed. His bright blue eyes even outshined the reflection from his bald head. I attributed this fire-coming-out-of-the-eyes look to the

fact that he was probably under the influence of some kind of drug. Only that night, I later learned, he hadn't taken anything. Like me, he'd only been drinking beer. Later I discovered that this intense, fire-eyed nature was his normal state, which makes Shadow somewhat difficult to be around if you want to slack off a bit. He is definitely a Type A guy, a lovable one, but Type A all the way.

I don't know how long we stood at the end of the table exchanging stories about who we were and what we did, but I'm sure that twenty minutes or more had passed before Deirdre interrupted the conversation to say, "Excuse me for a minute, but I think Ralua may want to know that her old friend here not only likes her salmon, but he REALLY LOVES her brownies."

A look of true concern flashed across Laura's face for just an instant before her big smile began to grow and she very slowly said, "BROWNIES? Brownies plural? As in more than one quarter of one brownie?" Gales of laughter immediately followed. Once again, the joke seemed to be on me.

That night I learned a very valuable lesson. Whenever you are around this group who sometimes call themselves the Tribe, never sample the sweets without first learning their proper dosage. That night the brownies were particularly potent, as everyone threw the last of their stash into the mixing bowl because it wasn't worth the risk of crossing the border with marijuana in your possession. Never transport, always buy local, that seemed to be their motto.

Except for the time when I was in first grade and accidentally fell into some freshly poured concrete at the mall, the next half hour was the most humiliating time of my life. One minute the room was a buzzing hive of conversation, and the next minute people were

arranging pillows and couches around the fireplace, while others magically cleaned up the kitchen and moved the food table against a wall, as if they were well trained ants following the orders of their queen, a role that Laura/Ralua seemed to command without question.

The humiliating part was that all of this sudden activity was centered on creating what someone was calling “a safe container” for me once my mega-dose of brownie came on. You have no idea what kind of effect all of this had on my reawakened paranoia. Outside of a few tokes of marijuana in college, I had never actually experienced a heavy drug trip. Not knowing what to expect, my mind began calling up images of me being raped in a Mexican prison where I was being held after I freaked out on brownies and killed someone.

I must have expressed some of these fears to Laura, because she took me outside where she gently whispered, “Now, Willie, let me tell you exactly what’s going to happen. I know you are still operating under the *Reefer Madness* lies that you’ve been fed by the Ruling Class, but almost everything you know about drugs is probably wrong.”

“Can you please call me William, or even Will? Anything but Willie!” I pleaded, totally ignoring everything she said after “Now, Willie.”

As I was about to ask her why she was still wearing that silly little hat she'd had since we were kids, one of her scouts showed up with a very stoned Russ in tow. “This guy says that he works with your friend, and that he’ll be more than happy to take responsibility for getting Mr. Brownie home tomorrow.” That was the other thing I was freaking out about. How was I going to get to the airport in the morning?

A quick look at the goofy grin on Russ' face let me know that I was in even more trouble than I had first thought. He quickly lost the train of our conversation about getting to the airport and began looking over his shoulder at all the hectic activity going on inside the cabin.

"What's goin' on?" he asked as he turned back toward us. Then he looked directly at Laura, "Are your parents coming back home early tonight? Is that why we're cleaning up?" By then, the first of the marijuana-laced brownies had begun to kick in, and I joined the three of them, laughing wildly for little reason.

"Now you know," said Laura, as she smiled at me.

"Now I know what?"

"Now you know what the next few hours are going to be like for you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You're going to start laughing at little things, and you'll probably find some rather sophomoric ideas to have profound significance all of a sudden. All in all, you're about to have the best time of your life. Look at it this way, Willie, you crossed the Rubicon once you swallowed all those brownies. There is simply no going back now. So you might as well relax and enjoy it. And don't worry, never in all of recorded history has a single person ever died from an overdose of cannabis."

"William. Please call me William. No one has called me Willie since high school."

"OK, Willie, I'll try to remember to call you William," she teased.

And with that, she led me back into the cabin and to a couch that had one end angled out from the fireplace, doing its part to form a large semicircle of couches and cushions that became our cocoon for the rest of the night. She sat down in one corner with her legs stretched out the length of the couch and invited me to lie down beside her with my head in her lap. For the rest of the night I drifted in and out of a silken floating dream. Thinking back to that night, I am no longer sure how much of the conversation I'm recounting here actually took place in that little cabin, and how much of it took place in some other dimension, where our spirit selves had gathered to begin creating a new myth to carry us all forward.

At one point, I remember asking what this Tribe thing was that everyone kept talking about. No two of them came up with the same definition. It was the dance community, the psychedelic community, the followers of shamanic traditions, the electronic music lovers, die-hard hippies, Dead fans, and a dozen other cultures thrown in for good measure.

As the conversation descended into a cacophony of ideas ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, my mind began to wander, and before long I was back in a Midwest winter. The ice on the pond in the middle of our town park was ringed with bright light bulbs that were strung from tree to tree circling the skaters. Laura and I were walking away from the pond on the dark path that led to the parking lot, when on a wild impulse, I reached under her coat and lightly caressed her breasts through the bulky knit sweater she was wearing.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked. Her voice in this dream was much softer than I remembered it being at the time. In fact, at the time

she actually said something more like “WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?” The dream voice was definitely better, I decided.

“William, oh William dear, do you know what you’re doing right now?” the soft dream voice said again.

“OH SHIT! Sorry!” I fumbled, as I sat bolt upright on the couch, suddenly remembering where I was and discovering that I had been absentmindedly massaging Laura’s breasts. “God. I’m sorry, Laura. I was asleep, or in a dream, or”

“Shhh,” she said as she gently pulled my head back down to lie on her chest. “It’s all right, William, just relax and enjoy yourself. And don’t worry, no one is paying any attention to you. It’s OK if you cop a feel now and then, but just don’t get so far into the flow that you forget your manners,” she added with a smile.

For the next hour or so I couldn’t follow any of the conversations going on around me. I know that several times Laura got into serious discussions with the group, but I can’t tell you what they were talking about because my mind was fully occupied trying to process what Laura (or was it Ralua?) had said about copping a feel. “Did she want me to? And what if I did nothing, would she think I didn’t want to? Should I play up to the fact that she was somehow responsible for drugging me and then try to take advantage of the situation? Could tonight be the night that Laura and I finally make love? Could I even get it up as stoned as I am right now? Is my stomach starting to rumble? Am I going to get sick and blow my chances of getting laid?” The loops were endless.

After what seemed like an eternity, I decided to let go of my sexual fantasies about Laura and tune in to the group's discussion, which had begun to increase in intensity.

“ ‘Why are we being intimidated by a bunch of jerks who don't know anything about life. Who are they to tell us what we feel and how we're supposed to behave? And why take all that bullshit?’ ”

“Wow! That's great, Stein. Did you write that yourself?” asked Laura.

“Nah, it's not mine. Guess who said it though. . . a long time ago?”

“I've never heard it before. Have you, Shadow?” Laura asked.

“No. It has a familiar ring to it, but I can't say who it is,” he replied.

“I don't know who actually said that,” a tall black man sitting near the fire said. His voice was very soft, but he obviously commanded everyone's attention whenever he spoke. “My guess is that it was someone from the Beat generation.”

“You got it, Al,” Stein said. “I should say, you got it, MAAAAAAN. It was Allen Ginsberg who said that when he was asked about the philosophical framework of the Beats. Those guys couldn't have cared less about what was being passed off as American Culture at the time. They knew that the country wasn't like what the *Ozzie and Harriet Show* made it out to be. At a time when it was really unpopular to do so, those guys stood up and were counted. And they followed their own plan. They definitely weren't part of someone else's plan, at least from what I've read about them.”

Another first impression: When Stein went off praising the Beats like that, I thought, “How does this young kid get off lecturing to this crowd?” After all, he seemed to be less than half the age of most of the people there. Although he wasn’t very tall, his string-bean frame gave him the appearance of having more height than he did, yet there was no question about the fact that he could not have yet reached his 20th birthday.

Since it seemed like everyone there had some kind of invented name, I thought I was being quite clever when I whispered to Laura, “I’ll bet he’s called Stein because of that fancy beer mug in his hand.”

His large cup was truly a work of art. While reminiscent of the fancy steins sold to tourists in Germany, this one was inlaid with multi-colored electric light fibers that seemed to morph into all kinds of exotic psychedelic patterns that appeared to synchronize with the mood of the conversation. I know I’m not doing it justice.

“No,” said Laura, “it isn’t because of the beer mug, but that’s what he wants you to think. When he first appeared on the scene, we were so blown away by how smart he is that we started calling him Einstein. He HATED that. So we shortened it to Stein, and that’s when he began carrying his electric mug to parties. And I guess it’s worked. I’ve even begun to think of him as the mug, not the brain. He’s one of the smartest people you’re going to meet in this lifetime, though. So be nice to him.”

I still thought the kid was kind of a smart ass, and to be honest, at times he can be both a smart ass and a pain in the ass. But if I was in a jam and could call on only one person to help me, I’d call Stein. He might not personally come to my aid, but he has more

contacts around the world than anyone I know. And Laura was right about him being so smart. He never finished high school, but he has a photographic memory, a great mind, and he reads incessantly. On top of that, he is one of those rare people who are always in a good mood. I would rather spend an evening talking with Stein than with any Ph. D. I know.

“The first question I would ask about any plan for long term survival on this planet,” Laura was saying, “is whether or not it is sustainable. And I’d reject any idea that answers that question with a ‘no’.”

“Well, that’s the ideal situation,” said Shadow, “but I think we have to temper that hard line with a little dose of reality in regards to how a new human culture makes it through the transition. We can’t just go off by ourselves, you know. There are far too many of us now. We number in the millions, I’m sure. So we can’t just go off to the woods and start over. The first thing we’ve got to figure out is how to stay out of the way of the American Empire as it continues to come unglued. Before we know it, the whole enchilada is going to come crashing down about our heads and shoulders.”

“That might be simpler than you think,” said Apache, the stately black woman who was sitting by the fire next to Al. “As you know, locals always survive empires. It seems to me that the trick is to put down deep roots wherever we are living and let the empire wash over us and fade away, as empires always do.”

At that, I was finally able to muster my thoughts long enough to say, “Are you people saying that you really think that the United States of America is going to break up?”

“The Soviet Union did. And it did it so fast that nobody I know of predicted the breakup just five years before it happened,” said Shadow. “Face it, the mythical version of America is already dead. In fact, it never actually existed, except in people’s minds. In Mythical America the needs of the poor and downtrodden were taken care of. Mythical America would never attack a country that hadn’t attacked us first. You think you have a right to privacy? Kiss that goodbye with the seriously misnamed Patriot Act. Your right to a speedy trial? Gone! Now even U.S. citizens can be held indefinitely . . . and without any charges being filed against them. On top of that, you might even be put in one of those secret prisons at which the Attorney General has now authorized the use of torture.

“Do you want me to go on? Face it, Mythical America is dead and gone. May it rest in peace . . . as if it ever existed in the first place.”

“I agree,” said Apache. “Far too many people in the States are still living in an Ozzie and Harriet fantasy world of the 1950s. It’s time for people to wake up and smell the gun smoke, because it’s coming from American guns, and before long they may be pointing at you.”

“But that’s such a negative way of looking at it,” interjected Ralua with her soft voice and a smile. “How about us getting back to the reason we’re here tonight? If you remember, we came down here with the idea that our little extended family would return with some new ideas about how to make it through the coming shift. So how do we go about creating a civilization that rewards sustainable self-determination? Isn’t that what we’re trying to figure out?”

“Sure. But I don’t want to get involved in just some new kind of rat race,” said Stein. “Right now, most of my friends who are stuck in the System spend the better part of their time and energy each week just trying to earn enough money to pay the rent, make a car payment, and get a little food. There’s got to be more to life than that. Personally, I’m not interested in being a part of any community where I’ve got to work more than two or three hours a day to do my part. I’ve got a lot of other things I want to do, and spending my life as a wage slave isn’t one of them.”

I was now beginning to wish I had paid more attention to the earlier part of this conversation. From the few bits and pieces that were beginning to come into focus for me, I gathered that these people were all privy to some knowledge about the future that wasn’t widely known. Or maybe it was widely known by millions of people but never talked about in the news. Actually, I couldn’t really follow much of the conversation at the time because of the effect that those brownies were having on my powers of concentration. So whenever I couldn’t hold onto the story line, I just drifted back into my beautiful floating dreams. Occasionally, another heated exchange would bring me back to the present.

“As you all know already, there is no precise line in the sky that separates Pisces and Aquarius.” As uninterested in astrology as I was at the time, Apache’s hauntingly beautiful voice completely captured my attention. In any great African tribe she would no doubt be their queen. Every time I saw her profile, my first thought was of the famous silhouette of Cleopatra, with her long and graceful neck arched back a bit, as if to include the gods in her conversation.

“There is a window of perhaps 300 years or so. Most likely the transition will be gradual. But my point is that at some moment in time, let’s say it is 500 years from now, at that point in time, we can safely say that humans on the planet Earth will be living under the influence of what is called Aquarian energy.”

“What Apache is pointing out,” Al interjected, “is that it may be worth the effort to begin to consciously transform our thinking into an Aquarian mindset right now. The Age of Aquarius is going to last for over 2,000 years, and one way or another it most likely will be less stressful than the Age of Pisces that we are now leaving.”

“That’s right,” continued Apache, “but keep in mind that there are two polarities to each of these signs. The prevailing consciousness in an Aquarian age can be very rigid - fair, but mechanical and tightly controlled. Or it can be dominated by a deeply human form of compassion and empathy.”

Shadow interjected, “My guess is that, at least for the next few centuries, these two opposite approaches to societal organization will be competing, not directly, but as alternative choices of life-style. In time,” he went on, not giving anyone else a chance to speak, “the cities will become more tightly controlled, with special ease of passage for citizens who have been prescreened and have the proper biometric credentials. In effect, the cities are going to be tightly locked down, and most of the decisions about free movement around town are going to be made by machines that have been programmed to either let you pass or hold you for further screening.”

“Man, that is really going to suck,” said Deirdre who had curled up next to Shadow.

“A brave new world where hackers rule!” shouted Stein as he gave a closed-fist, raised-arm salute.

“The lad has a point,” said Al. “I just reread Huxley’s *Brave New World* a few weeks ago, and I was blown away by how much that hideous future world that Huxley wrote about is like life in the United States today. Do you remember the picture? Almost everyone was working at a mindless job they would have hated but for their daily dose of soma, which is what they took whenever they were awake and not at work.”

“What’s soma?” asked Deirdre.

“It’s what Huxley called the drug that kept everyone mellow most of the time. Whenever people tried to break out of their tightly controlled culture they’d be offered, and in some cases forced to take, a little soma to help them relax and get their minds off the reality of their situations,” said Al as he got up and walked over to the kitchen sink to get a glass of water.

Apache, stretching out like a beautiful cat in front of the fire, added, “In today’s America, soma is television, sports, alcohol, anything that is legal and that takes your mind off changing the status quo.”

“I thought it sounded like MDMA, myself,” said Stein. “At least in the way he described its effect on people.”

“It does remind one of that,” agreed Al, “but Huxley didn’t know about MDMA in the 1930s when he wrote that book.”

“You know, this is why I tried to talk you all out of doing medicine tonight,” exclaimed a somewhat frustrated-sounding Ralua. “It’s impossible to keep the discussion on track with all the detours we keep taking. It doesn’t matter if Huxley’s soma is LSD or

television. What matters is what we are able to do during the next few years to remain free of the net of fear and control that has already trapped so many of our friends, relatives, and neighbors.”

“Stein already mentioned one approach,” said Shadow from the pile of cushions he’d stacked next to the fireplace. “As he just said, hackers will rule in a world where human freedom is doled out by machines. And speaking of hackers, I am happy to report that our Q-teams are within a year or so of having either bots or humans inside every major corporate and government computer network on the planet.”

That, of course, caught my attention, since network security is my specialty. But as I struggled to sit up so I could better follow the conversation, I noticed another of those quick exchanges of a glance between Laura, Shadow, and Stein. Before I realized what had happened, Stein changed the subject.

“You know, you guys should go back and relisten to some of McKenna’s talks. On quite a few occasions during his last few years he talked about the coming conflict between human consciousness and machine consciousness. A lot has happened in the world of tech since he died, but I’d be willing to bet that he’d really be beating the machine-versus-human drum right now.”

I tried to get the conversation back to what Shadow had just said about infiltrating the Net, but my few feeble attempts at entering the conversation never steered them back to my pet topic. As it turned out, this was just as well, because I probably would have tried to show off and inadvertently disclosed something that was classified. At least that’s how I rationalized it.

The truth is that I was far too stoned to carry on any kind of a normal conversation, like I was really stoned, seriously stoned, even the next day and beyond. I have to hand it to Russ. He got me home, but how he did it is something I'll never be able to piece together with any degree of detail.

I know we shared a taxi with someone for the two-hour ride to the Villahermosa airport. That was the easy part, because I slept the whole way. Getting through security, flying to Mexico City and then on to Dallas is still mostly a blur to me. At one point, I don't remember if it was at a ticket counter or going through U.S. customs, a long computer delay convinced me that someone from the party the night before had turned me in to the authorities, who seemed to be everywhere I looked. I thought that every person I saw in a uniform, from the baggage handlers to the pilots, were drug police who were just waiting for the right moment to pounce on me and take me away.

If you had asked me the next day to describe our journey home, I would have been able to describe in great detail how we barely got away from the cops at a ticket counter by diving onto the luggage conveyor belt that was running behind the ticket agents. The dive down the luggage shoot wasn't nearly as bad as I anticipated, but running across the tarmac with people in the little luggage tractors chasing us was tense. It was a grand adventure, and a miracle that we got away.

Of course, had I told you that story, it would have been a complete fabrication. It happened only in my mind. Every time someone stopped us to look at our tickets, my imagination ran wild with get-away plans like that. If, the next day, Russ hadn't assured me that

we'd had a completely uneventful trip home, I probably could have passed a lie detector test telling those crazy escape stories that kept running wild in my head. I still hadn't become accustomed to being stoned and was having a little difficulty telling the difference between what was taking place in the real world versus the imaginary world of cops chasing me that had become my own private reality.

Laura had warned me that with the huge dose of marijuana I'd had in the brownies that I'd eaten, I would still be feeling the effects two days later. While some people might think they would enjoy being high for so long, it isn't all that much fun. I guess I should also be honest with myself about the one little incident where I actually did lose my cool demeanor.

As we were coming in for our landing at DFW airport, the plane made a very steep bank to the right. At the same time, the pilot cut way back on the engine speed in some kind of new noise abatement maneuver I hadn't experienced before.

We were sitting on the right side, and I was asleep with my head on a little pillow leaning against the window. Suddenly, the plane lurched to the right in what seemed to me, in my half-asleep state, a very steep dive. The engine noise went from very loud to almost nothing . . . and I WOKE UP!

My heart stopped as my hands slammed against the bulkhead on either side of the window. If you had been outside the plane looking at me just then, I would have looked like one of those wide-eyed stuffed cats that nutty people stick on their rear car windows.

To make matters worse, as I came out of my stoned sleep, thinking there was a serious problem with the plane, I shouted, "WE'RE GOING DOWN!" My

words seemed to hang in the air as if they were frozen. With the exception of Russ, everyone around us was staring at me in horror.

Fortunately, I guess, Russ began to laugh so hard that I thought he would get sick. After what seemed like an eternity, I took my cue from him and began laughing as if I'd been making a horrible joke. I won't repeat what some of the people around us had to say about my little stunt (as they called it), but I can assure you that none of them thought it was very funny. Of course, that didn't keep Russ and me from giggling like two schoolboys until he dropped me off at my apartment on his way home from the airport that night.

The Genesis Generation

Chapter 2

Depression in Dallas

It is hard for me to recall my exact state of mind two years ago, shortly after Russ and I returned from Palenque. Looking back, I can hardly believe that I have made it this far, considering how naive I was at the time.

Until my trip to Mexico, I was on what my dad called the straight and narrow. Any inclination I might have had to explore parts of our culture that exist on the fringes (or the leading edge, depending on how you look at it) were squeezed out of me by the oppressive guilt trip laid on by the priests and nuns who explained that I came into this world with the black stain of Original Sin on my soul, and that if I didn't stay on the straight and narrow I'd revert to that evil little creature I was before I was baptized. As with most Catholic children, the mental agony inflicted on my young mind by the sick ideas I was being fed at school and in church still haunts me yet today.

After returning from Palenque, I finally began to see that if I was ever going to unleash that person I once imagined myself to be, the person I was in my dreams when I was a young boy, then I first had to extract myself from the religion and the culture I was raised in. I'm not saying that a single week in Mexico, hanging around with what I then thought of as a bunch of edgy freaks, is what changed me, but it was my first peek into a strange new world that until then I hadn't known existed. It was in Palenque that the first small crack began to appear in the cosmic egg of my cultural conditioning.

But before I get too carried away with myself, my new self, I'd better get back to reconstructing the

events of two years ago, back when I was still thinking like a Catholic-raised, conservative geek.

* * *

December 2003 — Dallas, Texas

*Success is a necessary misfortune of human life,
but it is only to the very unfortunate that it comes early.*

Trollope

The first day back at work after my Mexican adventure was one of the longest days of my life. It seemed as if the second hand on my old fashioned desk clock had turned into a minute hand. This was so unlike me. Even when I had menial fast food jobs while in high school, the time just slipped away at work. I could tell that something had changed in me, because all I could think about now was how much I would rather be back at that campground with Laura, or whatever she called herself these days.

I was having all kinds of fantasies about dropping out and traveling around with Laura and her weird friends, and, of course, we would make mad, passionate love all night. The truth is, I'd been working on versions of that fantasy for years, but now I had a vague sense that this time the dream might actually come true. If I remembered correctly, just as our cab was pulling away from the campground, Laura shouted something about seeing me again. I couldn't make out the rest of what she was saying, but as I recall, it sounded like maybe we had made an arrangement to meet somewhere. However, I had no memory of that conversation, if it did in fact take place. And, of

course, I was still so stoned at the time that it didn't occur to me to ask the driver to stop for a moment so I could hear what she was saying.

Suddenly, the phone on my desk began to ring, causing me to snap out of my lovely reverie. "This is William Batersley," I said, very business-like.

"Hey, William. Got time for a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah. I'll meet you in the cafeteria in ten minutes. OK?"

"See you then," Russ said and hung up.

The SiAmerica building had been designed by either the worst architect in the world or by an artistic genius making a statement about the dehumanizing qualities of the corporate world. With just a casual glance, people think it is a lovely design, very reminiscent of those grand hotels that have a ten-story-high atrium, around which each floor provides a promenade from which to look down on a garden below. And at SiAmerica we even had our own little brook winding through the garden, down to the far corner, near the cafeteria.

What was different about this building, significantly different, was that there was no promenade around each floor. Instead, every office had a floor-to-ceiling glass wall that looked down on the scene below . . . and across . . . and above.

I remember that at one point earlier in the day I began to panic when I looked out across that open space at that tower of offices facing mine. Whenever I looked across at them, all of those offices, up and down, left and right, I had the sensation of being trapped inside a huge glass box composed of stacked cubicles stocked with human captives. "God, what a

fucking rat maze this is," I thought. "That's what's wrong with this building. It exposes the reality of what it means to be a wage slave, as that Einstein kid calls us."

By the time I made my way down to the cafeteria, Russ was already there, sitting in our usual booth near the door where we could see everyone who came in. I bought a large coffee and joined him.

"Man, I've never had so much trouble getting back in the groove after a vacation," I said as I sat down across from him.

"You're probably still stoned," he laughed. "That was a big load of grass you ate the other night."

"I thought we agreed that we wouldn't bring that up here at work," I whispered, ducking my head like we were two conspirators planning the overthrow of the company.

"We did. I just couldn't resist pulling your chain a little bit. You're really way too uptight, you know."

"Well, fuck! Look at where we are. We're sitting in the cafeteria of one of the most secretive defense contracting companies in the country. If anyone here found out that we've been using drugs we'd not only be fired, our careers would be over too," I said, as my nonstop paranoia continued to grow. "Once you've got a drug charge on your record there's no way you'll ever get another job like this. And I really do enjoy my work . . . on most days anyway . . . just not today."

"Don't be so sure about not working on top secret projects if you have a toke or two on your own time. In fact, I know of two top-tier government research labs where a few of the programmers even use a little acid

on the job from time to time,” said Russ rather casually.

Before I had a chance to ask him what he based this outlandish statement on, he said, “Don’t look, but your boss is heading over here to join us.”

Sanburn Kellos was one of those corporate vice presidents who look like they were cast by Hollywood for the role. Tall, thin, and always impeccably dressed in tailor-made suits, Sanburn reeked of self-confidence, and entitlement. Years of sailboat racing and downhill skiing had left his always tanned face looking somewhat older than his 57 years, but it perfectly matched his prematurely silver-gray hair.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not, SK,” replied Russ.

Until Russ brought it to my attention a year or so ago, I hadn’t given any thought to why Sanburn always told people to call him SK. Russ explained that, “SK would really prefer it if we all called him MR. Kellos. But he can’t get away with that in this corporate culture. And so he goes by his initials to avoid letting us lesser mortals call him by his first name.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” I asked. Although Russ was only a little more than 10 years older than me, he was a lot more cynical than I expect I’ll ever be.

“I sure do. Just look at his family background. Old family, old money. The only thing that keeps him from the very top of the Superclass Ladder is his religion. It’s still not cool to be a Catholic, no slight to you intended. That’s just the way it is.”

Ever since we first became friends, just a week after I joined SiAmerica, Russ had been trying to get me to examine my religious beliefs. He was an agnostic who had a deep dislike for any and all organized religions. Like almost everyone I knew, on the rare occasions when I did go to church I still went to the same denomination church that my parents had belonged to. It was easier that way, because once you start down that slippery slope of questioning your parents' religion you are in for quite a ride. It was Russ who first got me thinking about these things by pointing out that perhaps I was using my religion more for social connections than for spiritual ones.

"I'm not saying you don't deserve your position," Russ told me one day, "but let's be honest here. You and SK graduated from the same school, one that's known for its good-old-boy network.

"Hell, SK is almost twice your age. He sees you as himself, just out of college and getting his first big break like one that he got from another grad from your exclusive little private school. Now it's time for him to pay the system back."

"So you're saying that the main reason I'm the head of the new R&D group here is that I graduated from the same college as my boss?" I shot back rather defensively.

"Of course not. I already told you that the main reason you're here is that you're fucking brilliant. Hell, you leveraged your master's thesis into a patented algorithm that cryptologists will be using for decades. You're the boy genius who made a name for himself before he was 30 years old. Grant you, it is in a tiny little corner of a very small field, but you did it all on your own, no college connections did that for you."

“Big deal,” I whined. “My last company owns the patent. All I got out of it was a \$10,000 bonus.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot that you judge your own value only in monetary terms,” said Russ. “Anyway, what I’m saying is that no matter how you came to SK’s attention, you would have gotten the job. But the fact that you attended the same clubby school as he did obviously helped you get noticed. You told me that yourself.”

Russ was right, of course. I never actually understood how our school’s old-boy-network operated. All I knew was that if you let a few of your former classmates know you were looking for a job, then somehow the perfect opportunity presented itself.

“So, what are your honest opinions about next week’s team-build?” asked SK as he sat down next to me.

“Outside of the fact that it’s going to put me a little behind in my regular work, I’m looking forward to it,” I lied. The truth was that no one I knew looked forward to these inane attempts to turn a group of mid-level managers into a tight-knit community, loyal first and foremost to the company, our source of sustenance. As you might guess, Russ’ cynicism was already wearing off on me. But even the most solid of our corporate citizens thought that these off-site team-building meetings were ridiculous. Russ was more forthright than I was, however.

“I’ve told you before, SK, these things are a waste of time. You take 50 managers out to the CEO’s private dude ranch, bore us with motivational speeches, and then treat us like children by forcing us to play those stupid games. But hey, as long as I keep

getting such a nice paycheck, I'm with you all the way," Russ said with a big grin.

It was hard not to like Russ, even the other executives put up with his directness because he had such a disarming way of speaking. He has a way of making you think he is joking, and yet you are never quite sure whether or not the joke is on you.

Thankfully, SK didn't stay long enough to finish his coffee. Apparently he just wanted to remind us about next week's team-build. As soon as he was out of earshot, Russ launched into what had lately become his recurring anti corporate rant.

"Beware of the corporate citizen who is 'going places.' The way our system works, they can get where they want to go only by climbing on the backs of those who help them get ahead," he groused.

"Have you always complained like this in every company you've been with?" I asked.

"Not the last one," he smiled.

I should have known better than to open the conversation to the topic of how he came to work at SiAmerica. Russ led a relatively small team of wizards who operated our far-flung communications network. Even before SiAmerica bought out his small network management company, Russ's team had become legendary for the almost negligible amount of downtime that occurred on the networks that they ran.

The buy-out offer from SiAmerica had been impossible to turn down, loads of stock options and a guaranteed salary for Russ and every one of his employees. Most of them had growing families to think about, and that factor alone made it easier for him to sell out to the black box guys at SiAmerica. As it was,

he still had about three more years left before he could start over again, free from the iron-clad noncompete agreement he was more or less forced to sign when he sold his company to them.

“You do know, don't you, that you're giving me a jaded view of corporate life,” I said, trying to nudge the conversation in a lighter direction.

“William, my young colleague, just listening to my cynical outlook on life will in no way protect you from the shock of learning the truth about the way the world works. You grew up in a nice Catholic family, went to Catholic schools, probably dated only Catholic girls, and even though you say you no longer go to church, my guess is that those old teachings still have a hold on you. And a big part of what they teach you is about the value of conformity, being a good citizen, my country right or wrong. Wait'll some cracks begin to show in the myths you've grown up with, then you'll see me as a wise man and not just some bitter, middle-aged, cynical curmudgeon.”

“Actually, Russ, you make a great role model . . . for someone going on 200 years old,” I joked. “But I guess you've had an effect on me, because I sent my resume to that headhunter I told you about a couple months ago. I told her I wanted to get out of the spook world and get into the gaming industry, that's where I think the real action is.”

“Hmm. Now that's a surprise,” said Russ. “Which reminds me. You shouldn't talk about looking for another job when you're in public places.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember where we were when you told me that a headhunter had contacted you?”

“Yeah, we were having lunch at Katie’s Diner.”

“Exactly! And the word on the street is that your boss is having an affair with our dear Katie. So if we happened to be talking about that when she was serving us, there’s a good chance old SK found out over pillow talk that night.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me before?” I shouted.

“Don’t worry. I would have remembered it the next time we went there. And I doubt that she heard us. Otherwise you’d probably have noticed him treating you differently, which hasn’t happened.”

“You’re right. If anything he’s been treating me even better. It was only three weeks ago that he picked me to join the advance team that’s going to Viet Nam next year to explore expanding into that market,” I replied. “It’s actually going to be disguised as some kind of humanitarian project, but SK tells me that the real purpose is to establish some connections with business people over there but not through official channels, whatever that means.”

“Yeah. Now that’s a weird trip though. Don’t you think? What the hell is SiAmerica planning to do in Viet Nam? Everyone in the world knows that we’re the black box guys for our high-tech spooks. What other government in their right minds would trust us to set up a secure communications network for them? It should be obvious that we’d give the U.S. a back door into their network. Something’s really strange about that trip, I tell you. But, hey, I’m probably only feeling that way because I didn’t get invited to go with you. I’ve always wanted to go there and see that country for myself. Anyway, back to your job search. I hope you find what you’re looking for, but you’d better find it before you fall in love and start making babies. Once

the single guy music stops, you're going to be spending many years sitting in whatever chair you happen to find yourself in just then. And if that happens to you, as it does to most of us, hey, it's not really all that bad. In fact, it can be a wonderful life . . . as long as you don't look back and wonder what you'd be doing right now had you actually followed the plan you had when you arrived here, had you followed your destiny. And while I'm giving out free advice here, I'd better also warn you about your good-old-boy job network. Don't use it unless you want SK to know you're looking for a new job. You're his golden-haired boy, you know. He's not going to let you go without a fight."

I thought Russ was just getting carried away with himself again, so I let this comment pass. However, later events have caused me to see the wisdom in Russ' cynical point of view. Unfortunately, by then it was too late to follow his advice.

"Don't worry. I'll be discreet. And the truth is that I'd have to get a really great offer to tear me away from here before we field-test the new toys that my group is developing," I replied.

A cross between a smirk and a smile appeared on Russ's lips, and he said, "Just be careful about making any significant financial commitments until you get settled in a job where you'll be spending the best years of your life. And don't get on this insane carnival ride of debt that most of us keep piling up each year. If you're not careful, you can get crushed under those ever-grinding wheels of debt. I once read that even Thomas Jefferson's character was significantly influenced by his difficulties with money. It's a crusher, debt is, a real spirit-crusher, and it appears to be attacking the entire human race."

“Wow. It sounds like you’re having a little trouble recovering from our trip too,” I joked, again trying vainly to cheer him up.

“Yeah, that too, but I’m mainly having trouble letting go of a dream I had last night.”

“Tell me about it,” I responded, hoping it was a happy dream. Russ would often tell me about his previous night’s dreams. And most of the time they were quite interesting, even to someone who hadn’t been there.

“It was about this place,” he said, holding his arms out as if to take in the entire building, “and I went in and out of the dream all night. This company was essentially keeping me a prisoner, forcing me to work for them even though I was trying to quit. I wasn’t free to leave the building. They knew I was crucial to their success and refused to let me go. My wife was outside the building, talking to me on her cell phone, and she was all happy and excited that I had a guaranteed job, and that I would now be able to pay for our childrens’ college educations. And then I had this big Ah Ha! moment and decided to break free. Somehow I got away. All I had to my name were the clothes on my back and a small bag of pot, but I escaped from their clutches.”

I still didn’t know what to make of Russ. At times he was full of life, engaged and excited about the future. Then he would slip into a dark mood and spread his doom and gloom all over the place. When Russ began to mine one of those black veins of despair, it was best to agree with him and then escape to sunnier climes. So, as I began to slide out of the booth, I said, “I’m beginning to understand what you mean about corporations sucking out a person’s soul. When I came in this morning, I rode up on the elevator

with some new guy I hadn't seen before. I wanted to show off and tell him about our trip to Mexico, so I tried to start a conversation by asking him how his weekend was. Do you know what he said?"

"What?" Russ asked.

"He said, 'Oh, it wasn't bad. I mowed the lawn.' Can you believe that? It wasn't bad! All he did of any note was mow the fucking lawn! What the hell is that guy living for anyway?" I shouted, suddenly caught up in Russ' black mood.

"What are any of us living for? People can tell you what they'd be willing to die for, but what are they living for, that's the real question, don't you think?" Russ said as we headed to the elevator.

To be honest, until that moment I had never actually thought about that question in such stark terms. Why am I alive? It's a question that can't be answered objectively by some august board of wise elders. In fact, no one can answer it for you. I suspect that most people deal with big questions like that the same way I did, and that is to avoid thinking about them. It can be quite disheartening to always be wondering whether or not you might have a more exciting destiny waiting for you than just finding a job, getting married, buying stuff, having kids, and then dying of a heart attack or cancer.

Until I took the job with SiAmerica I thought of my purpose in life only in terms of earning more money. I thought that if I became rich enough then people would recognize my abilities and open the doors of their homes and businesses to me. I had this great fantasy of becoming one of the power elite, one of the movers and shakers who run things behind the scenes. Then last September SiAmerica sent me to

represent them at an international symposium that was being held at Harvard University.

I was really pumped up about the trip because it would be my first time playing with the big boys. The company flew me first class to Boston, and they put me up at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge, within walking distance of Harvard Square. My room came complete with a Bose stereo, a second TV in the bathroom, choice of morning papers, and a personalized bath robe. For about an hour after checking in I felt like a king of the universe. Then I decided to take my first stroll around the campus.

As I walked around campus, I realized that the symposium I was speaking at was being held at the same time as Harvard's freshman orientation days. Everywhere I looked there were parents walking with their perfectly dressed sons and daughters, strolling around the grounds with a grace and elegance that I suddenly realized would never be natural for me. It hit me like a ton of bricks: I didn't belong here! Not on this campus, not in that hotel, and definitely not in the company of the Old-Money Class. They are a world apart from anything I'll ever be. In an instant I realized that no matter how much money I may ever wind up accumulating, I would never be accepted as one of their own.

I had come face-to-face with a fact about life in America that didn't fit the myth: If you aren't born into Old Money, then you will never be totally accepted into the company of those who were born into fortunes greater than most of us can imagine. Never in my life had I felt like such an outsider. Even being a featured speaker at the symposium didn't release the pressure I felt about being born poor. It wasn't that I felt I didn't deserve to be there. Because I did feel that I deserved

it by reason of my abilities and hard work. The feeling I had was that, no matter what I did, they would never feel like I deserved to be in their midst. I could amuse them and help them, but I could never be one of them. A steel door suddenly slammed shut between me and my dreams. “Now what?” I wondered.

I mention this only to let you know that I was already feeling a vague sense of discontent before we even began our five-day team-building ordeal. Christmas was only two weeks away, and I was caught between my growing sense of being out of place and Russ’ infectious cynicism. In short, I was in a mental state that would have given concern to most professional therapists. And, of course, I was still disoriented by the events of our last night in Mexico.

In case you are thinking that my resolve wasn’t firm about changing jobs, I must confess that my reasons to wait weren’t entirely honorable. It is true that I did want to stick around for the field tests of our new high-speed wireless battlefield communications system. The new encryption technique that my team developed for the project was the cornerstone of the entire system. It would have been unprofessional to leave before the inevitable fine tuning was complete. However, the main reason I decided to put off my job search for just a little bit longer was that I was scheduled to take two major trips for SiAmerica that I didn’t want to miss. One was to make a presentation at a conference in Holland, and the other trip was the trade mission (or whatever it was supposed to be) to Viet Nam with SK. With those two trips dangling in front of me, it was much easier to go along with the corporate flow of nonsense.

The team-building week for SiAmerica’s midlevel managers was spent at the CEO’s fake town. That is

really the best title to give to what he called 'my ranch'. It wasn't actually a ranch at all. It was just a twenty-acre tract of rock-strewn hills, on which our fearless leader had hired a gang of unskilled carpenters to build an old western-looking town.

When you first drove up the long entrance road and passed through the fake old fort wall, you thought you had been transported into an adults-only theme park. From the outside it really looked great, just like an Old West town. There was a general store, blacksmith shop, a school house (where we would be spending our days in a daze), and the obligatory saloon. I couldn't wait to get checked into my room and begin exploring this wonderful-looking place, but the room was my first tip-off that things weren't going to be as cool as I thought.

Our rooms were camouflaged behind a two-story, block-long row of fake store fronts. Russ and I shared a room that was behind a sign that read, "Ma's Bakery." My excitement took a steep dive when I discovered my room to be about as comfortable and exciting as a cheap 1950s motel room. Sadly, the room turned out to be more interesting than the rest of the cheesy props in the this so-called town.

There were only two weeks left until Christmas, and the parties were just beginning to gear up back in Dallas. The last place any of us wanted to be was at a five-day company workshop in a run-down fake town. Russ was convinced that the only reason they picked this particular time of year to hold these annual exercises was to further humiliate and humble us into ever-deeper submission to the will of the Corporate Mind. I forgot to mention that this was also the time when our bonuses were awarded. So it was difficult for

most of us to complain too much about missing a few parties, but Russ, of course, was deep into the blues.

“I’m heading back down that slippery slope of depression again,” he said.

“I’ve never noticed that you’d gotten off it. Did I miss a moment of cheerful Russ somewhere?” I teased, hoping to get him out of the funk he’d been in since yesterday when some motivational speaker got him thinking about the futility of a life without goals.

“Suicide is just the most visible result of one of the most basic features of *Homo sapiens* . . . our urge toward self-destruction,” he went on. “But going to work five days a week has the hidden advantage of giving me a good excuse to avoid a direct confrontation with the Big Question: What the fuck am I doing with my life? And thus all thoughts of suicide go away while I continue my struggle to pay the bills for all the stuff I’ve accumulated.”

“You aren’t really suicidal, are you?” I asked.

“No. Not really, but talking about it is a way to get people to feel sorry for me. Thankfully for the public-at-large, I inflict such bullshit only on my closest friends . . . and then only when I’m as drunk as I am right now.”

We had spent the past four hours in the saloon, pretending to enjoy the camaraderie of our re-built team, all the while getting extremely drunk. In my case, that meant I was in a jovial mood. Russ was just the opposite. Russ was a morose drunk, and when we returned to our room that night he also became angry.

“I’ll tell you what really got me tonight. It was when SK admitted why they make us sign that agreement that says that they can drug test us at any

time and for no reason. I've always hated that, but now I've got even more reason to be pissed off at being forced to sign such a bullshit agreement. Did you hear what he said?" Russ shouted.

"Yes. I did. And please be a little more quiet. I still need this job to make my car payments," I replied.

Ignoring the fact that I was there when SK made the infamous statement, Russ continued to recount it for me, but at least his voice was a little lower. "That bastard said the idea behind that agreement was that even when we were home on the weekend we'd think twice about smoking a joint because we knew they had the right to spring a drug test on us at any time. And when I mentioned that everyone knew there'd never been a random test performed, what does that lousy shithead say? He says, 'We know that, but it still keeps everyone aware 24 x 7 that we own them. It keeps your staff in line. So don't let them know this little secret.' Was he drunk and fucking with us, or do you think he really meant it?" Russ finally asked.

"I don't know, but why don't we call it a night?" I said.

However, Russ wasn't ready to quit yet. "I think I know why corporate life is so screwed up. I noticed the other day that my administrative assistant has an URGENT! stamp that's never been used. Ink has never touched those virgin rubber letters. And do you know why? It's because we treat everything as urgent. That's the trouble with this whole vicious circle we're all in. Everything we do seems urgent, but the truth is that most of what we do at work isn't really all that important in the grand scheme of things. And so we spend the best hours of our lives doing things that are urgent but not important. In the meantime, we never get around to doing those things that are important

but not urgent. We've got our priorities all screwed up."

"Yeah, but sometimes you've got to conform, go with the flow. Multitasking and treating each assignment as urgent is part of how America does business. That's just the way it works," I said.

"Conformity is doing what's expected of you, not necessarily doing what's right," Russ grumbled. "But I'll tell you what's really been getting to me today, and that's all this bullshit talk about the world as seen through the lens of Ayn Rand. God, I'm really sick of listening to all that shit."

"That's where I'm afraid we'll have to part company," I said, "I have to admit that I really loved *Atlas Shrugged*. I read it in college and thought then, and still think now, that it's a great novel."

"You're a geek, not a student of literature. What you loved was a terrific story. What you lack is the ability to think about that book in an objective way, which, by the way, is an ironic fault of Randians everywhere," Russ said as he chuckled at his own joke.

"You can see her work bleed through everywhere," he went on, "especially in today's political speeches. Quotes like the one SK used today are universally appreciated, 'Throughout the centuries there were men who took first steps down new roads armed with nothing but their own visions.' Ole Ayn sure did have a way with words. But have you examined, really thought about, some of her characters? They were really fucked-up people, ya know."

"Give me an example," I challenged.

“OK. How about her heroine, Dagny Taggart. Remember her drug of choice? She was a chain smoker and proud of it. So score intelligence low. And Dagny was vindictive. Remember how she’d say things like, ‘It is now in your power to destroy me, I may have to go, but if I go, I’ll make sure that I take all the rest of you along with me.’ So score compassion and empathy zero.”

“How do you happen to be able to quote, or at least pretend to quote, from a book you hate?” I asked.

“Oh, I’ve made a study of *Atlas Shrugged*, read it five times in all. The first three times I thought about it just like you do. Then, just two years ago, I read it again in the hopes that it would fire me up once more like it had in the past. Only that time I began to pay more attention to the nuances of her characters, since I already had memorized the major lines of the plot. That’s when I began to notice the cracks in Dagny. So I decided to read it one more time but with the thought of writing a critical analysis of it. It took me six months and I ended up with over 500 pages of notes.”

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed. “So are you writing the critique now?”

“No. That’s as far as I’ve gotten. The truth is, now that I understand for myself how remote her philosophy is from mine, I’ve kinda lost interest in it . . . but not my passion about it, as you can see. There are some really unsavory characters in that story.”

“Give me another example,” I said.

“OK, how about Francisco? He’s always thought of as this squeaky clean idealist. He’s the one who said

that when he got to heaven he would be able to claim the greatest virtue of all—that he was a man who made money. Virtue! Money is a lot of things, but being a source of virtue certainly isn't one of them in my book. Francisco is also the asshole who said, 'Dagney, there's nothing of any importance in life - except how well you do your work. Nothing. Only that. . . . It's the only measure of human value.' Now Francisco was a yuppie jerk, but he was a saint next to that steel mogul, Reardon."

"I remember him," I said, "He was the guy in the loveless marriage with a high-society wife. Didn't he have an affair with Dagney?"

"Yeah. They fucked. And every time they did the objective seemed to be the violent humiliation of Dagney. It was never pretty sex. And it takes two to make a loveless marriage, you know. At one point, Reardon said something to the effect of, 'I've given Lillian none of my time for months - no, for years; for the eight years we've been married.' Hell, he didn't even know what her interests were. He was a rotten husband and partner. No wonder his wife became so bitchy. But the thing that really got me about Reardon was the time his ore fleet sank in a storm. He never even expressed any concern for the lives that were lost. His only concern was for the time it cost him . . . and his lost profits," Russ finished with a flourish.

"Wow. You've really got a hard-on for Ayn Rand, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes I do," Russ shot back, his eyes ablaze, "and I'll tell you why. I'm pissed off at her for being such a good writer that she could conceal her hateful philosophy in that compelling story. She was really good at what she was up to, and now yet another generation is having their minds polluted by the

subtext of a good story. The framing is perfect," he went on, "the self-made men, and one woman, against the system. Hey, I'm all for it. The only problem is that fucking John Galt thought that the best way to stop the motor of the world was to get the CEOs to quit. You know them, those all-knowing gods who are guiding our great ships of commerce through the storms of capitalism, those feudal princes, those MINDS! They are the ones he convinced to drop out. If you read *Atlas Shrugged* with a more critical eye you'll see how she short-changes people like her trusty servant Eddie. Her whole fucking empire would have come down without him. But he's not far enough up her hierarchical power ladder to rate as a creator. So to her, Eddie was still a second-rater. There was room for only one creator per enterprise in her world, and that's just about the way it's playing out in corporate America today," Russ rambled on, seemingly unable to stop the torrent of emotion that Rand's philosophy caused in him.

"Now if you're a naive young college student, dreaming about one day clawing your way to the top of the corporate ladder and becoming a tycoon yourself, well, then you're going to really identify with these guys. But just think of what they did when they dropped out. They abandoned all of the women, men, families, and communities that had provided the labor upon which their great fortunes were founded. So they all drop out and go to Galt's high tech gulch and live happily ever after while their former associates descend into barbarism. Nice guys, huh?"

"Now, Russ, you're exaggerating. It wasn't quite that way," I asserted.

"No? Then go back and reread it for yourself. You're a big boy now. Read it with your eyes wide

open, keeping in mind what's going on in the world and on the environmental and poverty fronts. I think you should reread it with new eyes and decide for yourself."

"I think I will," I said.

"Remember that pasty, slimy character, Balph Eubank?" Russ began again.

"Oh yeah. Who doesn't remember him. He was that smarmy little bureaucrat who kept trying to regulate the steel industry and confiscate Reardon's new metal," I replied, pleased at myself for remembering this character.

"That's the way he was portrayed. You're right. But listen to Balph's view of the situation where he says, 'Our culture has sunk into a bog of materialism. Men have lost all spiritual values in their pursuit of material production and technological trickery.' He sounds more like the Dali Lama to me, yet Rand gives him the hateful bad guy role. Here is Rand's philosophy in a nutshell," Russ continued. " 'When men live by trade, the degree of man's productiveness is the degree of his reward. This is the code of existence whose tool and symbol is money. To love money is to know and love the fact that money is the creation of the best power within you.' Or words to that effect. Now if that doesn't sound like the rules of the game today, I don't know what does," Russ said as he slowly faded into sleep in the tattered recliner chair that dominated one corner of our room.

As I reached up to turn off the light over my bed, I noticed that someone had written something on the bottom of the bookshelf that served as my headboard. It was a quote from Christopher Morley that read, "There is only one success - to be able to spend your

life in your own way." I stayed awake thinking about that all night.

Four weeks later I found myself still thinking about how I could live my life in my own way, given that I wasn't born rich. But now I was thinking about it while looking out the window of a first-class seat on a plane that was leaving Chicago for Amsterdam. As we climbed, I caught a brief glimpse of the Fox River Valley, where I'd grown up. I hadn't thought about home for long time. What a huge part of my life that place once was, and now I seldom think about those years. The person who was me back then might as well never have lived, for all his history that is remembered. Now he is only a ghost that occasionally shows up and trips me into a deep melancholy. But this is no time to reminisce. I'm on my way to Amsterdam!

Chapter 3

Amazement in Amsterdam

I don't know what I thought I would actually do while I was in Amsterdam, other than attend and speak at the conference, of course. All I knew for sure was that I wanted to check out some of their famous coffee houses, now that my Palenque adventure had broken my marijuana cherry, so to speak.

What I hadn't really thought through, however, was the fact that I was still far too conservative to give myself permission to slip out of the conference and smoke a joint. Not only was I afraid of being seen by one of the conference attendees who might in turn tell my superiors at SiAmerica, I was even more afraid of looking like a fool, since I had no idea how Amsterdam's coffee shops operated. Did I just walk in and ask for some marijuana? Did they have pipes they passed around, or would I have to admit that I didn't know how to roll a joint and have to ask for help? I had a hundred questions and no one to ask. As much as I wanted to experience the delights of Amsterdam, all I did after dinner each night was walk the streets alone, searching for my courage.

By the last night of the conference, a deep melancholy was beginning to crush me under its oppressive weight. I was sad that I had to leave the next day, but I got even more depressed when I thought about the path my life was taking. Amsterdam seemed to be filled with so many vibrant people who appeared to be truly engaged in life. And here I was, not quite 30 years old and already wondering if that long, gray, dusty road of corporate life that now stretched out before me was my only choice.

February 12, 2004 — Amsterdam

*There is some myth for every man,
which if we but knew it, would make us
understand all he did and thought.*

Yeats

Just like the previous four nights, I found myself sitting alone in my room, waiting for the evening's round of cocktail receptions to begin, some of which would then be followed by an obligatory dinner for the select among us. It was a large conference, and each night various companies would take turns hosting these dinners and parties. According to Russ, the main purpose of these events was to get unsuspecting engineers like me drunk enough to loosen their lips and brag about whatever new project they were working on. Basically it was a fancy form of industrial espionage. So I was constantly on guard and probably didn't seem very friendly. At least that's how I rationalized the fact that I hadn't joined any of the little cliques that formed during the week.

I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything though. Since I was one of the speakers at the conference, I got invited to all of the most popular parties. The reception I was getting ready to attend on this last night of the conference was the hottest invite of them all. The sponsor was DVC, the big venture capital company. Everyone with an idea for a new start-up would probably try to get in, and that included just about everyone at the conference.

Not only would this be a great place to make some contacts that I could use this summer, when I began to look for a new job in earnest, it would also be a rare chance to get a glimpse of DVC's chairman, Michael A. Dannray, the reclusive genius behind the firm's meteoric rise. The story I heard was that Dannray made his fortune in the PC business early on,

long before the dotcom boom and bust of the 1990s. He had been a university professor who came up with some kind of new chip manufacturing process and started a business with the help of a small venture capital fund. Apparently he was even better at spotting new business opportunities than his backers were. After a while, he sold his interest in the new chip manufacturing company and wound up taking over the venture group.

There was a slow-moving line outside the room where the reception was being held. As I waited while the security people at the door carefully checked everyone's invitation, I noticed that unlike the other parties I'd been to that week, I was the only person in line with a speaker's tag on. A few furtive glances at some of the other people's name tags let me know that I was in rare company. Almost everyone in line was a CEO, CFO, or C-something or other.

The faint sound of classical music, highlighted by a harp, slid out of the room like a cloud escaping the din of a hundred or more intense conversations. The formality of this reception was in stark contrast to the previous evening's party, where an Elvis impersonator was the main attraction.

Behind me, I heard a slightly tipsy woman say to her husband, "So what's the deal with this guy anyway? He's been your company's major investor for three years now, and I've never met him . . . never even saw a picture of him for that matter."

"I told you," her husband patiently answered, "he's got some strange aversion to having his picture taken. Plus, he's just not very gregarious. I think this is the first public event he's attended in several years."

“Well, I think there’s something very strange about him, but I’ll be nice and keep my mouth shut.”

“Thank you,” came her husband’s obviously grateful reply.

At the door, one of the four burly guys who looked more like gangsters than security guards asked to see my invitation. As soon as he saw my name his demeanor changed. Smiling, he told the other invite checkers that he’d be right back, as “Mr. Batersley is here.” Taken aback, I asked, “Am I in the wrong place?”

He laughed and said, “Oh no, Mr. Batersley. You are definitely at the right place. In fact, Mr. Dannray left instructions for us to bring you to him as soon as you arrived.”

Wow! My heart was thumping so rapidly it felt as if it was trying to beat its way out of my chest. I wanted to believe that someone had told him about my presentation, and that he was blown away by my brilliance. However, my more rational mind quickly figured out that Dannray was somehow involved with SiAmerica, and he probably wanted to send a greeting back to our CEO. Even that prospect made me glow with a sense of self-importance. The mysterious Michael A. Dannray wanted to meet me!

We headed to the far corner of the room, where I assumed Dannray was the person at the center of a gaggle of executives in expensive suits. My escort gripped my elbow and politely steered us through the crowd and up to our host. Before I had a chance to process what was happening, the man who was the center of attention turned around, reached out, shook my hand, and said, “Hi, I’m Mike Dannray. You must be William.”

Fortunately, the security guy was still holding my elbow, otherwise I might have fainted into a heap on the floor as Dannray continued and said, "I'll be with you in a minute. Just let me finish this story." With that, he turned back to the woman next to him while I tried to compose myself.

"Could this be true?" I wondered. Actually, inside my head it was more of a shout, something like, "Is this true? It can't possibly be true. No way. No fucking way! FUCK ME!!!" You see, Michael A. Dannray was none other than Laura's friend, Shadow. To make a long story very short, Dannray/Shadow and I arranged to have dinner later that night.

The person he sent to pick me up reminded me a little bit of the people I met in Palenque that last night we were there. He was tall, thin, and had long black hair woven into dreadlocks. I immediately recognized him as the person I'd noticed sitting in the front row during my presentation the day before. In the dim light of the meeting room, the glow from his laptop screen reflected off his face in a way that looked as if the light was emanating directly from him. At a couple of points during my presentation I lost my train of thought when I looked up and saw his green-glowing smile coming my way. "I'm Q," he announced when I opened the door to my room, "Shadow said you'd be expecting me."

"Queue, as in a buffer?" I asked.

"If you like. But I just spell it with a single letter . . . more efficient that way, ya know," he said with one of those delightful Dutch accents that make some women swoon. "If you're ready we should go. Shadow is waiting for us."

I tried to make conversation with this mysterious Q in an attempt to learn more about him and the even more mysterious Shadow. But all I managed to find out was that Q was running a small R&D company that Dannray had a financial stake in.

We left the hotel and began walking. As we walked past the neon glow of the sign over the entrance to the Grasshopper coffee shop, I asked, "How far is the restaurant?"

"Only about ten more blocks," he answered. "But it's not a restaurant, actually."

"Oh, I thought we were having dinner," I said.

"Ya. We'll be having a dinner of sorts, but at a friend's coffee shop, not a fancy restaurant."

I was so excited to hear his answer that all I could say was, "Um," trying to be as cool on the outside as I was excited on the inside. It was too much for me to believe. Not only was I about to have an intimate evening with the elusive Michael Dannray, I was probably going to smoke a joint with him, not to mention the fact that he'd told me to call him Mike. In just a few short hours my outlook on life changed from one of borderline despair to one of hopeful excitement, which brought to my mind the famous William James statement that one could change one's entire life simply by changing one's attitude. Never before had I wished so fervently that this was a law and not just wishful thinking on James' part.

My guide's ten block estimate of how far we had to walk proved to be conservative by half or more. After crossing at least two canals and zigging and zagging through a maze of narrow streets, we arrived outside what appeared to be a nondescript, block-long

row of closed shops. Near the middle of the block, next to a dress shop, the faint glow of candlelight seeped through a dirty glass door that was covered with large gilt lettering advertising the shop's name.

As we entered, the unmistakable scent of burning marijuana filled the air. The room we entered was quite small, I thought. Of course, this was the first Amsterdam coffee shop I'd ever been in. So what did I know?

To our left, there were a couple of small round tables made out of thick, rough-hewn, dark-stained timber. For seating, in addition to the two wooden booths that braced the corner, there were little stools around the tables. Three people were sitting at the bar that dominated the room. Off to our right was what I thought looked like a train station's ticket booth. Later I learned that this was where you went to buy your preferred variety of marijuana from an amazingly complete menu.

With only the slightest nod of acknowledgment, the bartender let Q know that we were to proceed directly to the back. At the end of a long hall where the restrooms were located, a curtain covering a rounded doorway was drawn back to reveal my new benefactor, his arms stretched wide, an insane-looking grin on his face, but with eyes so warm that even a geek like me could feel the love they projected. It felt like I was being welcomed home like a prodigal son.

"Ah, William, my young friend," he said. "You look like you're doing quite a good job of holding your wits about you while you put the pieces of this new puzzle together."

“I’m glad it looks that way to you, but the truth is that I feel as if my head is going to explode,” I burst out.

With that, the two of them launched into gales of tearful laughter that I didn’t think would ever end. It seemed that whenever I was around Laura’s friends I was the main source of their merriment. “But hey,” I thought, “if being the butt of their occasional jokes is the price I have to pay for admission to this elite group, it’s a small price to pay.” Already I was thinking about how I’d tell Russ about this incredible turn of events.

When their laughter had finally played out, Dannray said, “William, my boy, this is going to be a long night, but the form of entertainment is up to you. Thanks to your friend, Ralua, or Laura as you know her, you are being offered the option of taking a look at the world from a far different direction than where you’ve been coming from all your life. And what that involves is first ingesting a few magic mushrooms. It won’t be a full-on dose, since I assume it’s your first time. It’ll be just enough to expand your awareness a slight amount. This can be a life-changing experience for you or not. However it’s totally up to you as to how we proceed.”

I was now beginning to experience the first signs of a major panic attack. I won’t go into all of the irrational fears that were running through my mind, but you can be sure that I would have run out of the room had it not been for two powerful counter-thoughts, one rational and one not. My rational mind locked on all of the facts that I knew about Dannray, other than what little I knew about his life as a guy called Shadow. One thing I knew for sure was that in his life as Dannray he could open more doors for me

than I ever dreamed possible. And that selfish thought overrode my normal fear of taking a risk. I also have to admit to harboring the fantasy of one day making love with Laura, and that maybe this guy could help me along that road as well. In retrospect, it was probably my lust for Laura that was the primary basis of a lot of the decisions I would be making in the months ahead. I don't point this out as a matter of pride, only as a matter of fact.

"So, here's the deal, William my young friend," Dannray was saying. "You either trust us enough to take you on your first psychedelic journey or you don't. Depending on what you decide we'll plan the night accordingly."

I thought about lying and saying that I'd tried mushrooms before, but my better judgment told me that this was not the time to be bragging about something I'd never done. How they knew that the only illegal substance I'd ever tried before was marijuana, I didn't know, but this also didn't feel like the right time to ask that question.

"The old red pill, blue pill dilemma," smiled Q.

"Exactly!" said Dannray. "Take the red pill and you'll begin to learn what is really going on. The truth isn't always pleasant, by the way, but as they say, it will set you free. Or take the blue pill, which means that the three of us will go out for an excellent meal at a five-star restaurant and have an entertaining night of great conversation. Which do you prefer?" Dannray asked with that insane-looking grin of his stretching from ear to ear.

I can hardly believe that I had enough courage to say it, but with a somewhat goofy grin on my face, I said, "I'll take the red pill."

It wasn't a pill that they gave me. It was a cup of hot chocolate with about two grams of ground-up, dried, psilocybin mushrooms stirred into it. As I learned later, my indoctrination into the world of sacred medicine was quite unorthodox when compared to the rituals Laura's group had developed for new initiates. Dannray told me that my experience would be less than optimal but that it was the only way to do it, for, as he put it, "Time is now of the essence, my young friend. Time is the essence!"

While we waited for the medicine to begin making its presence known, I quizzed them about this mysterious Tribe I heard them talk about in Palenque. Dannray wasn't much help.

"Tribe? What Tribe? That's just a romantic notion that Ralua and some of her more sentimental friends are trying to dream into existence," exclaimed Dannray. "They wish that there was this big, world-wide community of souls working in concert to change the world for the better. But all it actually is is a few tens of millions of people who have had a psychedelic experience or two. And let me tell you, my young friend, a little experience with the medicine is not enough of a bond to form an actual community, let alone a capital 'T' Tribe. That takes work, a lot of hard work. And to be honest, I don't see all that many people consciously working on building a community like that."

"Well, you and Ralua are working for that ideal," interjected Q. "So it's at least a clan, and that's still a community of some kind. And if it's not a real community, then why do we seem to have so many squabbles?"

"Good point," conceded Dannray as he nodded toward Q. "So let's compromise and say that our little

clan is one of many, many little psychedelic clans that exist in every corner of the world. We've got a long way to go before we become a capital 'T' Tribe, but we are consciously working to form a more cohesive group-think of some kind, and on a global scale. So I guess you could look at Ralua's Tribe as being more of a state of mind than an actual entity."

After about an hour it became obvious that something BIG was going on inside my head. As if they understood what was happening to me, Q and Dannray let the conversation die down . . . we just seemed to cruise along with no need for talk. After what seemed like a long time — a beautiful, dreamy, exquisitely perfect amount of time — the world began to morph into music and light and love. My entire being changed in some mysterious way that was far beyond my normal state of awareness. Then the man who called himself Shadow began to tell me what he thinks is really going on in this strange world we now find ourselves in. I later learned that this was just one of several competing views that are being hammered out by Laura's little clan in an attempt to figure out the parameters of what Stein calls The Earth Game.

Shadow went straight to the core of his beliefs as he began his rap. "The path that the evolution of human consciousness is taking right now is beginning to diverge. There are now two main branches, and each is struggling to be the dominant form of human consciousness in the new epoch of history that is rapidly approaching its dawn. And make no mistake about it, this is a battle that is taking place on the stage of cosmic consciousness. The game may be playing out on Earth, but the consequences will be of cosmic importance. The big unanswered question at this stage of the game is whether human consciousness will continue to be inspired by a level of

awareness higher than the four dimensions that now constrain our consensus reality, or will some over consuming, machine-moderated, pharmacologically enhanced, robot-like form of semihuman consciousness prevail? And I'm not talking about a Borg-like existence here. The danger isn't that we are going to be enslaved by our machines. The danger lies in not throwing off the chains that already enslave us to our institutions, our corporations, our religions . . . not to mention casting off the tribal affiliations and cultural habits that keep us from living our lives as truly human beings."

I should interject here that had I not been under the spell of mushroom consciousness that night, most of what Shadow had to say wouldn't have made much sense to me. Without the boost into a higher state of awareness that the mushrooms gave me, I doubt if I would have broken out of the cocoon of my then-current view of the world. Like almost everyone I knew, I remained bound by the cords of the family, religion, and culture that I had been born into. Light could no longer penetrate the thick husk of habit that protected my mind. But thanks to Laura, I now had the excellent guidance of Shadow and Q to help me take my first baby steps into this strange new territory. Needless to say, Shadow's view of things was far past the edge of my belief system at the time. In fact, the entire evening now seems like it was only a strange lucid dream . . . but one I can still recall quite clearly.

"For now, the machine-people seem to have the upper hand," Shadow was saying. "By manipulating the ant-people into over consuming and then keeping them in mental chains through propaganda and fear, large numbers of humans are ready to hand over their lives to the state, any state . . . any state that promises to protect the status quo, that blessed thing

the propagandists call the American way of life. People, particularly the less enlightened masses in the States, think they have got to have an ever-increasing amount of stuff in order to be happy. So they sell their souls to the System. And by the System I mean the highly interconnected global financial system that attempts to keep you in eternal servitude by keeping you in perpetual debt. And yet people continue to voluntarily put on those chains.

“However, the unvarnished truth is that these people aren’t living *human* lives. They’re robots who spend most of their lives working at jobs they hate just so they can buy more things that they really don’t need. These aren’t human beings, these are the automatons, the ant-people, who spend their entire lifetimes stuck in a world ruled by the machine-people who are actually nothing more than the intermediaries of the large artificial intelligences who ultimately run things, the global corporations. Now don’t get me wrong. I don’t have anything against any of the people who have bubbled up to the top of this System. It’s the System itself that is the problem. It isn’t the people at the top. They are only products of this nutty System. But most people don’t take the time to think about this, and so they wind up taking sides and either attacking or defending personalities instead of trying to figure out a better way for humans to organize their lives on this planet.

“The vicious circle of work-consume-work that has so many people in its clutches is what has made mindless automatons out of so many good people. Deep in their hearts they know that they are chasing a chimera. They know that *stuff* will never be a true source of peace and joy in their lives. One day, soon I believe, the great bio-mass of humans will awaken in unison and cast off the veil that clouds our perception,

preventing our species from experiencing the true light of what it means to be a human being," Shadow exclaimed, one arm held high overhead as if in imitation of the Statue of Liberty welcoming people to the land of their dreams.

"Ya. What Shadow says is right," agreed Q. "This is no ordinary period of technology development. Consciousness itself is also now evolving in a way that blurs the material world with the world of the Other."

"What do you mean?" I managed to ask.

"Gradually, computers are forming an exoskeleton for humans," Q began. His English was so perfect that I scarcely noticed his accent any more. "It began with the pocket watch binding our consciousness to time. Then these little machines migrated to our wrists. Before long, our mechanical time-keeping devices morphed into machines operated by digital computers, then other computers began to cover our bodies as well. First came pagers, then cell phones and wireless PDAs. A few pioneers are already using wearable computers. Already people are implanting chips that are directly connected to their bodies' organs. The most common one is known as a pacemaker. Now some of these computer-enhanced humans get into automobiles that are regulated by computers, some are even connected to orbiting satellites that are controlled by networked computers. PDAs are beginning to schedule meetings without the insertion of human action. The point is rapidly approaching where we will have to make a conscious decision to break free from the shackles our machines will try to impose upon us."

"Q is correct," Shadow added. "And for most of us, the fatal part of our addiction to machines begins with a compulsion to constantly check our email."

“Man. I wish I hadn’t taken this red pill,” I said as the two of them began to laugh once again. Yet I went on, “What you’re saying seems to make some sense, but to tell you the truth I’m really having trouble concentrating right now.”

“Ah! Our devious plan has worked, Master Q. We now have the young lad in our clutches,” cackled the wildly grinning Shadow.

“Pay him no mind,” comforted Q. Turning to Shadow he said, “Hey, man. Give the kid a break. He’s got to be paranoid enough with just the mushrooms. Don’t go giving him some of your bullshit right now. You’re going to freak him out.”

“As always, you’re right, Q. I’ll try to not get so carried away with myself again, young William. OK?” asked a chastised Shadow. I was far too altered to do much more than give him a silly smile to let him know that I was still hanging in there.

“Here, take a toke or two of this,” Q said as he offered me a joint. “A little cannabis right now will calm you down.”

“In case you’re wondering why we got you high on shrooms before having this heart-to-heart, it isn’t because we’re sadistic bastards,” said Shadow. “You see, we learned from the FBI’s COINTELPRO operation during the Nixon years. Now we don’t trust anyone new until we’ve journeyed with them a few times. With you, we’re going faster than usual, mainly on Ralua’s recommendation, but that’s just the way it is.”

“To be honest,” I said, “I can’t believe you’re telling me all this. Aren’t you afraid I might turn you in?”

“Ha! Now THAT is funny!” laughed Shadow. “Who would you turn us in to? Who is going to believe that an internationally known venture capitalist even knows who you are? All I’d have to say is that I’d never heard of you before. No one is even going to believe that you and I got stoned together, let alone that I admitted to being involved in a conspiracy to infiltrate high tech companies with people who have a psychedelic mind-set.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” I asked more interested than shocked.

“Shadow thinks he’s a character in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*,” said Q, “you know the one, the guy who said he was a ‘loner on the fringes of the fringes of the drug and software markets.’ ”

“Well, you know, we all have to have our own little personal myths to carry us through,” laughed Shadow. “But getting back to your question of why we’re trusting you with our stories, the first reason is Ralua. She has a personal interest in you, and so it behooves us to humor her. She’s our queen, you know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked

“A joke,” said Q. “Shadow likes to tease Ralua about being such a powerful shaman that she has become the queen of us all.”

“It keeps her feet on the ground,” said Shadow. “Anyway, who am I supposedly doing these nefarious deeds on behalf of, this thing a bunch of druggies affectionately are calling the Tribe? No one would take you seriously. That’s our main protection.”

Q added, “On top of that there is no organization. There is no group to infiltrate or even any evidence of

a plan, let alone a crime. In fact, for all you know, we're making this all up just to have a little fun with you."

"If only it was all fun and games," said a more serious Shadow. "It's about time you found out what's really going on, my lad.

"From an economic perspective, fewer than a thousand families control more than half of the world's wealth, and by wealth I mean they control the resources that are of most interest to humans. Beneath them is everyone else, and by everyone I'm including governments, CEOs, religious potentates, and practically everyone else on the planet, we're all beneath them. And whether we know it or not, ultimately, the main reason we all have to go to work each day is to increase the wealth of these powerful families. Like the brilliant young Stein says, most people are wage slaves," Shadow continued, "and in truth are no better off than the serfs of the Middle Ages.

"You've heard of the power elite, the superclass? Well those are the people who run things for the top families. They're the new global class of privileged people, the top of the business and social food chains. They're the CEOs and top managers of the world's largest corporations, and they're the social class who live off their investments, along with a handful of celebrities of various stripes. And note that all of these people are dependent upon corporations, those artificial beings that can live forever. In the past, the top families were the royalty and they had the nobility to run things for them. Today the face of the ruling families is the face of the multi-national corporation. But fundamentally, nothing has changed since the Middle Ages.

“Let’s assume that on the physical plane we are all serving a few great families. Then the question becomes: How can a person, who is not in some way connected with someone at the top of a wealthy family ever become more than a wage slave? And this, of course, then brings up the further question: Is there a way to break the vise-like grip that this small number of families have on the Earth’s wealth and find a way to redistribute it more equitably? And, finally, the BIG QUESTION, would this be a wise thing to do?”

While Shadow and Q began discussing these heady topics, which seemed to be of such great importance to the fate of the world, my thoughts went back to what Shadow had said earlier about Ralua having a personal interest in me. So my mind kept wandering away from whatever it was they were trying to explain to me while I fantasized about making love with Ralua. (Her new name was beginning to grow on me). At one point, I remember Shadow getting excited when he and Q were trying to calculate how many people there were in the world who had at some point in time used psychedelics.

“Like Fraser Clark says, there are sleepers everywhere!” exclaimed Shadow. “How many actively psychedelic people there are today, nobody really knows. Tens of thousands for sure. Most likely there are tens of millions or even more.” Just then, a raucous chorus from the front room swept over us. I couldn’t believe it. This was the most incongruous music I could think of for that place and for that time.

Here in the back room, the three of us huddled around a little table, a small candle the room’s only light, several empty glasses that once held mushroom infused cocoa surrounding the candle, and nested between Shadow’s hands, an ashtray that was steadily

accumulating a small pile of roaches. It certainly wasn't a moment when I expected to hear my two companions join the voices in the outer room singing along with Queen, "We are the champions, my friend. We'll keep on fighting til the end. Weeeeeee are the champions. Weeeeeee are the champions of the woorrrrrrld."

"I can't believe you guys are singing that corny old song," I said.

"William, my boy, no song is corny if it moves your soul in the direction of its dreams," answered Shadow as he joined back in with the next chorus.

"We are creatures of music," said Q. "We need the music to sustain us while we're in the Matrix, but our natural home is a world of song. We sing ourselves into existence."

"Ah! Wait a minute. Must I point it out? Where do we get most of our music?" said Shadow, suddenly very serious. "It comes from corporations. Face it, global corporations ultimately control almost every facet of our lives. They create our myths through their media, they staff the government, they set the rules. And don't forget, corporations aren't *real* beings like people. They're artificial intelligences, AIs, controlled by a few hundred large families, and they have taken over. And now the machines these great companies have created are trying to lock us down with an iron fist. Our entire lives are being digitized, my friends, and if we aren't exceptionally vigilant, the great corporate machine farms will soon be running the entire show.

"People associated with the Bush Crime Family have taken over the world's largest business enterprise, the global company known as the U.S.A.

Most Americans have already forgotten that during the S&L scandal the Bush/Baker cabal transferred millions of tax dollars into the bank holding companies of their friends. Our tax dollars went to keep the looters from losing even a penny once that Ponzi scheme crashed. But today nobody seems to remember this, and so that only emboldened them and now they've even appropriated the U.S. military to capture the oil fields of one of their competitors. They're brilliant! Evil, but brilliant. You've got to give 'em that," Shadow concluded.

I was so taken aback at this line of thought that all I could get out was a feeble, "You guys are screwin' with me again, aren't you?"

"I wish we were," continued Shadow. "But we're not, and that is the whole point of the evening. We're trying to get you to look at the world in a slightly different way. It's the same world you know and love so well, but it's a multi-faceted world, not the black and white place you want it to be. So just keep in mind that the truth about some things isn't complete until it is viewed from every possible perspective."

"And don't go raising that conspiracy theory straw man either. That shit doesn't get past the smell test, if I may so twist the metaphor," added Q. "You don't have to come up with some crazy-assed conspiracy theory to understand what we're saying."

"Let me clarify," said Shadow, "Do you know why the group that is laughingly called 'the middle class' so often votes Republican? I think it's because by doing so, and by buying designer label clothes and luxury cars, they think that the capitalist elite will accept them as one of their own. The truth is that the money class looks down on everyone but their own, especially wannabes like you and me, and even on

newcomers like Bill Gates. To people who are born into great wealth, a new billionaire is simply an uncouth interloper on their historical right to own the world.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” I replied, “but if it wasn’t for my desire to get to the top I wouldn’t be sitting here with you right now. I’ll be honest. I’ve really enjoyed my luxury hotel room this week. And the dinners have been spectacular. I’ll bet that our hosts last night spent over five thousand dollars just for dinner for about a dozen of us. I don’t need that every day, but I’d be lying if I said it isn’t fun once in a while.”

“And let me ask you, did you end your evening in the company of loving friends, or did you go back to a cold, empty hotel room and sleep alone in your fancy bed?” asked Shadow as if he’d been having me followed. I had to admit that it was something for me to think about.

“So what alternative to this sad state of affairs are you promoting then?” I asked.

“Ah. Now we can get down to business,” said Q.

“I knew it! I knew you guys wanted something from me. I knew this all seemed too good to be true. Just because I grew up with Ralua doesn’t mean that I’d give away company secrets to you guys. I do have some ethics, you know.”

Well, my little outburst only resulted in more gales of laughter from the two of them. They only settled down and stopped exchanging quips about my naiveté when they shared another of the constant flow of joints that kept appearing through some magic I didn’t understand.

“We want nothing from you,” said Q. “At least not until you fully understand who we are and what we are doing. But first we understand that you must get to know us much better. That can only come from having some long conversations like this. Because, as Terence McKenna once said, while the truth is always simple, its explanation can often be quite involved.”

“You see, the 20th century was largely about controlling fossil fuel energy resources,” said Shadow. “But the 21st century is also going to bring, at least in the early years, an attempt to control the information resources. That’s where we come in.”

Q continued, “Marx thought that if you controlled production you controlled the masses. In a true capitalistic society that may be correct, but in today’s world, it is control of the media that is the key to power. And the guys who remain in power today have done a marvelous job of controlling information.

“Look at the former communist countries. The first thing the oppressors always did was to take over the media, and that’s exactly what they’ve done in the U.S. Right now, five mega-corporations control almost all of the information people get through television, magazines, newspapers, and the radio. FIVE! That means that five CEOs, all of whom are major contributors to the Bush regime, have a huge impact on the news that reaches the masses.”

“And it’s not just the news stories that they control,” said Shadow. “These media giants actually control U.S. culture. They set the styles, and they let everyone know what’s OK to talk about in polite society. And guess what? One of the things they won’t allow a rational discourse about is psychedelic medicines. Have you ever wondered why?”

“Well, no, not really,” I said.

“Well it’s something worth thinking about, my friend. Working with our sacred medicines isn’t for everyone, but if you feel that you may have the calling and yet you’re still buying into the Just Say No crowd, you’d better do a destiny check, because my guess is that you are way off track.”

Shadow went on, “For the first time in history, We the People have an equalizer, our own big cannon called the Internet. And how well we learn to use this tool will determine the course of human history for the next thousand years. That may sound melodramatic to you right now, but if you start paying closer attention to what is really going on you’ll see what I’m talking about. The Net is a physical extension of the human nervous system and might actually have the potential of becoming sentient on its own. But that is a story for another day. For now, it is enough to have it as our direct link into one another’s minds, without all the window dressing of the corporate-controlled media getting in our way. That is why it is so important that we keep the Internet as free from bureaucratic control as possible.”

“As long as the acid heads stay in charge we’ll be OK,” added Q.

“But giving the government, any government, control over the Net is the same as giving that government direct access to and control over part of the overarching nervous system of our species,” said Shadow. “With the Net, the phrase ‘we’re all one’ takes on a new meaning because on the Net we have all voluntarily agreed to become a part of the global electronic nervous system. So if you use the Net and it is controlled, even in part, by a government, then that government has a lock on part of your personal

nervous system as well. Are you willing to turn over a section of your brain to a bureaucrat, or are you going to do whatever is necessary to thwart their plans?"

"How you answer that question just might determine your destiny, my friend," said Q rather mysteriously.

Shadow continued, "One of the human-created processes that has to be brought to a halt is colonization. That fucking madness has to stop. Once Muslim potentates colonized as much of the world as they could, then it was the turn of the European families who colonized the Americas. Now it is the U.S. trying to force their form of despotic corporate rule down the throats of its colonies. Next it will be China's turn. The wheel just keeps on grinding and grinding. But that wheel, my friend, is powered by oil," said Shadow. "AND that oil is about to become far too expensive to burn. For sure it will happen in this century. FOR SURE! Some think it will happen sooner rather than later. But once the inevitability of the situation is understood, intelligent people aren't going to quibble about whether it's going to happen in five years or fifty-five years. Even one hundred years is not enough time to properly prepare for the radical change a post-carbon economy is going to bring."

Shadow was back on his soapbox again. "What we are actually approaching is the discovery of incomprehensibly advanced forms of technology that harness essential energies available in higher dimensions of the space-time continuum. Now overlay that concept with what is actually taking place on the ground in the growth of fascism and antiecological thinking. Couple all of that with the fact that we may also be witnessing the death throes of capitalism, and KAPOW! Everything is in place for the next cultural Big

Bang, the ultimate battle for dominance between autonomous, organic-based human consciousness and some form of corporate, machine-controlled consciousness. It's human versus machine. The ultimate Frankenstein story . . . and we are all right smack dab in the middle of it."

"Or," the less expansive Q added, "this could all be the drug-addled paranoid fantasy of a couple of old hippies."

"Of course!" exclaimed Shadow. "Of course! We must never forget that our theories are most likely as full of holes as are any of the conventional myths. This may all be bullshit, my boy . . . but that's your challenge, to sort the shit from the Shinola."

"So are you trying to tell me that you are some kind of underground revolutionaries?" I managed to squeeze in amid their constant laughter at my attempts to pin them down about who they really were and what they were up to.

"Revolutionaries overthrow governments," said Shadow. "That's not what we're about. We're EVOLUTIONaries, not revolutionaries."

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"Revolutionaries only are interested in rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Evolutionaries effect changes in the course of human affairs by influencing cultures, not by changing constitutions," said Q.

"The facts are quite clear," said Shadow. "The world has an over abundance of bad guys who currently run the show. Right now there is an Empire that dominates the Earth militarily, and it has a ruler

that the citizens of the Empire can't control. Those are the facts, my boy, and they're not very pretty."

"So what am I supposed to do about it? I didn't cause all these problems, and I'm not interested in politics. So what do you expect me to do about it? I'm just me. Just one guy trying to get along as best I can without hurting anyone. What more do you expect me to do?"

"Nothing, really," said Shadow. "We don't expect anything from anybody. We're just here to introduce you to a new point of view. What you do from here on out is up to you, no expectations one way or another on our part."

"Don't take that too personally, William. We've had these little sessions with hundreds of guys like you, and only a few are interested in what we are saying. So we no longer have expectations about other people . . . only expectations about ourselves, right Shadow?"

"Right."

"You know, William," said Q, "Henry Miller once said, 'I see America spreading disaster. I see America as a black curse upon the world. I see a long night settling in and that mushroom which has poisoned the world withering at the roots.' But I think that maybe there is a cure for the curse that is on America right now," added Q. "Change Miller's image from a thermonuclear mushroom cloud to a huge psilocybe and pass it around," and the two of them again descended into fits of laughter. At least it was good to know that even if these guys meant what they were saying, they still knew how to laugh at the world and not take themselves too seriously.

“You know,” said Shadow, “often, when a species reaches the end of its evolutionary cycle, its last stage involves armor of some sort. What a metaphor for America’s insane military budget. No matter what form of human consciousness dominates the future of this millennium, I think it can be safely said that the current dominant version, *Homo sapiens sapiens* consciousness, will not be a contender.”

“I think young William has had enough for tonight,” said Q. “I know I have.”

Turning to me, now with a very serious look on his face, Shadow said, “You know, William, it doesn’t matter whether or not you believe any of this stuff we’ve been talking about. It’s going to happen whether you believe in it or not. I’ll be honest, the main reason I’m spending this much time with you is that Ralua asked me to. She thinks very highly of you. Which reminds me, she asked me to give you this note.”

My heart actually stopped for a moment. No matter what the medical profession claims about that not being possible. I am sure of it. My heart actually stopped.

Kindly, I thought, Shadow and Q got up and left the room while I opened the envelope and read:

Hi William (but you are still Willie to me),

I hope you remember that you promised to meet me in Viet Nam in March. Ask Shadow for his email address so he can forward your itinerary to me. I’ll find you, don’t worry.

Love,

Ralua (the girl you once knew as Laura).

I caught up with Shadow and Q, who were standing outside the little coffee house, waiting for me to read my note. "So, lad, what's the news from our goddess, Ralua?" joked Shadow.

After showing him the note, I said, "Somehow I think it would be easier to find out where John Galt lives than to figure out how to find Ralua."

Q chuckled and said, "Shadow knows everything, even where Galt lives."

"Hell," Shadow exclaimed, "everyone knows where John Galt lives. He lives in the dome of the Boxmaker." And with that he was off, leaving me to puzzle over his parting remark as Q silently led me back to my hotel.

Amazement in Amsterdam

Chapter 4

Confrontation in Viet Nam

On my way home from Amsterdam I decided to not tell Russ about my adventure with Dannray, who I now thought of as Shadow. I think you will believe me when I say that it was the hardest time I have ever had in keeping something that big and exciting to myself. For some reason, I was afraid that Russ would bring me to my senses and talk me out of letting Ralua know where I'd be staying during my trip to Viet Nam.

As it turned out, my caution wasn't required, because the email I sent to Shadow bounced. I tried every way I could think of to contact him, but once again Dannray had dropped off the face of the Earth. And the more I thought about the bizarre evening we spent together, the less I thought of our conversation that night as having actually taken place. Going to the coffee shop and drinking some mushroom-infused hot chocolate, that part was real, no doubt about it. But the details of the conversation, and more importantly the feeling I had at the time, quickly faded once I got back into the daily grind at SiAmerica.

By my third week back from Amsterdam I found it easy to rationalize that it was a good thing that I wouldn't be meeting Ralua in Viet Nam. Deep down I knew that she was never going to sleep with me, and I had to admit that that was really my main obsession about her. Instinctively I realized that the person she had become and the way she lived were too foreign to the way an obnoxious geek like me liked to live. I was still basically that same guy she knew in high school. The main difference was that now I also had a good job, some extra money to spend as I pleased, and enough leisure time to keep me happy. For all intents

and purposes, I'd arrived . . . and I was smart enough to know that Ralua wasn't interested in the material possessions or the social events that made up my life. Her life was about a journey. Mine was largely about the destination I had so proudly arrived at, and at that point in my life I just wasn't ready to let go of the golden ring I thought I'd grabbed. At least that is how I rationalized things, but some deep and secret part of me still craved the kind of exciting life that Ralua seemed to be living.

We had less than six weeks left to finish the testing of my group's design for the new high-speed battlefield communications network, and so it was all I could do to keep up with the final phases of our project. That meant I missed most of the video conferences that SK and his friends held to plan our trip to Viet Nam. Apparently, I was the only one of the seven of us who missed any of the meetings, let alone almost all of them. This quickly became a fact they pointed out whenever I'd ask a question that had already been discussed. And who can blame them? I'm the same way when I've got to cover some material over and over for people who miss things the first time.

Actually, it was only the other three lackeys my age who gave me a hard time. SK and his two friends treated me fine. They called us four younger guys their hot runners. It had some old Navy reference, but I never figured out for sure what it meant. For a good part of the trip it seemed to mean baggage handler, but hey, I got a first-class, all-expenses-paid trip to Viet Nam in exchange. That wasn't such a bad deal. At least that was what I thought until the end of the trip, when it turned into the biggest nightmare of my life . . . but I'm getting ahead of myself again. So it

might be easier to return to my journal to tell the rest of the story.

* * *

March 27, 2004 — Kontum, Viet Nam

Nobody is more indoctrinated than the indoctrinator.

Dan Brown

My arrival five days ago in Ho Chi Min City was quite unsettling for me. For one thing, SK and his friends insisted on calling it Saigon. I don't know why that bothered me, but it did. Unlike everyone else in our party, I had never been to Asia before, and I wasn't prepared for the buzzing hive of confusion such a large and constantly moving mass of humanity creates. The motion and sound of all that activity was so intense it almost made me dizzy just to watch it.

Until a few days before we left Dallas, I hadn't taken the time to learn much about Viet Nam, other than the fact that while people in the U.S. spell the name of the country as all one word, Vietnam, that's not the way the people who live there spell it. Other than that little factoid, I was basically ignorant about the country and the wonderful people who live there.

The withdrawal of American troops from Viet Nam took place before I was born. So the story of U.S. involvement there wasn't anything more to me than a few questions I once had to answer on a history exam. Before leaving on this trip, my only current information about conditions in Viet Nam came from a Vietnamese scientist who works at SiAmerica.

One of the stories he told me took place just a year or so earlier, when the son of one of his relatives, who still lives in Ho Chi Minh City, suffered a ruptured appendix. I think the little boy was only five or six years old at the time, and he almost lost his life due to their primitive state of medicine, even in the big cities.

Apparently the family had to run errands for the doctors simply to gain their favor, and they even had to go to the black market to buy the drugs doctors prescribed for their son, speeding them by bicycle back to the hospital. They bribed nurses to learn what was going on with his treatment, and to top it off, there was a several hour power blackout right during the operation! They kept the little boy alive somehow until the power came back on and then they finished taking his appendix out. Can you imagine how horrible that experience must have been for that little boy? And imagine being the parent of a small child and having to go through an experience like that.

Based on that story, and a few others he told, I wasn't expecting such a lively and exuberant feeling in the air. What little I knew about the war in Viet Nam, the one the Vietnamese call the American war, coupled with the stories I heard about how difficult life can sometimes be in that land, just didn't prepare me to see so many seemingly happy people out on the streets at all hours of the day and night.

There were cars and bicycles and pedestrians everywhere. I still can't understand why thousands of people don't die in accidents on the streets there every day. And I can tell you this from firsthand experience. If you have had a little too much to drink and are on the woozy side, then you definitely don't want to take a ride in one of their bicycle-driven cabs in the heavy nighttime traffic. That is particularly true

when your traveling companions have the latest state-of-the-art video equipment with which to document barf streaming from your mouth as you lean out of a madly speeding cyclo-cab whose driver is screaming something hateful at you in a language you don't understand. I am sure that video will make me laugh some day, but the thought of it the next day only made my hangover worse as we honked and bumped our way out of Saigon on an all-day journey up into the Central Highlands and on to the lovely city of Kontum.

We arrived here in Kontum three days ago, and if I hadn't been so hung over I'm sure the trip would have been quite enjoyable. We were in two new SUVs, complete with drivers. (Who we were warned were probably government informants.) The drive was made longer by a detour to visit Da Lat, but even in my weakened state I thought that little side trip was worth the time. Then we pressed on, and on, and on along a narrow little road until we reached Plei Ku just after sunset.

We stopped there to have a meal of sorts, sitting on stools on the sidewalk, eating something that I no longer care to remember, and listening to the evening propaganda spewing from the loudspeakers that seemed to sprout from every upright pole that would support one. It was a good time to not understand the local language, although I didn't see anyone who could understand Vietnamese paying any attention to the nasal voice of authority either.

It was late when we checked into our hotel here in Kontum. If they had any bellmen, they weren't on duty then, and so we had to find our rooms on our own. After carrying my luggage down two wrong hallways, I finally found my room and was greeted, as I walked into the room, by the biggest dead beetle I

have ever seen in my life. The floor was tiled, and this big black bug was lying on its back, dead legs in the air, and covering almost a tile and a half. At first glance I thought it was a dead rat, it was so large.

The room was dominated by a beautiful mahogany bed that was cocooned from the rest of the world by a mosquito net tied to two poles sticking straight out from the wall above the headboard. Through the white cloud of the mosquito net a bright red embroidered bedspread looked out of place against the background of the blue satin curtains gracing the window next to the bed. Just inside the door was a coat rack that doubled as the room's only closet. Compared to the fine quality of the bed, the cheap metal rack, made of bent tubes of aluminum painted a dull pink, seemed out of place. But it did nicely compliment the dead bug next to it.

The following morning SK and his two friends, who turned out to be medical doctors, left with the two medical technicians. They left the other hot runner with me in Kontum. Our job was to very unobtrusively conduct a test of the new communications system I was working on for SiAmerica. That was a last-minute surprise that SK sprang on me a couple of days before we left Dallas.

Apparently, the plan from the beginning was to take me along primarily because I was one of the project leads on this new system. And where better to field test its secure satellite communications capabilities than in a semihostile country that didn't have a sophisticated enough electronic eavesdropping capability to discover what we were doing.

Having grown up reading spy novels, but never having enough courage to actually get into that line of work, I found the prospect of testing our equipment

under these circumstances really exciting. I thought that I was walking out on the far edge now. (At least that was what passed for the far edge for me at the time. Things have changed.)

Our tests went off without a hitch, and I probably sounded like an excited schoolboy when SK returned, as I bragged about our success. It was really my success, I thought, because the guy they left to work with me had never even seen this new gear before. He was a bright technician, though, and a quick learner. By the second day of our tests he knew how to operate the system almost as well as I did.

It came as a shock then when SK returned with the others late last night and told me there had been a change in plans. Apparently someone in a position of authority in Hanoi was threatening to cut off permission for our humanitarian project of vaccinating the indigenous mountain tribes against various diseases. At least, that was what I was told we were doing. Giving free medical assistance to some of the world's most abandoned people made sense, I thought. Sure, it provided a perfect cover to field test some new military communications equipment, but now I saw that only as the means to the ends of helping some people who desperately needed help. As you can tell, my powers of rationalization were working overtime.

By morning it was obvious that SK didn't have good enough connections in Viet Nam to arrange our transportation to Hanoi by plane in time to meet with this uncooperative official. We all knew, of course, that what we were talking about here was another bribe. After all, we'd had to bribe a legion of petty officials just to get permission to come to Kontum, which also seems a little unusual. There's something fishy going

on up here in the Central Highlands if you ask me. I don't know just what it is, but you can actually feel the uneasiness in the air.

The plan now is that SK and I will travel to Hue tomorrow by SUV and then catch an early morning train to Hanoi. What bothers me about this change of schedule is that to complete the GPS feature-testing of our communications system, I had to leave the password for the system's root access with the other technician. There are features in that system that are highly classified, and if he decided to peek around in the root directory he would discover some two-way capabilities that SiAmerica would rather not let their customers, even their most trusted ones, know about. To his credit, SK understood my hesitation and even gave me a written confirmation that he had instructed me to reveal my password to another person. Ultimately, I believed at the time, with SK to back me up, there was nothing for me to worry about.

I have to admit, though, that these past few days have brought about a strange emotional struggle in me. Part of it, I'm sure, comes from being immersed in an environment that is as far removed from my normal daily experience as I can imagine. In a way, I feel almost as disoriented as I did in that coffee shop in Amsterdam after taking mushrooms with Shadow and Q. The fact that I haven't connected very well with any of the others on this trip has probably added to my confusion, but something in me senses that what our little group is doing here isn't right. Yet another part of me wants to shout about what important humanitarian work we are engaged in. And so I continue to rationalize that for people like me, who are born poor and without good connections, using my brain to work my way up the capitalist stairway to heaven is the only way to get far enough ahead that I

can reach back down and lend a helping hand to those who are even less fortunate than me. Or so I again rationalize.

* * *

March 28, 2004 — Hue, Viet Nam

The most shocking fact about war is that its victims and its instruments are individual human beings, and that these individual beings are condemned by the monstrous conventions of politics to murder or be murdered in quarrels not their own.

Aldous Huxley

The hotel SK booked us into in Hue was everything I could have hoped for to help ease the ungrounded tension that had been building in me the past few days. Technically, the hotel consists of a three-story high central hub with two spokes, one at ten o'clock and one at two o'clock, the spokes being the wings of the hotel. But that isn't how it appeared to me as we drove into the circular driveway leading to the entrance porch. The image that comes to mind is one of a tall, elegant woman wearing a beautiful yellow cape. And she is spreading out her arms in an all encompassing way, stretching them out toward the Perfume River near whose banks she stands.

As we walked into the reception area just inside the front door, I felt something very compelling and at the same time ominous about this historic old building. Originally, it was the colonial governor's residence during the period when this land was called French Indochina. Perhaps I felt the negative vibe because the place was so overly ostentatious, with touches like the

large elephant tusks that dominated the entrance to the sitting room. It was as if a thick cloud of dusty memories forced us to move in slow motion as we left the reception desk, walked past the tusks, and went down two small steps and into the large oval sitting room that dominated the ground floor.

Our friendly hotel guide was showing us the way out to a sweeping veranda that was surrounded by beautiful flowering gardens. Grape arbors supporting large-leaved twisting vines composed the ceiling of the outdoor room. Our guide informed us that the small scattering of tables was the main dining area.

The tables were all empty except for one, where a couple was sitting just to my right. The man was facing me, and he looked as emaciated as any living person I've ever seen. For a minute I thought I was watching an old Headless Horseman cartoon about Ichabod Crane. The guy had one of the most forbidding-looking faces I've ever seen, long and thin with dark wrinkled skin, and a gray beard that was badly in need of a trim. All of which made it more difficult for me to accept the fact that, even with her back to me, the way that little green beret was jauntily perched atop his companion's head told me that she had to be Ralua.

She seemed to sense me staring at them and turned around. This time, fortunately I thought, there was no excited squeal. She just turned around, squinted at me for a moment, and said, "Well, William, it seems that we keep bumping into each other in such unusual places." She said it so matter-of-factly that I only managed a few unintelligible grunts in response.

Almost as if she was brushing me aside, Ralua stood up, reached her hand out to SK, and introduced herself as an old high school friend of mine. She

brushed off the Palenque meeting by telling SK only that we'd seen each other briefly at a party. While I wasn't surprised at how cool she was in covering for me, it was interesting to see how skillful she was at always telling the truth, but only enough truth to feed SK's preset ideas about me and my life.

"I'd like you to meet my friend, Cisco," Ralua was saying to SK and me.

"Hi, I'm Francisco" the wild-looking man said. "But everyone just calls me Cisco."

"Cisco is one of the world's leading amateur mycologists," Ralua went on. "He's been living up in the Central Highlands for the past two years now, studying the little-known mushroom cults that have flourished there for hundreds of years."

I don't need to tell you how freaked out I was at meeting yet another weird friend of Ralua's. My mind was racing. What were the odds that the four of us would be staying at the same hotel in Viet Nam. Obviously, this was no coincidence. And what was most amazing to me was that she could have found us so quickly. After all, the decision had only been made yesterday that SK and I would travel ahead of the rest of the group. He didn't even make the hotel reservations until this morning. I heard him make the call myself. It had to be Shadow's doing, and if his information was that up-to-date, then his tentacles must be long, indeed.

I was still trying to process all of the wild thoughts that were flying through my head when I heard SK say, "Of course, we'd love to join you for dinner tonight."

“Great. I’ll reserve the private dining room here in the hotel. The food is good, and it’s a lot more quiet than a regular restaurant,” said Ralua.

And so, in a matter of minutes after checking in, it was arranged that my boss and I would have dinner with my exotic high school friend and her wacky looking companion in what was once the dining room of the governor of French Indochina. What a strange trip this was morphing into.

Any shopping and sightseeing we did that afternoon is no longer part of my memories. All I could think about during that long hot day was Ralua and how she had so mysteriously turned up in my life yet again.

Our dinner that evening started off well enough. Ralua apparently had made all of the arrangements, as we never saw a menu. The food, beer, and wine started flowing soon after we sat down, and what a feast it was. There were spring rolls made of rice paper so thin that their delicious contents looked to be encased in cellophane. The egg drop soup was the richest I’ve ever tasted. At one point I commented on how good the caramelized pork was only to be told by a stern Cisco that the meal was 100% vegetarian. He was so fierce about it that I felt like apologizing for even thinking about eating meat.

As the meal wore on, we began to run out of small talk, and I was getting nervous about the path our conversation might take next. So I shifted into my usual inane mode of saying something just to keep the conversation moving in a peaceful and polite direction. “Doesn’t it seem a bit incongruous that we’re here in this beautiful room, eating a wonderful meal on china plates, starched tablecloth, heavy silverware, and for music there’s only that old boom box on the sideboard

playing some strange music my Western ear doesn't appreciate."

"Well, we can easily solve the quality of the music problem," chimed in an already tipsy SK. "Why don't I go and get all those CDs I bought in Saigon from that kid on the street?" I remember groaning when he bought them, not only because they were obviously bootleg copies, but also because there were so many of them. I think the kid said the box contained, "All Rock and Roll ever. Nothing missing."

I tried to talk SK out of going to his room to get the box of CDs, mainly because I was still hoping we could get out of there before something went wrong. I had no idea of what that might be, but SK had drunk a lot of wine, and Cisco had been putting the beer away almost as fast as the waiters could bring it. I was afraid that if the conversation ever got around to politics there might be an ugly confrontation between them. Besides, as I vainly tried to argue, SK and I had to catch the first train to Hanoi early the next morning. But there was no stopping them. The let's-listen-to-some-old-music train had already left the station, and it was fueled by enough alcohol to ensure a long journey.

When SK returned with his box of CDs, Cisco immediately began to dig through it. The first one he played was by the famous folk singer, Phil Ochs, who was right up there with Bob Dylan during the peak of the antiwar protest movement in the Sixties. It quickly became obvious that Cisco had mapped out some sort of agenda to challenge SK about something or other, as he began singing along with the music. His voice, however, was nothing to write home about. "I declare the war is oh oh ver," he crooned each time the chorus to Ochs' famous anthem played. Next he began

playing *White boots marching in a yellow land*. I could tell that SK was unimpressed, both with the song selection and the quality of the singing.

“Didn’t that guy kill himself?” SK finally asked.

“Yes, he did,” answered Ralua. “He was despondent over feelings of being superfluous. I heard he thought of himself as being a has-been even before Nixon signed the truce. At least he didn’t sell out like so many of the others.”

“Most of them committed suicide, too,” said Cisco somewhat mysteriously. “It’s just taken ‘em a lot longer to die. How about you, SK? Are you one of the walking dead, too? Or have you cemented over all of your thoughts about our war on these fine people?”

“I didn’t have much to patch over, actually,” answered SK, refusing to rise to Cisco’s bait. “I spent most of my time over here in Saigon, working with an intelligence unit. “Outside of one TAD assignment to investigate a mission that went bad, I didn’t leave the city. So I never had any of the problems that you guys did who were in the thick of it all the time.”

Cisco and SK had already exchanged enough information to know that the two of them had been ‘in-country’ at the same time. And it was clear that Cisco had no use for the privileged officers who spent their entire tours of duty in air-conditioned Saigon offices. So it seemed like every little thing SK said set off another of Cisco’s outbursts.

“Unless you’ve been there, there is no way you can understand what it’s like to have the guy next to you, someone who had become a good friend, get killed. You keep movin’ forward, tryin’ to fight, but at the same time tryin’ to come to grips with the fact that

your buddy, the guy you were counting on to help you get out of this mess, is now dead. You're never gonna to see him again. He's gone forever and you might be right behind him if you don't pay attention and get the fuck out of there. It sucks, man. It really sucks."

"I'm sure it does," sympathized SK, "but at some point you've got to move on and get on with your life. Isn't that the best way to honor your fallen friends?"

"Man, you're so full of shit they can smell you on the moon," responded Cisco. "Do you actually believe that crap you're spoutin' or are you just sayin' the words they taught you in your fancy private schools?"

Before SK could defend himself, Cisco plowed ahead. "And now you and your buddy little George, the tyrant from Texas, are destroying the lives of yet another entire generation of poor kids."

"How do you know I'm a Bush supporter?" snapped SK. "You don't know a damn thing about me!"

"Wanna bet?" sneered Cisco as his demeanor began to assume that of a jaguar on the hunt.

"You already told me everything I needed to know about you when you told me who you were attached to and when you were in-country. You were part of the Intel group that let my division get ambushed when it could have been prevented. Remember that, Lieutenant?"

"I think I know the incident you are talking about, but that happened several months before I arrived. I don't see how you can hold that screw-up against me personally," said SK.

Before Cisco had a chance to respond, Ralua interjected, "I'll tell you what, guys. If you want to open these old wounds sometime when neither of you has had anything to drink, I'll be happy to be your referee. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let what could be a nice evening in an exotic land get spoiled by two guys who were on the same side when the poor locals here, who in fact did most of the suffering, have moved on. Come on you guys, get a life."

"I wish it was that simple, Ralua. I really do," said a chastened Cisco. "Man, I just wish it was that easy. But I get so mad, Ralua, when I think about what Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive war means to both the warriors and to those they make war upon. We now have a situation where a single person can determine that America should go to war without anyone getting in his way, even if that person is certifiably insane like that little Bush prick. James Madison, one of the primary authors of the Constitution, said the most important part of that document is the part that gives the war-making power to the elected representatives of the people. Yet in October 2002, Congress gave that power away to Bush, who used it less than six months later without any concurrence by anyone else."

Turning to SK, he said "You're part of the Last One Standing crowd, buddy. The aim of the people employing that strategy for human survival, according to Heinberg, and I quote, 'is to shift the pain of resource depletion from the most militarily powerful countries onto others less formidable so that an affluent industrial lifestyle can be preserved for at least a few people.' You really ought to read one of his books if you care anything at all about there being a decent future for anyone other than the most affluent, the top one percent of the money tree. Because most of us ain't gonna make it high enough up there to give

our grandchildren a decent future if we follow that strategy. And I really can't see how anyone who understands that that's what their strategy is can live with themselves. How do you live with yourself, SK? How do you justify living the so-called American Way of Life?"

"You might be surprised at how many people in this world still dream of coming to the States and living the American way of life," answered SK. "Our standard of living is unsurpassed in human history. And the opportunity to rise to the top after a poor birth is better in the U.S. than anywhere else on Earth."

"I'm not trying to gang up on you, SK," said Ralua. "But just because a lot of people want to live like the people in the U.S. live doesn't mean it's right. For example, let's say you and I join ninety-eight other people for an around the world cruise. In exchange for some kind of work, we all sign on as equals, share and share alike. But then when we're not even half way across the Pacific we discover, you and I, that four of our shipmates have been using over one-third of our supplies. They're eating our food and drinking our water at a rate that may last them until the end of the trip, but the other ninety six of us will perish long before our ship returns home. So what do we do, you and I, when we discover that situation, SK?"

"Well, Ralua," he answered, "that's a nice little parable, but the world is much more complicated than that."

"Is it? Really?" Ralua asked as her eyes locked his.

"Yes, it is," SK answered without hesitation.

“Maybe so,” said Cisco, “but do you want me to tell you what life is like if you’re a so-called middle-class American male? It’s simple. You’ll have an unhappy but manageable childhood, go to a state college, get a job, get married, have some kids, change jobs several times, and you’ll get divorced and remarried at least once. Ultimately you will die an unhappy, unfulfilled old man who wished he’d never been born. That’s the typical American life for a man. For women it’s much worse.” Cisco was obviously working back up to a fever pitch.

“Why’d you join the Army and come to Viet Nam, SK? Did you do it because you were a loyal American, or did you do it for your resume? You knew that your father could always pull the right strings to keep you out of harm's way, didn’t you? So what was the reason you signed up?”

“I joined ROTC in college. I thought it was the patriotic thing to do,” SK shot back, his face beginning to redden.

“It must have been nice to be free enough to at least think you had a choice. These poor bastards in the military right now are exactly that, poor bastards. If there were enough decent jobs around, those kids wouldn’t have to take the chance of getting their heads blown off just to get a start in life,” continued Cisco, hardly taking a breath or letting anyone else get a word in edgewise.

“I’ve never truly felt free. At about the age I began to understand what that word meant I also found out about the draft. Primarily because of growing up with the draft breathing down my neck I always felt as if someone was coming to get me. Even as a kid I was fearful of that awful knock on the door in the middle of the night. I’ll tell you how crazy it made

me. One day I was reading about a person who had a hand that was seriously deformed. I thought, 'How lucky he is, he can't be drafted. The state will never own him.' I've always felt like I was a chattel, SK, ever since I was a little kid."

"I'm sure you don't want to be reminded of this, Cisco," Ralua said in her most gentle of voices. "But didn't you once tell me that, even though you now have such a strong antiwar attitude, that you thought you were at your best when you were here during the war?"

"Were we at our best back then, we brothers-in-arms? Yes, I'm sometimes afraid that's so. And that may be the heart of our macho-human problem today. In combat we finally found out what we were capable of when all the chips were down. We survived under fire. But when we came home the challenges looked puny to us, and so we slacked off. We were never able to regain that edge we had here in Nam. We were young back then, and at our best. Then we came home and found no challenge worthy of keeping us at our best. And no one understood. There was no one to talk to. Since then, most of us have been disappointed in what we have accomplished, no matter how great. Never again did we reach that fine edge of existence, where every moment of life is precious. And we learned the hard way that a fucked-up nation could not care less about what we did or what becomes of us. We were just meat, another brick in the wall."

"How sad but true," said Ralua. "It is one of the great human paradoxes that so many men are never more gloriously alive than they are during war."

"I'm not sure that's true," said SK. "I only now am beginning to feel at the peak of my powers. Truly alive, as you say."

“Hah! You’re even deceiving yourself,” said Cisco. “Like the song says, I discovered that I’d traded a walk-on part in the war for a leading role in a cage, and it seems to me that that’s just what you’ve done.”

Cisco again appeared to be settling in for the telling of a long tale, as he took a toke of the joint he had just finished rolling, swallowed some beer, and began, “You see, I was just like you a while back. Well, not exactly like you. I didn’t have all those great breaks that being the son of a rich man gets. But hey, I didn’t let my jealousy of guys like you spoil my enjoyment of my own personal winnings from the rat race. I was doin’ OK, sorta like this kid here is probably doin’,” pointing to me with his thumb.

“Then one night, right oughtta the blue, I was almost paralyzed with fear by the thought that somehow, without me even noticing it, I’d gotten OLD! And at that very moment I groked the fact that it was time to let go of virtually all of my dreams, because they were the dreams of a much younger man. There simply was no longer enough life left in me to accomplish even a small number of the things I once intended to do. Could it be true, I wondered. Was I actually middle-aged, or worse. A day or so later I was driving to work and noticed a bumper sticker on a car in front of me that read, ‘Thanks to our veterans, America is #1,’ and I thought, you know, that’s right. Without the awesome force of the U.S. military, assholes like Bush couldn’t murder people wholesale just to make their tiny little dicks hard. And what was that #1 crap? Yeah, America is number one at consuming the planet’s limited resources, and it’s number one at polluting, and killing anyone who gets in its way. That’s when I started seriously thinking about moving here to begin mending my karma before it was too late. Part of me said, ‘Let go, take a chance,

move to Nam and change your wastrel ways.’ But another part of me was asking why, what was really going on here? What was I really searching for?

“Was I thinking about running from something or to something? My grandfather was running away from something when he moved to the U.S. Did that make it any easier for him, I wondered. About that time, I got into a little jam with the IRS. It finally worked itself out, but for a while I was secretly hoping that they’d make life so unbearable for me that I’d be forced to leave the states and go underground. Eventually, I came to realize that if I didn’t let go of this constant clinging to a life that I didn’t really enjoy all that much anymore, I’d go crazy, or probably even die. In fact, I finally realized that continuing on as I was for much longer would guarantee me a quick death, which, of course, I saw as preferable to the long wearing-away of my spirit that was already taking place. As Dubuffet once said, ‘Unless one says goodbye to what one loves, and unless one travels to completely new territories, one can expect merely a long wearing-away of oneself and an eventual extinction.’ Well, that was me, and so I moved here.”

“So you were financially successful once? You had all the stuff you wanted? Huh. I’d never have guessed that,” said Ralua.

(I have to interject here that this off-hand comment raised my spirits considerably. If she didn’t know something that basic about him, then maybe my worst fears were unfounded, and they weren’t lovers after all.)

“Yeah, I was living in this really upscale neighborhood,” Cisco continued, “hell, the deed-restriction committee wouldn’t even permit children’s wading pools in your own legally fenced back yard!

Fuck! Even a few drops of oil on your driveway would land a citation on your door within minutes. There were these old retired assholes who would drive around the neighborhood, just looking for infractions of our deed restrictions. It's all part of the regimentation of America. When our kids are only a few months old we put 'em in day care, we don't even raise them at home anymore. Most of the raisin' is done in corporate-owned institutions. Just think about that for a minute! The regimentation begins when they're infants and never stops. The System is designed to force both of a kid's parents to work just to be able to give 'em a decent start in life. So they have no choice. It's a human factory-farm, day care, preschool, and then on to the horrible regimen of the public schools, which further locks in the brains of these zombies to where they are no longer capable of having an original thought.

“By the time they're adults, they've completely given up reading. Look at fucking Bush! *My Pet Goat* is the only book he's read in the last fifty years. And study after study shows that people who get their information from TV news are not just ill informed, they're actually misinformed. It's a prison system for human consciousness from cradle to grave. Being Borg would be a holiday for some of the sad sacks I've seen who claim they are living the American dream. So, no! I no longer have any interest in lending my mind to serving the blight on this planet that is known as the American way of life. I have lived that way of life and, believe me, it really sucks. From Monday through Friday you go to some shitty job that you hate, spending the best part of your day with people you would never socialize with otherwise.

“Then you get home around seven o'clock. Exhausted. You have some fast food for dinner and

veg out in front of the TV until you fall asleep. Then you go to bed and get up and do it again, and again, and again . . . day after day after endless fucking day. And if you have kids, it's even less of a life because you've got to spend a little of your precious time faking interest in their miserable lives at a school that also sucks big time. That's really not a life worth living, let alone a way of life worth fighting and dying for. The people of America have been duped. They're rats on a never-ending treadmill, each one thinking he's helping to preserve a culture in which his kid is going to get rich and take care of him in his old age. Instead, the System extracts the maximum amount of work from you in return for the minimum reward you will labor for. Ultimately your long years of overwork cause illnesses that prohibit full enjoyment of your old age. In the end, you will spend most of your pitiful life savings on your final involvement with the medical system. You're fools, you Americans. Wake up and get out while you can."

"That's easy for you to say, and to be honest, I'm glad that you actually did just that . . . get the fuck out of a great country," shot SK. "You've got a lot of righteousness going for you, but look at where you are. Look at what you're doing. You've run away from what you see as a battle between rich and poor. Well, at least I'm staying and fighting for what I believe in."

"Until I'd been in-country for a few months, SK, I felt just like you do. It was my country, right or wrong. Of course, at the time I had no idea how UN-fucking-believably wrong my country could be. But the minute I found out that I'd been lied to I just fuckin' quit."

"What do you mean, you quit?" asked SK.

"Just what I said. I quit being an American. I no longer pledge my allegiance to the United States of

America. I take back my oath, a pledge of honor it was, yet I take back my oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. But I take back my oath only because there no longer is such a Constitution. It has been shredded, burned, and destroyed by the neo-fascists who have seized the reins of power in the U.S.," an impassioned Cisco came close to shouting.

"But you ask, didn't I once love the good old US of A like you do today? What went wrong with me?" Cisco said no one in particular. "When I first got here I thought we were doing something important, not here locally, maybe, but for the big picture at least. Even though I knew how fucked up the war was, I still had the blind hope that we were somehow connected to events that would one day make the world better. Like all stupid warriors, many of us believed that our war really was the war that would make the final difference. The slaughter in Iraq is now showing everyone once again just how naive that thought always is. Not to mention that insanely named War on Terror. Fuck me! Has everyone lost their minds? How can there be a fucking war on an emotion? War fucking causes terror."

"Very funny," an obviously unamused SK said. "The world has become an incredibly complex place. Far too complex to discuss over this much wine. But I can guarantee that President Bush is considerably better informed and far more competent than you could know. And if you ever meet him in person, as I have, I am sure you will agree with me."

Just then, as one of the waiters was leaning between Ralua and me to remove a dish from the center of the table, he nodded toward Cisco and said, "Vô liêm si."

“What did he say?” I asked Ralua.

She smiled and said, “ ‘Vô liêm si.’ It means something like ‘the most despicable liar is a liar who no longer feels shame.’ Their slang for it is that such a person is a Cabot-Lodge.”

“A what?” I asked.

“A Cabot-Lodge is just that, a despicable liar who feels no shame. The phrase refers to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who lied to the Diem brothers, eventually costing them their lives and setting the stage for the madness that ensued,” she answered, setting me back in my tracks with her in-depth knowledge of a part of recent history that had completely escaped me.

Changing the subject on a dime, Ralua said, “So, you still haven’t told me, Sandburn”

Ralua sometimes called SK by his first name, and, amazingly, he appeared to enjoy hearing her say it. Knowing what I now know, my guess is that she was using one of her shamanic tricks of voice and had hypnotized him. It was obvious to everyone at the table that Ralua had SK wrapped around her little finger.

“ . . . out of all this sixties music, which one single song is your favorite above all others?”

I guess the question was more than SK could handle, as his head hit the table with a little thump when it slid off his crossed arms that had been serving as a pillow for the past few minutes. Ralua arranged for two of the waiters to help SK to his room and then whispered that she had something she wanted to give me, and that she would meet me in my room a half an

hour from now. Needless to say, my fantasy life went into high gear for the next thirty minutes.

As we left the dining room, I could hear Cisco singing along with an old song from the Alan Parsons Project. He was still sitting on the floor in the corner and was working on rolling another joint. "I don't care what you do. I wouldn't want to be like you," he sang.

* * *

March 31, 2004 — Hanoi, Viet Nam

A coincidence is a clue.

Lorenzo

Although I embarked on this trip with a positive attitude, by now my disposition was vacillating between fear and disgust. I was disgusted with myself about a lot of things, one of them being my inability to tell Ralua how I felt about her. Of course, I was able to neutralize that thought with the realization that I didn't even know myself how or what I felt about her, or what I thought about that whole crazy scene she seemed to be involved in for that matter.

I was also disgusted with myself for not paying closer attention to what was going on around me. Was I really involved in some kind of weird experiment to test RFID chips implanted in humans, as Ralua warned me the other night in Hue when she came to my room? Or was I just a glorified porter?

There I was, shortly after three o'clock in the morning, bent under the weight of my own oversized backpack and also pulling two of SK's three suitcases along behind me. Their little rollers were having a difficult time navigating a street that my memory claims was made of cobblestones but which my reason says must have just been a bumpy road. We were walking from our hotel, in the dead of night, to the railroad station in Hue. SK had somehow convinced me that if I took two of his bags then he could use his little flashlight to illuminate our path. Since he was obviously hung over, I just went along with him, even though I was beginning to feel more and more like some rich guy's flunky.

“Hey! What chuse guys doin’?” came a voice off to our right. That’s when my fear kicked in big time. For a brief instant I truly thought that my life would end on a dark street in the lovely city of Hue.

Since SK had taken charge of our travel plans, I wasn’t aware that he had forgotten to arrange for transportation to the train station in time to catch the 4:20 a.m. “Reunification Express” to Hanoi. After our early wakeup calls, we met in the lobby and only then realized we had a problem because there were no taxis available at that hour. I don’t think SK had actually sobered up yet, because his reasoning powers seemed a bit weak. Nonetheless, I went along with his plan to walk to the station, since it was only about a half a mile away. As we were leaving the hotel grounds, the night guard at the door, ominously I thought, warned us of thieves who might be lying in wait along our dark walk to the train station.

“Hey! What chuse guys doin’?” the voice said again. It definitely came from the little circle of men sitting around a small fire just off the street.

“We’re going to catch the train to Hanoi,” said SK in a friendly voice.

“Be careful up there,” a younger voice warned. “It’s not safe, ya know.” The paranoia I first felt with the overload of brownies in Palenque now seemed to be my constant companion . . . even without the brownies.

We arrived at the Hue train station without incident, but we got there so early that it hadn’t opened yet. The doors to the station’s waiting room were locked and dozens of people slept on the ground outside. Across the open space in front of the picturesque old railroad terminal was a decrepit-

looking building that appeared to be an automobile repair business of some kind. A warm yellow light shining out of the building's corner window looked inviting, drawing us in like moths. It turned out to be a little coffee bar. We ordered two Vietnamese coffees and sipped them, sitting on upside down plastic crates while we waited for our train to arrive.

By the time I heard the train's first whistle, I had begun to allow myself to relax into the romance of this new experience. And when the train finally came into view, my imagination really took flight. Just like a scene from *Doctor Zhivago*, a loud and clanking engine came rolling into the station with a dozen or so passenger cars in close pursuit. And much to my amazement and delight, there were two small red flags flying from short flagstaffs on the front of the engine. The dirty but proud old engine looked as if it would be willing at a moment's notice to pose as the background for a communist victory photo op, but I am probably drawing a better picture here than the scene actually justified.

The only seats we could find together were backward-facing, yet my memories of that train ride remain fond. For the next 13 hours we only saw where we'd just been, not where we were going. Only the train's toilets provided a little break in our backward monotony. They didn't have windows, but their method of sanitation did provide an interesting view of the world.

If you didn't know what to expect when you opened the door of a toilet on a speeding Vietnamese train for the first time, you were in for a big surprise. The noise alone can scare the shit out of you before you get in the door. Basically, the toilet part of their restroom consists of a hole in the floor. The blasting

sound of the wheels on the tracks, the wind rushing up from the gaping hole in the floor, the sight of the ground speeding beneath you as you squat and concentrate on keeping your balance, the train seemingly about to careen off the tracks, well, hold that picture in your mind for a minute, and then you will understand why there are stains on the bottom of the pants of so many Western tourists who are trying to save a little money by taking the train.

To this day I still don't know why we had to take the train to Hanoi. I never did buy SK's story about not being able to get a convenient flight. My guess is that it had to do with something that was in one of SK's suitcases. On our first afternoon in Hue he had several meetings that I didn't attend, and he always took this small bag with him. It didn't occur to me at the time, but I now think that SK was taking something from Hue to Hanoi that he didn't want to be accidentally seen during a routine airport screening.

I never confronted him about this, of course, and for his part he made up some kind of plausible story about wanting to ride the train anyway because he had heard an old Army friend rave about the experience. This was apparently the same guy who recommended that we try the meatballs boiled in dough that the lunch vendors sold as they bounced from side to side walking down the aisles selling their wares. They were quite tasty, by the way . . . the meatballs, not the vendors.

We arrived in Hanoi on Monday afternoon and checked into a small hotel in the Old Quarter of town. For the next two days, SK spent most of his time bouncing from one government office to another. At least, that is what he told me. I didn't actually care what he was doing, though, because it left me free to

explore old Hanoi on my own. Instead of taking a tour of Ho Chi Minh's tomb, or other such tourist traps, I spent my time walking around the 36 streets of the Old Quarter. According to my travel guidebook, this area is the site of the longest permanent place of habitation in Viet Nam. People have been living and dying on this little piece of ground for over 2,000 years now. I could almost feel its history soaking into my skin.

I loved walking along those narrow little streets, and was amazed at how easy it was to get turned around and then completely lost if I didn't pay close attention to every little twist and turn. I swear it seemed like the names of the streets changed almost every block. I finally figured out that I had to forget about street names and focus on the various shops as my landmarks. My favorite one was the corner I turned at on my final approach to our hotel. It was a tombstone shop.

Like most of the shops around there, it wasn't much wider than a two-car garage. During the day, the big metal front door would be rolled up to reveal a dark workshop inside. In front was a little table, much like an elementary school desk. And there sat a man, patiently chiseling Chinese characters into slabs of stone. All along the front of the shop were more tombstones, inscriptions of some sort already carved and painted with gold on the smooth black stones, just waiting for someone's name to be added in the space below. There were small thin slabs that only reached up to my knees, and there were more ornate thicker ones almost waist high.

My favorite place in Hanoi, though, wasn't in the Old Quarter. My Vietnamese friend from work made me promise to stop and say hello to an old friend of

his, a man who owned a small coffee shop called Café Lum, which I finally found today, but only after a great deal of effort on the part of my cyclo driver. The sign in front is so unobtrusive that we drove by it twice before noticing its yellow background fading into the dull green walls of the building. Open shutters revealed black steel bars that substituted for glass in the windows.

Mr. Lum lived in a large room right behind the small coffee shop, which held only a scattering of tables and benches. A thin, white silk sheet hung from a rope stretched across a door that separated his living quarters from the shop. But behind that little piece of cloth there existed a world of wonder beyond my powers of description. Even now it is hard for me to believe all that I saw. Like the thin membrane between normal consciousness and psychedelic consciousness, that gossamer sheet of silk concealed an art collector's heaven.

His room was probably about half-again as big as the public area, but it seemed even larger because the ceiling went up for more than two stories. Every square meter of wall space was covered with magnificent art. Framed paintings were also stacked all around the room on shelves, leaning against the walls, and on the floor. Large tables were piled high with unframed canvases. I know I'm not doing this description justice. Just try to imagine several thousand original works of art all piled up in one place and you'll begin to get the idea.

In the far corner of the room was a spiral staircase that wound its way up to the second and third floor art galleries. And yes, in every sense of the word, these were true art galleries, hardwood floors and all. As I understand the story, during the

interminable years of war, first fighting the French and then the Americans, Mr. Lum served as Viet Nam's greatest patron of the arts. What little profits he made in his tiny coffee shop went mainly to provide supplies to a core group of artists who frequented his shop and repaid his kindness by giving him some of their finest work.

As of right now, his collection is the most valuable private collection in Viet Nam. It consists of thousands of works of art, many of whose creators were killed during American bombing campaigns. I hope that this wonderful collection doesn't disappear when Mr. Lum dies, but the word on the street is that the communist party members who are already looting Viet Nam can't wait to get their hands on Mr. Lum's collection.

Maybe it was the juxtaposition of such superb art with the unimposing little coffee shop that enchanted me so, but my afternoon with Mr. Lum will remain one of the most memorable and pleasant interludes of my life. As we parted, I felt better than I had in years. The radiance of Mr. Lum's spirit made me feel as if I'd been in the presence of a Bodhisattva. "What amazing things we humans can accomplish, even in the face of great adversity," I thought.

However, my good mood quickly evaporated when I got back to our hotel. SK had slipped a note under my door saying he needed to see me as soon as I got back. By the time I got to his room he was quite agitated and acting nervous about getting packed and ready for our trip home tomorrow. After his screw-up in making arrangements to get to the train in Hue, I assumed he wasn't going to leave anything to chance this time, but I thought he was being somewhat obsessive when he said he wanted all of the bags we

were going to check to be stacked in a corner of his room, but again I just went along with him.

“If we have everything ready to go it’ll be a lot easier to get what passes for a bellman in this place to help us get it down to the taxi,” said SK.

“No problem,” I replied as I stacked my big backpack on top of his two largest suitcases. “I’ve just got my carry-on left in my room, and I’ll put my shaving stuff in it in the morning.”

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to the large package I had stacked on top of my backpack.

“Oh, that’s just something that Ralua asked me to mail for her when we get back to the states,” I answered.

“Are you kidding me!” SK shouted. His face was turning so red that I thought his head was going to explode. “Where have you been the last few years? Haven’t you heard that you NEVER should carry a package on an airplane for someone else?”

“I don’t think that applies to carrying things for a friend,” I answered.

“You told me yourself that you hardly know that woman anymore. Just because you went to high school with her doesn’t mean you can trust her. And what about her obnoxious friend? Are you sure that package isn’t really his?”

“In fact,” I replied, “it actually is Cisco’s package. But Ralua told me she packed it herself, and that it only has some unidentified plants in it that Cisco wants sent to a friend for analysis.”

“We’re throwing that damn thing out right now,” insisted SK. “I’m not about to take a chance like that for those people.”

For the first time since I went to work at SiAmerica, I stood up to him and said, “Look, SK, Ralua’s a long-time and very dear friend. I literally would trust her with my life. So I’m going to bring her package to the states and mail it just like I told her I would.”

“OK,” he said, “if you feel that strongly about it then you at least have to open it and confirm that there’s nothing illegal in it. I just happen to have some of that same kind of tape. So we can rewrap it after you check it.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“As serious as cancer,” came the uncompromising reply.

Just as I expected, there was nothing in the package that looked like contraband to either of us. There were a dozen or so small plastic bags holding dried mushrooms, each one labeled in great detail as to the place, day, and time the samples were collected. It looked harmless even to SK, who took charge of rewrapping the package while I went down to the lobby and made arrangements for a taxi to take us to the airport in the morning.

Confrontation in Viet Nam

Chapter 5

Stranded in San Francisco

April 4, 2004 — San Francisco

*Whom the gods wish to destroy,
they first call promising.*

Cyril Connolly

For me, these past four days have been like living in a dream, a nightmare actually. Last Thursday morning we left our hotel and took a taxi to the Hanoi airport. My only memory of our return trip to the U.S. is one of mind-numbing boredom. In addition to the long lines and security delays air travel now imposes, we had to first fly to Japan and then catch the long, slow flight to San Francisco. Although I guess traveling at several hundred miles an hour can't actually be considered slow. But spending a half a day suspended over the ocean in a metal tube can sure make time seem like it has come to a stop.

It was late Friday afternoon when we arrived at the San Francisco airport, and I was so worn out from the long trip that I could barely drag my bag from the luggage carousel to the customs inspection station. I thought this would be my last stop in the long series of annoying bureaucratic checkpoints that take the fun out of travel these days. There was a middle-aged black woman behind the table, and as soon as she saw me she called out to a nearby supervisor and said, "Here's that guy you've been looking for."

Since she hadn't even looked at my passport yet, I assumed she must have been talking about someone behind me. But when I turned around to see who she was talking about what I saw were two security guards coming up behind me to block any chance of my

escape. Where I would escape to I had no idea, and why I would have to escape was an even more pressing question, but my fight or flight instincts all seemed to be in order. All I knew for sure was that some deep-seated animal instinct in me told me to run, to get the hell away from these people who had obviously mistaken me for someone else . . . and then I remembered the package I was carrying for Ralua, and I had a sick feeling that my life was about to change, and not for the better.

Rather than bore you with all of the details of my humiliation at being thrown in jail for transporting heroin into the country, I'll just cut to the chase and say that tomorrow morning I have to appear in court where I'll find out what happens next. However, thanks to SK and my bail bondsman, I remain calm, trusting that they are right about me being released to return home while this is all being sorted out.

Looking back, I now see that SK's instinctive mistrust of Cisco actually worked in my favor, because SK at least knew, as I did, that the drugs had to have been placed there sometime after he and I left our hotel in Hanoi. And I have to hand it to him, he immediately came to my defense and told the officials the whole story, but they either couldn't or wouldn't drop the charges against me. So SK contacted SiAmerica's lawyers and had them arrange for my bail and for a local attorney to defend me.

Technically, this was a personal problem of mine, but since this was actually a business trip, SK assured me that SiAmerica would cover my legal expenses. However, I must admit that the way he said it didn't completely ease all of my fears. What he said was something like, "And don't worry about the money. Since this was a business trip, all of your legal

expenses associated with it, including defending you against the false charges for smuggling drugs, are going to be covered by SiAmerica. It's a total write-off for us, once you get an innocent verdict, that is." It was all I could do to keep from crying out, "What the fuck do you mean, innocent verdict? You know I'm innocent, and you even promised to come back for the trial and testify. Are you saying that an innocent verdict is in doubt? Is there still a chance that I could end up in jail?"

But I kept silent, not wanting to let him know what a state of internal panic I was still in. I've always been a little claustrophobic, so the thought of being locked in a small cell was almost more than I could endure.

I'm doing my best to think of my court appearance as merely a sorting out of the facts. After all, I did nothing wrong. But there is no denying the fact that when the customs agent opened the package I was carrying for Ralua, in addition to the packages of plants Cisco had collected, they found a half-kilo of heroin. How it got there is the question I still haven't answered satisfactorily, but everything points to one of the baggage handlers at the Hanoi airport. Even the customs officials concede that point.

I have to admit, though, for the first few minutes after being handcuffed I had the wild thought that SK had this done to me for some perverse reason, like maybe he had heard I was looking for another job. Of course, now I have eliminated that possibility because of how quickly he came to my defense and tried to intervene with the customs agents. He even told them that he was the one who wrapped the package in the hotel. And after I was released on bail he was there to

help me get checked into a hotel where I could wait in comfort for my preliminary hearing tomorrow.

I would be a little less nervous about court tomorrow if he had been able to stay in San Francisco until then, but I understand that he had to get back to Dallas, since he was already a day late getting home. After all, it was a problem that I had created by trying to help Ralua. Ultimately, my lawyer convinced me that with SK's testimony at the trial, which will take place in a few months, there should be no problem closing this matter satisfactorily. Of course, none of these facts relieved the stress I have been feeling since this nightmare began. By this afternoon I was finally getting a grip on my emotions when yet another unexpected encounter took place.

As I was sitting at an outside table, having lunch at a small café just down the street from my hotel, a deep voice from behind asked in a familiar British accent, "Do you mind if we join you?" Startled, I knocked over my glass of water as I spun around and saw two very unexpected faces smiling down on me. It was Apache and Al, the stately black couple I met at the party in Palenque.

I'm not sure what we said in those first nervous minutes together. But I eventually managed to say, "So, let me guess. Shadow told you where to find me." Without answering, their smiles told me all I needed to know. Although there was no reason or factual basis for me to feel this way, knowing that the elusive and mysterious Shadow was somehow involved caused a wave of relief to sweep over me. Maybe everything was going to turn out all right after all, I thought.

"Since I obviously have no clue about Shadow, the two of you, or even Ralua for that matter," I blurted out, "I guess it's your move."

“You are putting on a brave front, William” Apache smiled. “In fact, you almost look calm, but we’re not here to play a game with you like Shadow does. We’re only here to pass on a little information that may be of interest to you.”

I said nothing as Al began to talk, while I strained to hear him against the background of the traffic noise coming from the busy intersection two doors down from the little patio where we were sitting.

“First of all, here are our full names,” he said, as he slid a business card toward me. Go to a public library or someplace where you can Google us. But don’t do it from your personal account.”

“Why, because I’ll get in even more trouble for being connected to you? Are you drug dealers or something?” I almost hissed.

“Well now, finally there is a little spark of life in him,” Apache said to Al with a soft smile, and we could all feel the tension between us begin to slip away.

I gave them a sheepish smile and said, “I guess I’m still in shock. A lot has happened to me in the past couple of days, and I feel like I’m living in a dream, a really bad dream.”

“Now you’re on to something,” said Al.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not a dream you are caught up in, it’s a nightmare, and it’s called the War on Drugs. Like it or not, you are now intimately involved in that exercise in madness, and just because you are innocent it doesn’t mean that you are going to walk away a free man.”

“Well if you are trying to make me feel better that sure doesn’t help,” I replied.

"I wish we were here to make you feel better, Will," said Apache, "but that's not why we're here. All we're trying to do is to pass along a little information and help you get things in perspective so you can make some intelligent decisions as to what to do next. But one thing you might want to keep in the forefront of your mind is that everyone has their own agenda, including Al and me. So be careful that you stick to your own plan, because if you don't you'll become a part of someone else's. Even the people who care most about you and want only the best for you have their own agendas. In fact, they are the ones you have to be most on guard against, because what's right from their point of view may not be right for the role you have come here to play."

"So you're telling me that I shouldn't trust anyone, including yourselves?"

"Trust yourself. Trust your own instincts, William," Al added. "They will seldom let you down."

"It's my instincts that I trusted when I carried that package for Ralua, and they sure didn't serve me very well this time," I replied.

"Are you sure?" Apache asked. "You are going to have to eventually decide this for yourself, but Al and I think you were correct in trusting Ralua. Something else is going on here, and it may be more sinister than just a simple attempt by some Vietnamese baggage handlers to sneak a little contraband into this country. What if someone else slipped those drugs into your package? Have you given that any consideration?"

"Who else was there?" I shot back. "There was Ralua, SK, and the baggage handlers. If I eliminate Ralua and the baggage people that only leaves SK, and I hope you don't mean to imply that he was the

one who set me up, because there's no way he would ever do something like that. What would be his motive anyway?"

"I can think of a few reasons SK would have, but let's not go there," said Al. "All we're trying to say is that until you know with absolute certainty how that contraband got into your package you shouldn't rule out any possibility."

"What do you mean?" I asked, panic once again starting to creep into my voice.

"You have to forgive Al sometimes," Apache interrupted. "Living in the shadows like we do brings with it the occasional bout of paranoia, and Al has more than his share of it."

"Just because you're paranoid it doesn't mean that someone isn't after you," Al said with a grin.

Ignoring him, Apache continued, "Right now it doesn't make any difference who set you up, or even if you were an intentional target. Right now you've got to prepare for what's just ahead."

My heart sank as reality raised its ugly head once again. "I know. Or I should say I wish I knew what was going to happen tomorrow. Just the thought that I could possibly be put back in jail has me close to throwing up." I said. "I think it's the not-knowing that is the worst."

"Well, it's not quite as bleak as that," said Al. "While right now there is no way of knowing what the ultimate outcome will be, I think I can say with almost one hundred percent certainty that one way or the other, whether it's by having the charges dropped or by having the case sent to trial, no matter which way it goes tomorrow you can be sure that you'll be on

your way back to Dallas by tomorrow night. You might be out on bail, but you'll be on your way home. Of that I'm sure."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

"Trust me, Al has been involved with the U.S. Court system on many occasions and at many different levels," said Apache. "He knows about these things."

"And," a grinning Al said, "I have Shadow's word on it."

Before I could question him about this hopeful piece of news the two of them stood up, gathered their things, and began a hasty exit as Apache turned to me and said, "By the way, the main reason we were asked to see you today was to let you know that Ralua will be arriving in Dallas next week and would love for you to pick her up at the airport."

And with that she handed me a small piece of paper with flight information on it. Before I could gather my wits about me enough to know what just happened, they had disappeared around the corner.

Chapter 6

Ecstasy in Dallas

Just as Al and Apache predicted, my case was set for trial, and I was released on bail. However, there was a condition set for my release that I hadn't anticipated. I was given two weeks to tie up loose ends in Dallas before returning to California, where the court ordered me to stay while awaiting trial. The only person who didn't seem to be surprised at this turn of events was SK. When I phoned to give him the news, he barely missed a beat before telling me that he would arrange for me to use the company apartment in San Francisco, and that I could take a partial sabbatical, working remotely until my trial. Apparently Russ was right about SK being willing to go to great lengths to keep me at SiAmeirca. So I flew back to Dallas and began packing, as I was going to have to put everything but my clothes into storage for several months.

For reasons that aren't all that clear to me, SK explained my situation to my coworkers only by saying that I had the bad luck of having someone put contraband in my luggage without me knowing about it. He didn't tell them that I had voluntarily carried a package into the country for a friend. Instead, he made it sound as if the drugs had been planted in my backpack after I turned it over to the baggage handlers outside the hotel. I said nothing to change that notion, except to Russ, of course.

I had expected Russ to go ballistic and give me a hard time about my getting involved with Ralua, but instead he was very supportive, telling me that he would have done the same thing had he been in my position. I wasn't sure where he was coming from on

this, but it was comforting to have him more or less on my side. However, I did find it a little strange that he didn't want to come over to my apartment once Ralua arrived in town.

* * *

April 10, 2004 — Dallas, Texas

*No drug can elicit a response to which
we are not physiologically predisposed.
Drugs can only enhance or suppress those
capacities we already possess.*

Matthew Alper

Ralua arrived two days after I returned home, and by then I had already completed the paperwork for my sabbatical and begun packing my stuff for storage. Our first two days together were strained, to say the least. It was obvious that she felt terrible about my predicament, and she even went so far as to take on 100% of whatever blame there was to go around. As much as I wanted to just sit down and talk this all out with her, I had to stay focused on getting my things packed and into storage so I could drive back to San Francisco and get there within the two-week period I was given to return to the state. Once she learned what my plans were, Ralua lost no time in convincing me that it would be a good idea for her to accompany me on the drive back to California. Of course, it didn't really take much cajoling on her part. Now that she was back in my life, at least to a small extent, I was willing to do whatever it took to renew our connection.

Deep down I knew that Ralua and her friend Cisco were not responsible for the trouble I was in, and yet had I not agreed to carry their package we would all be back where we were before my trip to Viet Nam. But as Ralua said, "What is, IS. Now what are you going to do about it?"

When she first asked that question my answer was simple and curt, "Just what I'm doing. I'm going to put all of my stuff in storage and move to San Francisco for a few months until this is all cleared up, and then I'm going to return to Dallas and get my life back."

"That's what I'm talking about," Ralua replied, "Your life. What are you going to do about you, the way you are living, what you're doing with your life. The way you've been talking, it doesn't sound like you are very happy most of the time. In fact, you don't even sound satisfied with your career. So what are you going to do about it? Are you going to just continue on this mindless path of consumerism that you seem to be hooked on, or are you going to get back to creating the kind of life you and I dreamed about when we were kids?"

We had two days of conversations like that, with me essentially holding back, not wanting to get sucked into a heavy discussion while we were frantically packing. I think it was mainly to get her to stop asking so many heavy questions that I finally gave in and agreed to take MDMA with her to see if I could get a little better handle on the big picture of my life. At least that's the way she explained it to me. But as you probably can guess, the only thing I knew about MDMA was that its street name is Ecstasy, and some people called it the love drug. Since you already know how I felt about Ralua, it should come as no surprise that I

once again overcame my aversion to using these drugs in the hope that at long last this would be the night. The way it turned out, however, I took the right drug but for the wrong reason. I took it thinking that if I played my cards right I might actually get laid, but, of course, it didn't work out that way.

We decided to have our experience on Saturday night because we would be almost finished packing and could take the next day off to recover, since the storage place wasn't open on Sundays. And so it was, sitting on the floor with packing boxes all around us, that Ralua set out the ground rules for our experience.

"There are only a couple of things we need to agree on before we begin," she said. "I learned about them from Ann Shulgin who formulated them over time, when MDMA was still legal and was being used by professional therapists. Since then, we've found that by agreeing to a few ground rules in the beginning there isn't any confusion once the medicine begins doing its work."

"Do I need to take notes?" I asked rather facetiously.

"Relax, William. This is going to be fun."

"Well it sounds more like work than fun. I thought that this was the drug everybody was using at raves where they stay up all night and dance. Do they all enter into a formal agreement before they start dancing too?" I asked like a spoiled little boy.

Ralua let out a sigh and said, "William, you are about to have one of the best nights of your life, but unless you can relax a little, and quit being so bitchy about everything, I'm going to call the whole thing off."

"I'm sorry, Ralua. I guess I'm just really nervous about taking this stuff."

"That's good, and that's why we need to set our boundaries. Right now we've got our normal cultural constraints to hold our behavior in check. In an hour or so most of your inhibitions will have gone away, and so we need to agree on a few things, like sex."

Now she had my attention. Maybe I would get laid tonight after all.

"I'm always agreeable about sex," I joked.

Without missing a beat, she replied, "Good. Then the first thing we can agree to is that all sexual feelings are OK, and we can talk about them without reservation. BUT there will be no physical acting out of any of them. You're not going to get laid tonight, if that was what you were thinking. Besides, one of the more interesting things about MDMA is that a man can have an erection for hours but it's almost impossible to have an orgasm while under its influence."

I wanted to ask her how she knew this but I didn't.

"The second rule is that there will be no acting out of feelings of hostility and anger should they come up," she continued. "We both realize on some level that you are very angry at me . . . and at yourself. That's natural, and we should explore it. But we'll only explore it with words. No violence. Agreed?"

"Are you kidding? You know me better than that. I've never hit a woman in my life, and I never will. I'm a pacifist, remember? Violence isn't in me," I said.

"Good. I'm sure then that we'll both remember that one, too."

“Great,” I replied. “So, are there any other rules and regulations I need to know about before we begin?”

“Yeah, there are a few other things that we normally cover when we are doing psychedelics, but with MDMA I think we can let them pass for now,” said Ralua.

“I thought we were doing a psychedelic. Isn't Ecstasy a psychedelic?” I asked.

“Not technically, and I prefer to call it MDMA, since what is being passed off as Ecstasy these days is seldom the real thing. But technically it isn't a psychedelic. Some people call it an empathogen because the emotion it brings up is much closer to fear-free empathy than it is to ecstasy. The psychedelics, like mushrooms and acid, are totally different. They're a lot more heavy-duty. On MDMA you are going to remember having felt like this before. What we are about to do will help you to feel much like you did on a perfect summer day when you were a young boy. It's not going to take you into strange places where you will encounter unusual entities and things like that. That's why MDMA is so good for therapy. It isn't very intrusive, and yet it completely removes all of the barriers we put up to shield us from the pain that seems to come at us from all directions these days,” she said. “So let's unplug the phone and agree that for the next six hours it's just going to be you and me working things out.”

Disappointed about the sex part, but still eager to give this stuff a try, I agreed to Ralua's rules, unplugged the phone, and swallowed a little capsule that Ralua assured me contained 120 milligrams of pure MDMA. We washed it down with grapefruit juice, which she said would potentiate it a bit, but having

fasted for six hours leading up to this experience I didn't need any extra help getting the medicine into my system.

I've now taken MDMA a dozen or more times, and while each time was wonderful, none of them has ever come anywhere close to how great I felt that first time I experienced it. Thankfully, I had someone like Ralua to take me on my first trip with this magical substance. While there is a learning curve involved with using mushrooms, LSD, and other psychedelics, that isn't so with MDMA. In fact, everyone I know who has used it agrees with me that they never again reached the heights of pure joy they experienced the first time they used it. I like to call that first experience the MDMA virgin rush.

“And now,” Ralua said, “let's just listen to some soft music and be quiet while it's coming on.”

What I hadn't prepared myself for was the interminably long wait for the drug to take effect after swallowing it. Granted, forty-five minutes isn't all that long. But after a full day's anticipation and six hours of fasting, the wait for the MDMA to come on seemed to take forever. And when its effects did finally take hold, the first thing I said was, “I've felt like this before.”

“That's what almost everyone says,” Ralua replied. “It'll be about an hour now before we reach the plateau. So don't try to do too much or say too much right now. Just lie back, relax, and allow yourself to simply feel GOOD.”

And so we did.

I decided to lie back in my old recliner chair, and Ralua sat on my lap. We didn't talk, just held one

another, snuggled, and sighed a lot. That was all that happened for an hour or so. Then we began to talk.

Ralua started it off by saying, "While MDMA isn't technically a psychedelic substance, it is sort of like riding a psychedelic bicycle with training wheels. You more or less get the idea of what it is to ride a two-wheeler, but without the fear of falling over. You see, basically, what psychoactive compounds do is to dissolve the cobwebs of culture, history, and family by restoring your mind to its primal human state. You once again experience an undifferentiated consciousness where communication takes place in a language both mythic and supernatural. A full blown psychedelic experience is all-pervasive and encompasses every aspect of your being. What takes place, at least in my opinion, is that properly used, these substances can restore the human mind to its premodern state of oneness with the planet and cosmos. Yet they don't block your ability to use the full power of your modern mind. MDMA is a little different from that, but it does some other things better than any other medicine you'll find. How do you feel right now?" she asked.

She had me there. Until then I was just floating in a sea of bliss, putting words around it was going to be difficult. "I don't know how to say it. An increase of energy. A slowing down, a mellowing of mood. Intense contact with reality. The ability to see what is actually important in my life and to put my problems in perspective. The ability to be completely honest with myself about myself. I sound like a commercial for some new tranquilizer or something. It doesn't even sound like me now that I think about it. Does Ecstasy have this profound of an effect on everyone?"

“It's not Ecstasy, remember?” Ralua chided. “Ecstasy is the street name for a wide range of substances, and what is sold as X is seldom MDMA any more . . . unfortunately. But, no, it can't work miracles. It can't make a person into something he or she is not capable of becoming. Will an MDMA experience help you attain peace of mind and the ability to better cope with your life? Yes, if you are honestly searching for answers and are willing to accept the truth. It can also enable you to lay a foundation upon which you can begin building the life that you know you are capable of leading. In short, MDMA can make you more of what you already are at your core. But that may be an unquieting experience for you if you are not pleased with your current state of being.”

Suddenly, she got up and headed across the room to a big open box that held my CD collection. “What we need right now is some different music. You can tell an awful lot about a person by looking through their music.” And as she sorted through my sad little stack of CDs she added, “You do know that this is a hopelessly bad music collection, don't you? How about we start with one of mine first?”

After digging an iPod out of her backpack and jacking it into my stereo, Ralua selected something by Kitaro and sat down on the floor. Then she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. As Kitaro's lovely music filled the room I was transported, for the first time in my life actually, into a realm of bliss so deep and rich that I never before suspected it was even there.

“I think Kitaro must exist in some parallel universe and only visits here periodically to play for us,” Ralua said as she skipped to the third track and played *Kaleidoscope*. “That's the song I want played at

my funeral. It says everything I feel about life and death. No words can say it better.” And with that she settled back on my lap, and we held one another for a long time, listening to the rest of the album.

Finally, I said, “I hope you’re not getting ready to die.”

“Everybody is getting ready to die all the time, it’s just that some of us are doing it consciously. But let’s not talk about dying right now. Right now I want to enjoy this perfect moment,” she replied.

“Ah, yes, this is a perfect moment. That’s for sure.”

Since that night I have had the pleasure of experiencing MDMA on several other occasions. I’ve danced on it, walked in the woods on it, and strolled along a beach while under its influence. But like most people, I found that the best way to experience this powerful medicine is to use it in small, intimate settings with only a few close friends. Probably the best way for it to be used is in the presence of a skilled therapist, but since the government has made MDMA illegal it has become almost impossible to find a professional therapist who is willing to risk their license, let alone their freedom, to work with this material. And so it is that on any given weekend there will be tens of thousands of MDMA sessions like the one Raula and I were having, but without any public account of all the healing that is taking place.

How sad it is that we can’t even sit in our own homes and enjoy a little cannabis, let alone MDMA. Living in a densely populated apartment complex, people have to sneak into their bathrooms just to have a toke. Otherwise a nosy neighbor might turn you in. It

is almost as bad as being behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

I think it was Timothy Leary who once said that when the time came to screw things down really tightly it would be control of the psychoactive substances that would be the government's main focus. After all, controlling the population means controlling their consciousness first and foremost. So make no mistake about it, the people who are in control of most governments right now are very smart. They know that in order to remain in power they must control the mass consciousness of their people, and by painting people who use drugs as criminals, or sick, or silly, or whatever, they think that they can prevent people from using them. However, once someone has had their first psychedelic experience, the party is over. It's the rare bird who can't fly once they're pushed out of the nest. And in her own very gentle way, Ralua was beginning to push me out of my nest.

While I was enjoying my reverie, Ralua got up and changed the music yet again. "I think you're getting a little too lost in dreamland," she said. "Let's try some of your music, something with words." Before long, the familiar strains of Enigma's first album began to change the evening's mood. By the time *Sadness* came on, my spirit felt as if it was back in high school, and that is when my reserves finally let go and I broke down and cried.

"Oh, Laura, I mean Ralua. I still can't forgive myself for Tina's death. If only we hadn't snuck off like we did that night she'd still be alive today."

"Do you really believe that, William, or are you just saying that so we can all feel sorry for ourselves a little more?" she replied.

“Are you serious? Do you think this is about me? It was Tina who got killed.” I shouted.

“That's good, William. Let it out. It's about time that you unloaded all that old baggage you've been carrying around for so long.”

Now if we had been having this conversation when we were drinking I'm sure that I would have begun to get a little defensive, maybe even hostile. But under the influence of the MDMA those feelings never came to the surface. Instead I felt the love that was flowing between us at the moment, and I knew deep down that what Ralua was saying was right.

“Ultimately, William, we all are going to be held accountable for our actions by the way our lives turn out. Granted, you and I may have had some unconscious motives that sprang from her being such a bitch after our graduation ceremony. Maybe we were trying to punish her for not letting us spend a little time together that night. I can see why she would have been jealous. After all, she was your girlfriend. I was just a friend who also happened to be a girl.”

“You were my closest friend, Laura, not just a friend . . . I mean Ralua.”

“OK. So two close friends snuck away from a party, parked on a dark road and had a long talk. That is all we did, William. That's all. And I take full responsibility for doing that.

“But it was Tina who decided to hunt us down. It was Tina who sped by us at over one hundred miles an hour. And it was Tina who lost control of her car and hit that tree.

“It was Tina, William, not you, not me. It was Tina who was responsible for her own death, not you and me. And that’s the way it always is,” concluded Ralua.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s the way it always is’?” I asked.

“This probably isn’t the best time to go into this,” Ralua answered, “but I have come to the belief that everyone’s death is a form of suicide. Even though it doesn’t usually appear that way, it’s a fact. We all choose the time and place of our own departure from this life.”

“Are you crazy? What you are saying is that my parents were suicides, even though my dad died of a heart attack and my mother from cancer,” I shot back.

“I’m sorry about your parents, William. I remember hearing about your father’s heart attack and thinking that your mother probably wouldn’t stay around much longer either, since they were so incredibly close. And then a year later I heard that your mother died also. I know that those were terrible losses for you, William.”

“Thanks,” I said, beginning to silently weep, not realizing that she had side-stepped my question.

“It’s OK to cry, William,” Ralua said as she held me and pressed my head to her chest. “It’s OK to cry.”

I don’t know how long we stayed like that, but eventually my neck began to cramp, and I had to stand up and move around a bit.

“Here,” she said, handing me a water bottle, “you haven’t been drinking enough water. That’s one of the things you have to pay attention to when you take MDMA. Getting overheated and dehydrated are the

two problems that cause almost all of the emergency room visits by people on it. And unfortunately there is a fine line between becoming dehydrated and consuming too much water," she added.

"How do you know when you've got it right then?" I asked.

"If you haven't been going to the bathroom every couple of hours you probably aren't drinking enough water. I don't know how to tell if you're drinking too much, but just be sensible and have a bottle or so every couple of hours. Unless you're dancing, of course. And then, if you are like me, you'll need more because you'll be sweating a lot, too."

"I have a confession to make," I said, suddenly changing the subject.

"On graduation night, when we left the party to talk in private, well, in the back of my mind I was thinking that because it was graduation night that maybe you and I would at least make out a little."

"You didn't just want to make out, William. You wanted to have sex. I'm not that stupid. I knew what was on your mind, but there never was any chance at all that that would happen. I'd made that very clear years earlier. But I knew that you hadn't given up on your horny high school dreams. It just wasn't going to happen, though, and you had to know that deep down as well. But now I think we're getting somewhere," Ralua said.

"Let me ask you this," she continued. "If your motives that night had been impeccable, if all you wanted to do was to have a conversation with me, and you hadn't been fantasizing about sex, then would you still feel so guilty? Then would you still be blaming

yourself for Tina's death? I don't know the answer to that question, but it may be something you want to spend some time thinking about."

"Can we change the music?" I suddenly asked.

"Sure," Ralua smiled. "But I think it's the subject that you actually want to change. And that's OK, too. It's your night. We'll take it wherever you want to go."

"Well, one place I still want to go is to bed with you," I blurted out.

I'm sure that I never would have said that had it not been for the MDMA. But that is one of its most valuable features, removing all of the defensive barriers that stand between us while we are in a state of ordinary reality. Under the influence of this gentle but insistent drug, all of my inhibitions seemed to melt away. It wasn't as if I felt I could change our earlier agreement about no sexual activity, but I was completely relaxed about saying anything that came to mind. I knew I could say something like that and not cause Ralua to take offense. It was like I was under the influence of some kind of truth serum. And I had a deep sense of knowing that since Ralua was in the same state of mind I was in that she wouldn't take offense at anything I said . . . as long as it was the truth.

"Thank you, William. I take that as a compliment," was her unexpected reply. "So let's talk about that for a minute. It's obviously been on your mind ever since we bumped into one another in Palenque."

"It's been on my mind a lot longer than that," I laughed.

“OK. That's honest. Now, finally, after all these years, we can have this conversation without worrying about what's next. Tonight we have an agreement that there will be no sex between us. But let's talk about the facts, and the future,” she said.

“Objectively speaking, and I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but objectively speaking don't you think that maybe I've grown a little too exotic for you? Look at you, William. Like it or not, you're basically a geeky, know-it-all asshole. Just pay attention to what you say and how you act in a crowd, and I think you'll see what I mean.

“But that doesn't mean that I don't like you. I love you, in fact. But I'm not *in love* with you the way two lovers need to be. That kind of spark just isn't there, William. And if you are honest with yourself my guess is that you'll find that spark missing also.”

While that wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear, I had to admit to myself that she might be right. But I decided to think about it for a while before saying anything else. So I stood up and joined Ralua in her swaying from side-to-side to the soothing music she had put on. It was the perfect selection for that particular moment.

After we had been dancing, if you could call it that, for what seemed like a very long time, Ralua said, “You know, William, you seem to be very sad. At least that's the vibe I get from you. Right now you think it would make you happy if we made love. And maybe it would for an hour or two. But then what? What next? Where do you go from here? How do you make yourself happy, William, because only you can do that. Others can make you unhappy, but you can find happiness only on your own.”

"I don't think I'm all that unhappy," I replied. "Maybe I'm not jumping up and down with joy all the time, but life's not so bad. I'm doing OK."

"Just listen to yourself, William. Just listen to what you are saying and how you are saying it. I find life to be a great adventure, and I'm having a wonderful time. Sure, I have down days, and things often don't turn out the way I planned. But how could it be an adventure if there weren't ups and downs . . . and a few sideways thrown in too. That's what life is. And by approaching it like I was on an adventure I find it great fun."

"Well, my adventure right now involves having to move to San Francisco for six months to wait to be tried for something I didn't do," I said, reverting to the dark mood that had been haunting me ever since returning from Viet Nam.

"Ah, now that's a clever change of tactic. Go for the sympathy fuck," she said laughing.

"That's not what I was trying to do," I protested.

"Maybe not consciously," she shot back, "but let's be honest here. After all, that is the main point of taking MDMA together, so we can be honest with each other without worrying about the consequences of that honesty, or about whether or not anyone's feelings would be hurt. So yes, I have empathy for you, it's a tough situation you are in. And, yes, I realize that you are in it in no small measure because of me. You wanted to please me, first of all because you are my friend, but also because, and I'm only guessing here, but you probably were hoping that doing me a favor might eventually lead me to your bed."

I started to talk, but she put the palm of her hand to my lips and said, "Please don't protest. It's all right that you have those feelings. Hey, everyone wants to be sexually attractive. So I take it as a compliment that you want to have sex with me. So please don't beat up on yourself for having such a natural feeling. Think about this for a minute: Even though your hormones are raging right now, and the MDMA is most definitely accentuating that, still you haven't made a single inappropriate move on me. You have remained the perfect gentleman."

"You don't know what's been going on in my mind, though. Off and on, I've been thinking about having sex with you this entire time," I said.

"I know that," she answered matter-of-factly "So what's new? Unless I miss my guess, you are having sexual fantasies about people every week, maybe every day. I hate to tell you this, but you're a human being, and humans are sexual beings. Fortunately, we have also evolved into civilized sexual beings, and we civilized people don't act on our fantasies . . . at least the ones that aren't shared by our partners."

"How did we get on this subject. Since there isn't going to be any sex tonight, I'd just as soon not talk about it any more," I said rather petulantly.

"You know, William, we're starting to come down I think," she gently replied. "Let's not spoil the night with an argument." Then she wrapped her arms around me as we slid down into the little nest of cushions on the floor where we slept in each other's arms until morning.

The Genesis Generation

Chapter 7

Midwest Memories

Although it didn't feel as if my personal angst had been relieved as a result of our MDMA trip together, Ralua and I finally relaxed and returned as much as we could to the easy back-and-forth banter we so enjoyed when we were growing up together. The day after our experience was a Sunday, and since the self-storage warehouse wasn't open, we just lazed around all day, listening to music but not talking very much. I don't remember ever feeling so good on a Sunday afternoon. It was obvious that almost everything I had been told about Ecstasy was wrong.

The one thing we did decide during that wonderfully long night, though, was that we would take a detour on the way back to San Francisco and visit our old hometown, as well as my college campus. From my standpoint, I liked the idea because I was still sentimental about my past, even though it wasn't all that distant. I hadn't been back to the Midwest since my mother's funeral five years earlier. With both of my parents gone, there wasn't any reason for me to return before now. So I readily agreed to take the side trip. I particularly wanted to show Ralua around my college campus because she had never been there before. But I wasn't prepared for what she had in mind for our trip.

* * *

April 13, 2004 — On the road

There's something inside you that knows when you're in the center, that knows when you're on the beam or off the beam. And if you get off the beam to earn money, you've lost your life. And if you stay in the center and don't get any money, you still have your bliss.

Joseph Campbell

“Even though I'm heading to California to face the biggest crisis I've ever encountered in my life, it still feels like I'm running away from something,” I said.

Leaning back against the passenger door and looking half-asleep, Ralua responded “We all need to run away at various points in our lives. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. All I know for sure is that I've done it myself a few times, and it always felt like the right thing to do. But a better way to look at it is that you are running toward something, not away from something.”

“I wish I could see it that way, but the truth is I have no idea what I could be running toward,” I whined, still feeling properly sorry for myself.

“You're suffering from the Tuesday blahs,” she said. “One of the negative side effects of using MDMA is that it can cause a let-down, or an experience of mild depression on the second or third day after using it. I'm one of the lucky ones that isn't affected that way, but it sounds like that's where you are right now.”

“Well, I'm depressed, that's for sure. It would be nice to blame it on the MDMA, but I suspect that I'd feel this way no matter what we did two days ago.”

“And do you know what I think?” Ralua said. “I think that you have been feeling this way for a long time but haven't paid attention to it before now.”

“Well, you're wrong about that,” I replied rather testily. “Until I got into this mess with that package and the drugs, my life was about as perfect as a life could be.”

I wasn't prepared for the spontaneous laughter that filled the car after I made that remark. When she finally settled down a bit she said, “Oh, Willie, my poor William, you've been sold a phony dream, and now you think it's your own. Has your life been anywhere close to the life we dreamed of having back when we were kids? Where is that sense of excitement and adventure we talked about? From what I know about your life it was pretty boring. You'd go to work early, stay late, work part of the weekend, and then what? So you would squeeze in a little fun here and there. So what? It's your LIFE, William. And what are you doing with it? What are you doing with your precious time? You're giving the best hours of your life to some company that isn't even going to remember you were there ten years after you leave.”

“Well, it's hard to argue with that, but what's the alternative, just scraping by, doing odd jobs, living on the financial edge? I watched my parents just barely scraping by all their lives, and where did it get them, an early grave, that's where,” I said.

“I had a feeling that we'd have a discussion like this. That's why I stashed your collection of Emerson essays in the car,” said Ralua, as she began poking around in a pile of stuff on the back seat.

“That book was a graduation present from my dad. It used to be his. I have to admit that I haven't

actually spent much time reading it. But my dad was a big fan of Emerson and thought that I should have his words of wisdom nearby, just in case I needed him one day.”

“Well, this may be one of those days,” she said. “I haven't read many of his essays myself, but I do remember his famous lecture about self-reliance, and right now might be the perfect time for you to hear it, too.” And with that she began to read one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's most famous essays to me.

I was thankful for the break in our conversation that her reading brought because Ralua had been asking all kinds of probing questions that kept leading me back to that place U-2 sings about in their song that goes, “I still haven't found what I'm looking for.” As Ralua read, my attention wandered, and my mind began to drift back to those summer days when I would sit up in that big old maple tree in our back yard and dream about what my life would be like once I grew up. Now, here I was, all grown up and no longer even remembering any of those long-ago dreams. And when I thought about it, maybe Ralua was right, maybe I was sad most of the time.

As she read, a line or two would catch my attention every once in a while, like: “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.” That one really got to me because I almost always find myself doing things other people think I should do, instead of doing my own thing.

When Ralua reached the end of what seemed like an overly long essay she said, “And he concludes by saying, 'Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of your principles. So what are those principles, William? Do

you have any principles of your own, or are you still under the influence of someone else's principles?"

As she tossed the book on the seat between us, it fell open to a page where my father had underlined a few sentences. Without missing a beat, Ralua picked the book up again and said, "Hmmm. It looks like your dad wants to say something about this too. Let's see what he underlined here. It's an essay about literary ethics, not a subject that seems all that compelling right now, but sometimes these little synchronicities are worth checking out.

"Here is what he underlined:

You will hear every day the maxims of a low prudence. You will hear, that the first duty is to get land and money, place and name. What is this Truth you seek? What is this Beauty? men will ask, with derision. If, nevertheless, God have called any of you to explore truth and beauty, be bold, be firm, be true. When you shall say, As others do, so will I: I renounce, I am sorry for it, my early visions; I must eat the good of the land, and let learning and romantic expectations go, until a more convenient season; - then dies the man in you; then once more perish the buds of art, and poetry, and science, as they have died already in a thousand men. The hour of that choice is the crisis of your history; and see that you hold yourself fast by the intellect.

"Well, that's me," I said. "I have definitely let my expectations go until a more convenient season."

"Maybe they got tired of waiting, and that's why your seasons are changing for you on their own right now," she said.

We pulled off the freeway to get gas and were stopped at a traffic signal. It had begun to get a little warm, and so we were in the process of putting the windows down when a car pulled up beside us. Its lone occupant was a grey-haired man who must have been close to 60. He was wearing a suit, complete with a white shirt and a red power tie, and he was obviously in his own world, completely oblivious to us or anyone else. His radio was blaring an old song, and he was singing along with it, something about "It's OK to go your own way, just don't go away."

I tried not to look at him because I was afraid I would break out laughing. He did seem quite ridiculous, though, with that Ivy League look, coupled with his plaintive cry of longing to be free.

"I suspect there are tens of thousands of men and women around the country who do the same thing he's doing every morning," Ralua said, "refugees from the Sixties. And most of them are fools, not because they sing on their way to work, but because they once knew better than to get sucked into the System, yet they did. Of course, they all have solid reasons now, a child in college, parents entering old age, credit cards at their limits—they have dozens of commitments that have unthinkingly evolved over time. And they no longer can escape the fact that they *are* the System."

"Well, I think that they are trapped in the System," I replied.

"The 'System', William, isn't a sentient being in its own right. It's a collection of people who have all bought into the same myth. And it's a wonderful myth, works quite well. Because over time, these people who you think are trapped have actually trapped themselves and now are the ones who are keeping the System alive," said Ralua.

"I prefer to think of it as playing by the rules," I said.

"Whose rules, William? Your rules or someone else's? Right now, like it or not, you, my dear William, are at a fork in your life's road, and it may be your last chance to decide who the rule-maker will be in your life."

"Rather than a fork, I prefer to think of this as a temporary parking place. I'm going to park myself in San Francisco for a few months, do some reading and sightseeing, and generally relax and enjoy my partial sabbatical. How's that for taking things in stride?" I asked.

"It's a fork in your road," she said firmly. "Maybe it won't be the last chance you have to change the direction of your life, but that opportunity is definitely here right now. Your destiny, William, is determined by the all of the little choices you make each day, and you are very fortunate to be in a position where you actually have a choice about how to live your life in the years ahead. Not many people ever get to that point. But here you are, a single, unattached, white, college-educated American male. In all of human history there haven't been many people who have as many advantages as you do. So don't go crying about your fate. Your fate is what you make of it. You may want to do some serious thinking about where your current life is leading you, William, because there is always the chance that you are now at the final fork in your road, and what you decide in the next few months may well decide your destiny."

"Wow. That's a little heavy, don't you think?" I responded. "And the big thing you've left out of that picture is the fact that I need a job. I need money to live. If I had been born rich it would be easy to do what

you say and follow my bliss, but I'm not rich. I've got to work for a living."

"So do I," said Ralua. "But I don't go to some job I hate and do the same thing over and over, day after boring day."

I wanted to ask her what it was that she did to earn money, but first I said, "I don't do that either. I actually like my job, and each project is different. So it isn't like what you describe at all. It's a really interesting and challenging job."

"And if you were rich would you still be going to work there every day?" she asked.

We both knew the answer to that one, and so I elected to not say anything while I thought about where she was going with this conversation. Earlier we had talked about balancing the need for money with what we wanted to do with our time. And when I thought only about the basics, the bare minimum amount of money it would take each month for me to just survive, I realized that those requirements were quite low when compared with my current income. Granted, I wouldn't be living in as nice an apartment or driving such a good car, but to just survive it wouldn't take all that much for me to get by. Yet without my job I didn't see how I could travel and do some of the other things that the luxury of free time provided.

Again, Ralua interrupted my reverie as she got her laptop out and said, "I'd like to read an essay I wrote a while ago. It may get you back to thinking about the big picture of your life."

“Sure, go ahead,” I said, welcoming anything that would get my mind out of the negative loops it seemed to enjoy so much. And so she began reading.

Ralua's Essay

You are aware, are you not, that there has been an unbroken chain of events that has taken place from the very beginning of this material universe until now. Whether you call it the Big Bang or the act of creation, the history of the universe as we know it has ultimately led to you.

Over eons of time so great that the human mind cannot grasp their magnitude, energy coalesced into matter. Suns were born, galaxies formed and planets began to sprout life. From the simple plasma of pure light, complexity began to arise. Beyond the observed fact that the evolution of this universe appears to follow the arrow of ever-increasing complexity, what can we say of its purpose? Does evolution have some end game in mind, or is our existence the result of blind chance? “What is the point,” people ask?

In our search for the answers to these eternal questions, we in the West have spent much of our time focusing on the material world, largely ignoring the spiritual dimensions of what it means to be human. For far too long now, the Western world has been paying a heavy price for its deal with the devil of materiality and technological progress. We have become obsessed with the creation and preservation of wealth and in finding ever more sophisticated ways to give ourselves pleasure. But the price we have paid for all of this has been

devastating. The price has been to forfeit our very souls.

The century just past was, in human terms, the bloodiest ever seen. In just one hundred years we sacrificed the lives of more human beings than in all the previous history of the world. Today we look back on civilizations that existed thousands of years ago and see their rituals of human sacrifice as barbaric. So too will future humans look back on our present age as one of inhumanity. Our ritual is now called war, and its primary purpose seems to be to offer up human lives in some sort of blind sacrifice to a power we do not yet clearly perceive.

As human beings evolved from species to species, common traits began to appear. They cared for each other in family units. And even when fierce inner-family rivalries developed, they would come together and repel what they perceived as a threat from the outside. And it is this one factor, above all else, that is at the root of our most serious problems on Earth today. We have failed to see that there is no outside. We humans seem to have lost sight of the fact that we are truly, literally, all in the same family. And furthermore, our family includes all life on this planet.

It is not easy to always maintain a conscious awareness of the fact that we are all connected, at the most fundamental levels of our being, to each other and to all that is. The press of daily affairs regularly intrudes to the point of excluding our more lofty thoughts. This is why, now more than at any previous time in human history, it is vitally important for all of us to

constantly remind ourselves of the fact that we are one family, the human family of beings on a planet that we share with many other beings. We must constantly remind ourselves of the incredible gift of life and to value it above all else.

It has taken the universe billions of years to evolve the being that is now you. That fact is unquestioned. You, yes you, are the end product of billions of years of hard work done by the processes of evolution. You are not an accident. You are a purposeful force in a universe that is constantly creating itself. Whatever you do, please do not underestimate the evolutionary pinnacle that you represent.

“And I wasn't just talking to myself there, William,” said Ralua. “That goes for you and everybody else as well. Just think about the uniqueness of you, you as a physical being at a moment in human history that is completely unprecedented. This day, this moment, this life, will never come again. Your life is both a mystery and a gift beyond measure. Now what are you going to do with this gift, William? How are you going to use it?”

“Wow. That's a new kind of question for me. Now that I think about it, I can't remember ever being asked a question in quite that way by a teacher or mentor or anyone else, 'What do you want out of life?' Instead, all I was ever asked was, 'What do you want to buy? How are you going to earn the money to buy that thing?' ”

Ralua laughed and said, “You remind me of that old Yiddish proverb that goes, 'When you don't know where you're going, every road will take you there.' ”

“So where is your road taking you, Ralua?” I asked.

“And why do you ask? Are you thinking of trying my road for a while?” she teased with a little smile on her lips. “Do you still think you'll get laid if you follow me down my road?”

I was glad that we were back on our old friendly level where we could tease one another, but I wasn't in the mood for it just then. So I said, “No. Actually I was just wondering how you even found that strange road you're on to begin with.”

“I know that this will sound like a joke to you, and maybe it is, but step one for me was to choose my parents carefully.” Before I could pounce on that remark she went on, “For all intents and purposes, my parents looked like all the other parents in town. You know, they had jobs, kept the yard neat, went to PTA meetings. They did all the things people do to fit in. But we had a family secret.”

“What was that?” I asked eagerly, now more interested in our conversation than I'd been all day.

“You won't think it's such a big deal now,” she answered. “But back then if anyone had known that my parents smoked pot I would have been put in foster care. THAT was our family secret. My parents grew and smoked cannabis, marijuana to you.”

“And you are saying that just because your parents smoked marijuana that you wound up as some kind of a world-traveling, hippie, medicine woman or something?” I asked.

Gently smiling at me, Ralua said, “No. At least I don't think so. But what I learned from them is that our society has a lot of strange ideas about what

people should and shouldn't be allowed to do in the privacy of their own homes. And that got me to thinking about a lot of things, and my parents and I talked about these things. We talked about getting trapped in an eight-to-five job, a mortgage, a car payment, an early marriage along with children and the responsibility they bring. In fact, they even admitted that it was my birth that brought about their giving in to the System. They weren't blaming me. In fact, I believe them when they say they wouldn't have had it any other way. And it was because of the security they provided me that I now have the confidence to be able to live without a corporate safety net of any kind. And so I simply continued to refine my childhood dreams and build them into a life of adventure," said Ralua.

"I'm afraid that all of my boyhood fantasies are gone now," I said. "Gone like the drifting smoke."

"Are you sure they're gone?" she asked. "Or is it possible that they have just been suppressed. From what I've seen, people tend to repress ideas that contradict their current belief systems. I think it was Descartes who said, 'The chief cause of human error is to be found in prejudices picked up in childhood.' "

Just as Ralua was reciting that quote, the exit came up for our hometown. Since it was already late, we decided to check into the first motel that looked decent and take a look around the next day. I guess we must have been more tired than we thought, because when we got to our room we decided to skip dinner. The past few days had been exhausting in more ways than one, and just then nothing seemed more compelling than to go to sleep.

* * *

April 14, 2004 — Hometown Memories

*The greatest discovery of my generation
is that a human being can alter his life
by altering his attitudes of mind.*

William James

I don't know what I expected to find in the little town I was raised in, but I wasn't prepared for how different and small everything looked. The house I grew up in was at the bottom of a hill, a very steep hill as I remembered. It seemed terrifyingly steep that day I took my first ride in the new Soap Box Derby racer that my dad built for me.

The problem was that the rope that controlled the front wheels had been wrapped the wrong way around the steering shaft. So when I turned the wheel left, the car went right, and when I turned right it went left. Obviously, my dad discovered his error before we pushed it to the top of the hill for my test drive. But he convinced me to give it a try like it was, saying he would fix it for my second run.

Although I went along with his plan, by the time I was half way down the hill, off the sidewalk and out into traffic, madly weaving like the world's first drunken Soap Box Derby driver, I questioned my father's wisdom in sending his only child careening down a mountain-like slope in a seriously defective vehicle.

So I was literally dumbstruck when Ralua and I stopped in front of my old house and looked up that hill. What can I say, it was barely a hill at all. This

immense hill of my childhood memories is actually not much more than a very long speed bump. Yet I still see it as a huge hill when I shut my eyes and remember all of the wonderful, and very fast trips I took down what I called the Hill of Death in that great old toy car my dad built for me.

“Look, there's where we went to kindergarten together,” Ralua cried, more excited than she had been since we had begun driving around town an hour or so ago.

“Good old Lindbergh School,” I sighed.

“Do you remember nap time?” she asked. “I can still remember that old knit, zebra-striped carpet I used at nap time. I think that is my all-time favorite school memory, nap time in kindergarten.”

“Not to change the subject,” I said, “but have you ever read some of the gossip about Charles Lindbergh? After reading a few biographies about him I'm not so sure he's someone that should have a school named after him.”

“I know what you're talking about,” she replied, “but all that aside, I find it interesting to stop and think about just when it was that this unknown person named Charles Lindbergh became LINDBERGH.”

“Well, that's pretty obvious,” I said. “It was the moment he landed in Europe after being the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic.”

“I don't agree,” she said. “I think that the moment he became the icon we simply call Lindbergh is the moment, that single instant, when he made the decision that he definitely was going to attempt flying the Atlantic alone. Everything that was done after the very moment, the moment when he made that

decision, everything after that was done by the legendary LINDBERGH. So, Will, when are you going to create YOU? When does your legend begin? When do you think your moment will arrive, or has it already?" she teased and then went on.

"Unless your spirit, your essence, changes, the only way you will ever perceive things is as you now do. And I hate to be the one to tell you this, but your view of the world is incredibly small, so unimaginably limited. Only by cracking your cosmic egg and expanding your consciousness will your spirit be able to grow large enough to take in the wonders of what is really going on right now. As Michael Brownstein says, the world is on fire, William. A confluence of changes is taking place on every level imaginable. Whether you want to or not, you are about to take part in the greatest transformation of consciousness that this corner of the cosmos has seen in many eons. This is the big one, William. The Main Event."

"I think you've been eating too many of those mushrooms, that's what I think," I said. "Sometimes, when you take off on one of those flights of fancy like that, you make me think that you've really begun to lose it. You sound like one of those end-of-the-world freaks in California that I hear about."

Ralua's laughter let me know that I had finally made a good point. "OK. You win this time. And you're right. I do sometimes get carried away with myself. But, William, I'm just so worried about the fact that people can't feel what is about to happen. Our species is about to undergo a transformation unlike any in all of recorded history. And everyone seems to be pretending that we humans are going to just muddle along like this forever."

"So what should we do about it then?" I asked.

“Ahh, I wish I knew,” was her reply. “But I do know something that might be of benefit to you right now.”

“What's that?” I asked.

“We should leave here really early in the morning and arrive at your college campus before dawn. Then we should hold a ceremony celebrating your freedom from its grip and the grip of the Catholic Church on you.”

“What? Are you crazy? What are you talking about?”

“Ever since I arrived in Dallas you have been making despairing remarks about your college and about the Catholic Church. Methinks you protesteth too much. Because it seems pretty obvious to me that you are still emotionally very attached to them both. My suggestion is that we go to the place of your emotional attachment and make a point of intellectually breaking your subservience to them. And the best way to do that is through a ceremony of some kind.”

“I think you are completely nuts,” I said.

Needless to say, she once again had her way.

* * *

April 15, 2004 — A college ceremony

*My fate cannot be mastered;
it can only be collaborated with
and thereby, to some extent, directed.*

*Nor am I the captain of my soul;
I am only its noisiest passenger.*

Aldous Huxley

“I really can't believe I'm doing this,” I protested. “Tell me again why you think this is necessary.”

“Your whole life has been filled with ceremonies. There have been school graduations, sporting events, and religious ceremonies just to mention a few. Without you even paying attention to it you participate in a patriotic ceremony every time you stand up for the national anthem at a football game. And if you attend the opening hour in Congress or the Senate you'll first have to participate in a religious ceremony when their chaplains say a prayer each day. Ceremonies are everywhere you go, William. And now it's time for you to create your own ceremony, one that will free your mind from the control of others.”

“Is that what you think, Ralua? Do you really think that I've been brainwashed or something?”

“Yes, actually,” she replied. “You may believe that you are an independent thinker, but your thinking is only as good as your information. And if your main source of information comes from television, magazines, and a few newspapers, then you are very badly informed. The information you are basing most of your thinking upon is mainly the facts as seen by the current power structure. And until you completely break free from their mental clutches you are going to have a difficult time understanding the facts as they appear from a point of view different from what is taught in our schools.”

“OK, I believe you. You made your point. So let's not do this goofy ceremony thing. I just don't feel right doing this.”

“Are you saying that my way is too freaky for you?” she teased. “Are you afraid to step out of your little box and unwind a bit? See, they’ve got you brainwashed into caring more about what somebody thinks about you than you do about being free.”

“Somehow, making a fool of myself on my old college campus doesn't add up to a feeling of freedom in my book. Let's just say I did this and get back on the road to San Francisco,” I pleaded.

Completely ignoring what I said, Ralua got very business-like and said, “OK, now do you remember our plan?”

How could I forget! The plan was to do something that would impress on me physically what I had already decided, and that was to be a free thinker. No longer would I be bound by the prejudices I picked up as an altar boy and in school. At least that was the idea.

Ralua's plan for this exorcism was for us to make a circle of some sort around the statue of my college's founder, which stood at the main entrance to the campus. Then she would gently play a small drum she had with her while I stood in the circle and did whatever came to mind. That was the part I was uncomfortable with, my part.

I had no idea what to do, nor did I want to even stand in that silly circle because somehow I knew that I would wind up making a fool of myself. Of course, I was no match for Ralua. Now that I think about it, she had been bossing me around since before we went to kindergarten. So this was nothing new.

Besides feeling self-conscious about this ceremony she wanted me to do, I was also

disappointed that we wouldn't be able to walk around long enough for me to show Ralua the places where some of my favorite memories are attached. I particularly wanted to show her the dorm where I lived for my last two years in college. It was one of the oldest buildings on campus, well over 150 years old. My room was in the basement, which was the location of the most coveted living quarters on campus. Many were the legends that came out of that old basement.

"We have to park at the edge of campus," I said, "because only foot traffic is allowed."

"Yes, I've seen pictures of your school before," Ralua said, "and you are right, it is one of the most picturesque university settings in the county. And the no cars, no streets rule, of course, is what makes it such a park-like setting. I can see why you enjoyed your time here. It seems a perfect atmosphere for learning. But, please tell me, William, how on Earth did they ever convince you that the basement of the oldest dorm on campus was a good place to live?"

"It's a long story. Just trust me, it was the best address on campus," I said. "A lot of school history took place in that old building."

"Like what?" she asked. "What part of your history took place there?"

"Well, the time I remember best is the when my roommate set the building on fire."

"What!"

"Well, he didn't mean to. The night before he had repaired a clock radio for a friend, and he decided to test it before returning it. Next to it there was one of those electric heating elements used to heat a cup of water. It was plugged into the back of the radio and

timed to turn on shortly before the alarm. My roommate had planned on putting the element into a cup of water for coffee in the morning. But he forgot the cup of water, and the element spent the night on top of the clock radio's plastic case, which was balanced somewhat precariously on top of our waste basket. When the radio automatically turned on in the morning, neither of us got up right away, and so we didn't notice the heating element getting red hot and melting through the case, dripping hot plastic onto the paper in the basket below. The next thing we knew there was a flash, and a big section of the wall caught fire. It was quite a scene for a while there."

By this time Ralua was laughing out loud, trying to catch her breath. So I said, "Thanks for laughing, and it was one of the funniest things that happened that year, but I'm not sure it was that funny."

"It isn't," she laughed. "Your story is actually more stupid than funny. What I'm laughing at is that it was the first memory that popped into your head when I asked why you are so attached to this place. And you tell me a story about a waste paper basket catching on fire. Wait'll you get to the coast. In one weekend you'll have so many new and wonderful experiences that you'll never even think of this place again. It's time to restart your adventure, my dear William, and this is the perfect way to begin."

We parked in the visitor's lot near the front entrance to the university. The plan was to hold our little ceremony in front of the statue of our school's founder, which was on a high cement pedestal. The imposing statue stood in a circular patch of grass, and the walkways leading from it led in one direction to some classrooms, in another direction to the athletic

fields, and the one behind the statue led directly to the main administration building.

When we got out of the car Ralua grabbed her drum, an MP3 player, and a roll of toilet paper. At first I thought she was going to have me wrap the statue in toilet paper while she played the drum. It seemed a little childish to me, but since it was so early in the morning I figured I could get the job done before anyone saw us. So why not?

Ralua had something else in mind. As soon as we got to the statue she used the toilet paper to quickly make a large circle on the ground around the statue. Then she handed me the earphones for the MP3 player as she booted it up and selected something she wanted me to hear.

“Put the earphones on while I get your music ready,” she said. “Have you heard Michael McDermott's song *Deirdre Dances?*”

“I've never heard of him,” I answered.

“That's what I figured. So this will be a completely new experience for you. Now what we're going to do is really simple. You stand in the circle and listen to this song while I very quietly beat my drum.”

“Then what do I do?”

“It's your ceremony,” she answered. “Do whatever you feel like doing.”

“How about I just stand here, listen to one song, and then we go? Would that be enough to make you happy?”

“This isn't about me, William. This is all about you. And if after a few minutes the spirit moves you to turn off the music, clean up our mess, and head back

to the car, then so be it. But let's get started before anyone notices us." And with that she plugged the earphone jack into the MP3 player, cranked up the volume, stepped outside the circle, and began drumming very softly.

I don't know what kind of music I was expecting to hear, but it certainly wasn't the plaintive cry of a young man singing, "I no longer know what I want. I no longer know what I need." And on it went, a song written just for me. It had to be.

I shut my eyes and began to sway from side to side as McDermott's strong voice echoed my own silent one from deep within, a voice I had been trying to silence for far too long. Before long my arms were out in front of me going from side to side as my hands rode invisible waves up and down in sync to the music in my ears. Without any warning, tears began to flow.

"I no longer know what I'm doing here. I no longer know what to believe," he sang. Those words, now that I have just written them, seem flat. Without the emotional overlay of the music behind them they just don't convey the impact they had on me at that moment. Never before had I heard a song for the first time and thought it was written exclusively for me.

"I don't know who I'm sposed to be," he sang. "It's just that I never expected this kind of thing to happen to me." And as the final chorus began, without giving it any thought I found myself stuffing the earphones into the pocket that also held the MP3 player, and I started to hop, or dance, or skip, or some foolish thing, to the beat of Ralua's drum. I still don't understand all that happened in those few short minutes, but it was as if I slipped into a trance of some kind.

Here I was, hop-skipping around in a toilet-paper circle, pretending to be an Indian or something while I danced to the beat of a drum.

Boom, boom, boom, boom

Boom, boom, boom, boom

Boom, boom, boom, boom

Around I went, dancing faster and faster as Ralua picked up the tempo of her drumming.

Boom, boom, boom, boom boom, boom, boom, boom

Boom, boom, boom, boom boom, boom, boom, boom

I was in a frenzy now, ripping off my clothes, dancing around the circle like a crazed person, as our serene founding father looked down on me with benevolent bronze eyes. It was no doubt just another college prank to him.

But to me it was SOMETHING ELSE! I was really getting into it now. As I hop-skipped around the statue my arms began flying up and down on their own. I was trying to make a chopping motion, pretending to be a wild savage with a hatchet in my hand. But had you seen me you probably would have thought that I was pretending to milk a very tall cow.

Now I was on a roll, half naked, running around in a circle, flailing my arms about and saying over and over and over, "Fuck you-I quit; Fuck you-I quit. Fuck you-I quit." All to the rhythm of Ralua's Boom, boom, boom, boom boom, boom, boom, boom.

I don't know this for a fact, but I have been told that at some raves in the Midwest these days there is

a point during the night when they do the “Fuck you. I quit” chant. You see, just as I was really getting into the whole thing I felt Ralua pulling my arm and saying, “OK, William. You did great. Now let's get the fuck out of here.”

Opening my eyes I discovered that there were a dozen or more students gathered around the outside of the toilet paper circle, and they were applauding. I didn't have time to think about how ridiculous the whole scene must have looked, because Ralua was running around picking up my clothes and pushing me in the direction of the car in what finally turned into a full-out run.

As we were climbing into the car, Ralua yelled out to the still-clapping students, “No need to give us any money for the performance, but we will be forever grateful if you would clean up our little toilet paper mess.” As I pulled away from the curb I looked in the rear view mirror and saw our audience beginning to pick up the paper we left behind in our hurried getaway.

Now that I think of it, I shouldn't have laughed at the old guy singing on his way to work. Compared to what Ralua and I looked like as we headed toward the freeway, he was of no interest at all. Windows down, tears of laughter running down our cheeks, me driving, half-naked, and Ralua shouting, “Fuck you. I quit. Fuck you. I quit.” It was quite a scene.

As we merged into the flow of Westbound traffic, Ralua waved her little green beret in the air and shouted, “California here we come!”

Chapter 8

San Francisco Seminar

Our drive to San Francisco was uneventful, which was a welcome relief after the excitement of my “Fuck you. I quit” experience. In fact, we didn't even do much talking, just listened to music and watched the world flash by as we sped to that beautiful city by the bay.

For us more conservative souls from the Midwest, the mystique of San Francisco has always been a powerful force. Even though my only time in that city so far had been less than enjoyable, I was now looking forward to spending a few months there. In fact, this was an excellent opportunity for me to see if the West Coast was someplace I might enjoy living one day.

Before I left SiAmerica's offices, SK gave me the keys to the corporate apartment in San Francisco, and so Ralua and I went directly there after arriving late on Friday night. Following our hasty exit from my college, we drove straight through to the coast. After having been on the road for almost forty hours we were exhausted and practically fell into bed. The reason for pushing ourselves to arrive before Saturday was that there was a conference beginning then that Ralua had been planning on attending for quite some time. The focus of the conference was an Amazonian plant mixture that goes by the name of one of its components, the ayahuasca vine. This was something new to me, but as it turned out, I learned more about life in the psychedelic community than I did about that mysterious jungle brew.

April 17, 2004 — The Ayahuasca Conference

*Those who seek the truth
are more than friends.
They are brothers.*

Dan Brown

I am usually somewhat of a wall flower at large conferences where I don't know many people, but much to my surprise I was immediately welcomed into one of the little groups that always seem to form during these events. They were all there, all of the faces I remembered from that party in Palenque. The only person who wasn't there, much to my disappointment, was Shadow, but then I didn't really expect to see him in such a public gathering.

Ralua was reintroducing me to her little clan, "And you remember Old Joe and Tiger. In fact, you might want to become good friends with Tiger, she's a lawyer, you know."

"And what about me?" Old Joe asked. "I would think he ought to become friendly with a guy like me as well."

"I was hoping to keep him away from you, Joe," Ralua laughed back as the two of them embraced.

"Don't listen to her, kid," said Joe, "they're all afraid that my good sense might rub off on some of 'em, and then they'd have to quit havin' so much fun."

That set them all off buzzing and giggling like a small hive of young bees. "Do it for us, will you?" asked Stein, one of the few people from that wild Palenque night whose name I could remember.

"Do what?" I asked.

“Do the Fuck You/I Quit for us. The dance you invented for Ralua.”

“I didn't know you had such loose lips,” I said, turning to Ralua. “It never occurred to me that you would tell the whole world about what a fool I made of myself.”

“Are you kidding? That was priceless, and it has now gained you full membership in our clan,” she said.

“What clan?” I asked, along with several of the others in our little huddle near the entrance to the lecture hall.

“Us!” she said as she opened her arms in an attempt at encompassing us all in her embrace. “The clan of us, at least most of us are here right now. And each one of us here is also involved in several other little clans. We're a clan of clans and one day we might actually become a Tribe, with a capital 'T'.”

In addition to Joe, Tiger, and Stein, our little group also included Shadow's companion, Deirdre, whose name now reminded me of the Michael McDermott song Ralua had me listen to. The stately black couple, Apache and Al soon joined us, as did a young woman I can only describe as ethereal yet earthy, a combination I always find irresistible.

“Fig, this is William. William this is Fig,” said Ralua in the way of introductions.

“Fig? Is that right? Like the fruit?” I inanely asked, unable to think of anything intelligent to say.

“Fig as in figment,” she answered. “Tomorrow I'll only be a figment of your imagination.”

“I hope not,” I blurted out before thinking about how that might be taken. I was only trying to make

polite conversation. What I didn't know was that Ralua had been telling Fig about me ever since we reconnected in Palenque. Always the match-maker, Ralua sensed that there might be a spark between Fig and me once we met.

Just then a chime sounded, letting us know that the conference was about to begin, and so we went in and took our seats. It started with a long introductory session, but this at least gave me a chance to learn a little about some of the world's top experts on the subject of ayahuasca. Speakers included Luis Eduardo Luna, Jonathan Ott, Charles Grob, Jeremy Narby, and Kathleen Harrison among many other notables.

The list of speakers was filled with Ph. D.s and M.D.s as well as a shaman and several ayahuasceros, and their topics ranged from history, to art, to medicine, to chemistry and beyond. By the end of the day I was so intrigued with all of this new information that I knew that even my timidity probably wouldn't hold me back from this experience, should the opportunity ever arise. However, I must admit that most of what I learned about ayahuasca came later, mainly from the recordings I made of the talks, because I found it hard to keep my mind from thinking about anything but Fig. When the first break came, I made it a point to walk out with her in order to strike up a conversation.

"Since Ralua already seems to have told my life story to all of you before I got here, I feel like I'm at a disadvantage not knowing anything about you," I began, trying my best to not get caught staring at her.

"There's not much to know, but thanks for asking," Fig replied. She was almost as tall as me, and whenever we spoke, her intense brown eyes looked directly into mine, as if she was trying to tell me

something without using any words. At least that became my new fantasy. Now that I had finally come to accept the fact that Ralua wasn't going to change her mind about us being only friends, I figured it was time to look in a new direction for romance.

"I work as a legal secretary for a temp service," Fig answered. "That way I can work when I need some money and yet be able to take off whenever I want to, more or less."

"Wouldn't you get more for your time if you had a full time job?" I asked.

"Sure, but the extra money and other benefits come at too high a price for me," she answered. "I saw my friends spending beautiful Sunday afternoons just sitting on their couches and watching TV, usually a sports program. They did that every week. All they do is work at jobs they don't like so they can buy a big screen television and a nice air conditioned house in which to have their brains numbed by advertising. They live in a complete fog of sleep, work, and corporate media propaganda."

"I know what you mean," I managed to say before Fig went on with her little rant.

"I'd rather live on the edge. At least out here on the edge I feel ALIVE! My god, have you seen what's on TV these days? They have contests in malls to see who can buy the biggest pile of stuff in a limited amount of time for a thousand dollars or something. And in the morning you can find Regis Philbin, along with his latest bimbo arm piece, all dressed up in a tux and hosting a wedding or something. What a load of crap people are being fed."

“Well I can't argue with that,” I said. “You're pretty wound up about this aren't you?”

“I guess I get too intense sometimes. Sorry about that.”

“I didn't mean it that way,” I replied. “In fact, I like people with strong opinions.” What I was also thinking was that maybe this little outburst happened because she was also nervous about making a good impression on me. Or maybe she just wanted to let me know where she stands on things to see if that would scare me away. In any event, I was quickly coming to the conclusion that maybe my forced exile in California might work out even better than I had hoped.

“Then I guess I'd better warn you, even though I have an opinion about something, it doesn't mean that I won't change my mind if the situation calls for it.”

“What do you mean, 'if the situation calls for it'? Are you talking about situational ethics or something like that?” I asked.

“No, I'm talking about a situation where you find out you were wrong in your assumptions or about the facts. Let me ask you this,” she went on. “What if you found out that you were wrong . . . wrong about almost everything. Would you live any differently than you now do?”

We were standing near a table that held pitchers of water and plastic cups. Just as Fig was asking me that question, Stein walked up to us. Without being invited, he simply inserted himself into what I was thinking of as an intimate little conversation with Fig. It irritated me at first, but then I remembered Ralua telling me that I shouldn't discount his opinions just

because of his age. So I decided to back out of my 'go after the girl' mode and simply see where the day would take me.

"Of course he would," Stein began. "You'd have to be a nut-job to not change your ways once the light comes on."

"So what did you do when your light came on?" I asked him.

"I left home. Once I got involved in the psychedelic scene with a few of my friends, it became obvious that my reality and my parents' reality weren't the same any more. Our worlds were both real, but our realities didn't have much in common. It seems to me that the only thing that can result when different realities clash is that one of them gets marginalized, or worse. So I decided to let my parents blossom on their own, and I moved out here."

"Stein's being modest," said Fig. "You should hear his full story, because it was a much bigger deal than simply leaving home."

"But that's not important," Stein continued. "My point is, as somebody whose name I can't remember right now once said, once you change your view of the world your entire world changes."

"And what's your view of the world right now, if I may ask?"

"How much time do ya have?" Stein laughed. "It'll take me at least an hour to even give you the headlines."

"Since those chimes are telling us to get back into the auditorium, I guess we don't have any time," I

replied. "But just give me one headline right now, and we'll talk again at the next break."

"OK, here's one. A distinguishing feature of the psychedelic community, of which I am a proud member, is that consciousness exploration is more important than earning money."

There it was again, the psychedelic community. And I still didn't have even the foggiest idea of where this community was centered, who was in it, or what it was actually all about. All I knew for sure was that I was sitting in a very large hall with about six hundred other people, and that I might possibly be the only one there who was still an outsider. What I didn't know at the time was that to join this world-wide community took no more than changing your mind about how the world works and how you want to fit into it. There really wasn't anything mysterious about it, no drugs to take, no tests, no gatekeepers. I still didn't get it.

Instead of returning to our original seats, when we went back into the auditorium we discovered that our little group had rearranged itself and left three seats together for us at the end of the row. I think Stein had it in mind to sit between Fig and me, but I managed to finesse him into sitting next to Apache with Fig between the two of us. The next speaker had just started to talk as we were sitting down.

After several minutes of putting our things under our seats and getting settled, which I'm sure must have disturbed the people behind us, I finally got focused just as the lecturer was saying, "The Buddha says something to the effect that all is thought or consciousness. What I like about ayahuasca is that it provides a way for the core of my being to have a tactile experience of that consciousness. That's the only way I know how to describe it. There really is no

good way, is there, to describe how wonderful it feels to hold a beautiful thought in your mind. However, even though there are no words to properly describe the experience, if you look deeply into the eyes of another psychonaut, as you very well know, there is an exchange of information on a scale that boggles the mind. I think Tony Rich said it best a while back when he said, 'We *do* know what we know.' "

And with that, the audience broke into wild applause. As the crowd settled down, the speaker continued, "But we also know that it takes an immense amount of work to come back with what we learned. It isn't a case of just take a little pill that does its magic on its own. No, it takes hard work to bring information back from entheospace."

After having heard that same thought expressed so many times by so many different people, I must admit that I was getting tired of what was beginning to sound very much like preaching. Although I wanted to lean over and say as much to Fig, I had a sense that if I wanted to make a good impression on her, which had now become my main focus, the best thing for me to do was to keep quiet until I had a little better understanding about where these people were coming from.

Before I came to this ayahwasca conference, I thought that my experiences with cannabis, mushrooms, and MDMA, although slight, had given me all the background I needed to hold an intelligent conversation with Ralua's friends. However, in the small amount of time I had now been with this little group, it had become glaringly obvious to me that I had a long way to go before I had anything even close to the depth of psychedelic experiences everyone around me seemed to take for granted. It was as if I

had stumbled into a group of scholars who specialized in Medieval Arabic poetry, and I was illiterate. The blend of science and shamanism coming from the speakers soon lulled me into a private reverie that I didn't come out of until the noon break.

It didn't take long for our little group to decide where to go for lunch, and before I had a chance to use the restroom, which was rapidly becoming a priority for me, I found myself walking between Fig and Stein on our way to what turned out to be a self-serve Chinese buffet. "Where's Ralua?" I asked as I looked back to see if my protector was following us.

"She went to lunch with Black Beauty and the rest of the group from Australia," Stein said. "Don't plan on seeing much of her this weekend. There are a lot of people here that she hasn't seen for over a year, and they all want to spend some time with her. Goddesses are like that, ya know."

"You'd better not let her hear you call her a goddess," said Fig. "You know how much that bugs her."

"That's why I do it," Stein laughed. "Learned it from Shadow."

By the time we got to the restaurant, Joe and Tiger were already there and had saved seats for us at a large round table. I was the last one through the buffet line thanks to my detour to the men's room, and when I got to the table with my food the only seat left was between Tiger and Apache. As I sat down, Joe caught my eye and said, "You'd better be careful over there, kid. Those are two powerful forces you're sitting between. If they want to, they could crush you like a leaf."

“Joe! Be nice now. You promised, remember?” Tiger said, smiling slightly.

“I’m always nice,” Joe replied. “It’s just that some people don’t understand my version of nice.”

“That may be, but if you’re not careful I just might tell William about your psychotic break out on Long Island, when you misplaced your stash,” Tiger said.

“Tell me,” I pleaded, as Joe became uncharacteristically quiet. However, it did appear that he was enjoying the attention, particularly when the others also began to implore Tiger to tell what I later learned was an often told tale.

I leaned over to Apache and whispered, “So what’s the story on Joe? How did he get involved with you guys?”

“Ah, that’s a long story. Ask Fig to tell you later,” she replied as Tiger began to tell her story. It was the first of what I’ve now come to know as a Joe-story, and there are a lot of them.

Tiger began, “Actually, this is my favorite Joe-story, William. It’s about the time Apache, Al, and I went to visit him when he had a house-sitting gig on the East coast.”

“And how well I remember that,” Apache chimed in, grinning at Joe.

“Let me set it up,” said Al, again surprising me with that perfect British accent. “Joe was relatively new to the scene and didn’t think he could find a connection back East. So he took his sizable stash of drugs with him, hid them all over his car. Luckily he wasn’t stopped for a traffic violation and searched, because he had enough contraband to land him in jail

for the rest of his life. Frankly, it was a stupid thing to do.”

“Amen to that,” Joe sighed.

“So that's the set up,” Tiger went on. “Joe and his pile of drugs make it safely across country to his temporary new home.”

“And if I remember correctly,” Apache added, “that was also the time that you and Joe became a couple. You were just kind of buddies before then, weren't you?”

“Yeah, but very close buddies, huh?” Tiger smiled to Joe who grinned back like a schoolboy.

“Anyway, Apache, Al, and I decided to take advantage of the fancy place Joe was watching and take a short holiday to visit him. I'll never forget his welcome.”

“Nor will I,” said Al. “As we were driving down the lane to that big old house, out comes Joe, waving his arms over his head, laughing like a madman, and shouting something incoherent to welcome to us.”

“Aw, I wasn't that bad,” said Joe.

“Bullshit! You were as blasted as I've ever seen you,” said Tiger. “Let me tell you what happened next. We had planned on having an MDMA experience that afternoon, but a traffic delay caused us to be several hours late. So as soon as we unloaded the car, Joe announced that we'd better launch immediately if we were going to peak before sunset.”

Al began to chuckle, “ 'We've got to peak before sunset. We've got to peak before sunset,' that was all Joe could say. And from the looks of him, no one was going to argue.”

“What do you mean? How did he look?” I asked.

That sparked wild laughter in Apache and Tiger as they recalled that moment. Between gasps of breath and continuing laughs, Apache said, “You should have seen him. He was a WILD man, eyes as big as saucers and shining like lasers.”

“And that grin,” Tiger sputtered, “that insane grin. I fell totally in love with him right then. I knew that no matter how depressed I would ever get that this guy would still be able to make me laugh.”

Al had joined the laughter now, as he began to revisit that scene in his mind. “But the best part was the Great Drug Search. Joe's GDS.”

Apparently everybody but me had heard this story before, because I was now the only one at the table who wasn't laughing. I assumed that once all of the pieces were put together, the picture would also make me laugh.

“Can I say something in my defense?” asked Joe.

“Too late,” Apache and Tiger said in unison as Tiger continued. “You have no defense. You were way over the top stoned, and you know it. Hell, you even tried to take Al's computer apart.”

“Now that was logical at least,” Joe said. “I remembered that before I left home I put my main stash inside that old PC I had. So I was just double-checking to make sure I hadn't forgotten to unload it.”

“Taking your computer apart was one thing, but when you came after my laptop with that screwdriver in your hand and that maniacal grin on your face,” laughed Al, “I knew we were skating on really thin ice,

because not only was my computer not even on your cross country drive, it was a fucking laptop!”

“Well, I guess that might've been a little over the line there, now that you mention it,” said Joe somewhat sheepishly.

“Am I missing part of this story?” I asked. “Is that the way you always are, Joe?”

“Nah, that was early on in my drug training,” he joked. “I was like you back then, kid, a babe in the psychedelic woods. That morning I'd just made a batch of really strong brownies, like the ones that did you in that night in Palenque. What I did was, I doubled the dose of cannabis in them. So I knew that to test them I should eat only an eighth of a brownie, not the normal quarter. But by the time they cooled down enough for me to test, I did the math wrong. Instead of an eighth I ate a half of one, and it really did me in.”

“He forgot to mention the little fact that the reason he got his math wrong was that he was already stoned from smoking a joint,” added Tiger.

“What I thought was the funniest part,” said Apache, “was while Al was trying to convince Joe to leave his laptop alone, Tiger found Joe's stash sitting on a shelf in the bathroom medicine cabinet.”

“By that time, the house was a mess, Joe's computer was in pieces on the floor, and the sun was about to set,” laughed Al.

“But we finally got the job done!” Joe exclaimed. “Our timing was a little off, and we missed the sunset. But what a night that was, huh?”

As we all began to eat, I kind of wondered what was so funny about their story. I guess you had to be there.

“You guys forgot to tell William the moral of the story,” Fig suddenly said.

“Why don't you call me Will,” I blurted out. Why I said that I'm not sure. Never before had anyone called me Will. So I don't know where that came from. Thinking back, the only reason I can come up with is that suddenly 'William' sounded too formal. Joe had already treated me like part of their group by making that reference to my 'performance' in Palenque. Now I even surprised myself at how much I wanted to be accepted by these free spirits.

“Why 'Will'? And didn't I hear Ralua call you 'Willie'?” asked Stein.

“That's what she called me when we were kids. She's promised to stop calling me that. I never did like it, and I sure don't want that name to keep following me.”

“I like William. Why 'Will' all of a sudden?” asked Tiger.

“And why did you become 'Tiger' one day?” Joe asked.

“Good point,” she answered. “So 'Will' it is.”

“Well, whatever your name is, do you still want to hear the moral of Joe's GDS story?” asked Fig.

“Sure.”

“The moral, is that you never, as in NEVER, transport contraband in your car. Somewhere around ninety percent of all drug busts come from routine

traffic stops, and most of the rest of them come about when someone rolls over.”

“Rolls over?” I asked.

“Snitches. Cops out. Becomes a narc,” said Joe. “But in my defense I want to point out that I did take precautions on my drive.”

“Like putting your pot in tins of coffee?” Stein interjected. “That old trick went out years ago. The dogs are now trained to go for the coffee-cannabis combination, ya know.”

“I went 'em one better,” answered Joe. “I went to a huntin' store and bought a bottle of fox piss. Then I sprayed it on my tires and in my trunk.”

“What! You sprayed animal piss in your own trunk!” exclaimed Stein.

“Yup. It's the best trick in the book these days. No matter how good their drug sniffing training is, you can't undo a dog's hard-wiring that makes 'em want to chase other animals. And you can hardly even smell the stuff an hour after you've sprayed it on your car. Only the dogs can smell it, and when they do, well, marijuana becomes about the last thing on their minds.”

“I wish I'd known that a few years ago,” said Stein. “Of course, getting busted for pot turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “Your life must have really been bad if getting arrested was a good thing for you.”

“I didn't actually get arrested,” Stein said, “but I was in the car when a friend of mine got stopped, and they found a bag of weed in his trunk. So my parents,

who I'm sure love me very much, thought that the best thing for me was to begin doing random drug tests on me. That finally freaked me out totally. I mean, come on now, what the fuck could they have been thinking? First of all, if they knew anything at all about cannabis they'd have gotten me a doctor's recommendation for medical marijuana. Instead they tell me that if I want to get high I can drink as much of their alcohol that I want as long as I don't go out afterwards. They have no compunction about turning me into an alcoholic like them, and at the same time they start having me drug tested. How crazy is that?"

"How often did they test you?" I asked.

"Twice. I passed the first time, but I knew I wouldn't pass that second test. So that night, right after I'd pissed in their fuckin' cup, I split."

I had to ask it, "So what do they think about you now? Do you stay in touch with them?"

"A little. I email them every once in a while to let 'em know I'm OK. But they wouldn't be able to handle it if I told them what life is like once your mind is set free from that fundamentalist religion that keeps them captive," Stein said.

"And at the end of each email I tell 'em I'll be back just as soon as I'm sure I'll pass their drug tests, but since I just had a joint they shouldn't expect me for at least another sixty days, because I know they can't love me when I'm stoned."

"That's kind of cruel, don't you think, Stein?" asked Fig.

"Of course, it's really childish. But hey, I'm still a fucking child, at least according to the law. I'm hoping that one day my parents and I can do X together and

become this loving family we always wanted to be. If they weren't so closed-minded about drugs, I'd go home today."

I really couldn't understand Stein's position. It seemed inconceivable to me that a person would make such a serious break with their parents over something as trivial as smoking a little plant matter. But for everyone else at the table, it seemed the natural thing to do, as Stein was receiving a lot of sympathy from them.

"You guys really take these drugs seriously, don't you?" I finally managed to say.

"Once you come to understand what we mean when we say these aren't 'drugs' but rather they are medicines, sacred medicines, it will all become very clear to you," said Fig. She then went on to say, "Instead of condemning these substances and painting them with the negative connotation of the word 'drug', people should be investigating what it is about these experiences that is so valuable that we willingly forgo almost everything else in order to have them, including risking the loss of our freedom, and in some parts of the world even death. And for what? Well, to experience a moment of transcendence. It's as simple as that."

"I guess I still don't get it. I haven't had much experience, but I've tried mushrooms and MDMA, and while those experiences were nice, they aren't something that would cause me to leave home," I said. "And from what I hear, even if these things do help you to penetrate the mysteries of life, once the experience is over you say that there are no words to describe it. I guess that when you talk about being psychedelic it just doesn't sound all that appealing. At least not appealing enough that I would take such

huge risks with the law that you guys seem to take for granted.”

“In case you hadn't noticed,” said Al, “no one is trying to recruit you or talk you into anything. In fact, I doubt if many of us have actually given any thought as to how we arrived here, how we came to this mind-set. But over time, and by way of seemingly divergent paths, a large number of people have come together and more or less swarmed into some kind of nebulous, globe-circling cloud of consciousness explorers. None of us knows more than a handful of the others, but through our experiences in entheospace we have come to know that our number is large, and that we seem to be awakening in unison.”

“What do you mean by experiences in entheospace?” I asked. “What's entheospace?”

“In *The Spirit of the Internet*, Lorenzo defines it as that sense of place you have when you're really high, that place where time doesn't exist, and you experience some kind of magical unfolding of consciousness, the realm of divine mind, if you will,” said Stein.

“Remember how you felt that night in Palenque when you ate so many brownies?” asked Joe. “Well, that's kinda the lower level of entheospace, that feeling.”

“So how big a number is it?” I asked Al.

“What number?”

“The number of people in the world who consider themselves to be psychedelic,” I answered.

“Who knows?” he shrugged. “But I'll tell you what I think Gaia is up to. I think she's planning on following

the same evolutionary pattern she used in ancient Greece.”

Al went on, “I remember being at one of the last workshops Terence McKenna held when he was on a panel with Tom Robbins, and Tom said, 'In Greece only about fifteen percent of the population may have experienced the Elusianian Mysteries, but it was enough to enlighten the entire culture and produce a golden age.' And I think that's what is about to happen once again. But this time it's going to be a world-wide golden age. This time Gaia is planning on using fifteen percent of the entire human population to tip our species into its next higher level of awareness.”

“That would mean hundreds of millions of people would have to become enlightened, or psychedelic, or whatever you call it,” I said, quickly doing the math in my head.

“Precisely!” said Al. “And that is why it's so important that we find the others before the winter solstice of 2012. That won't be our last chance, but it'll be our best first chance to have a global, all-day psychedelic experience that is participated in by massive numbers of people.”

“No way it's going to happen by then,” muttered Joe, “but it certainly is worth workin' for. And no matter what, that's going to be one hell of a party.”

“OK, girls and boys,” said Apache, “it's time to get back to the hotel. I don't want to miss the next speaker.”

And with that our rambling conversation came to an end, as we all began to gather our things and head back to the conference. Fig had to use the restroom, and so I stayed behind to wait for her. Out on the

street, the clang of a cable car's bell served as background music, while Fig and I slowly climbed up the steep San Francisco sidewalk that led back to the hotel where the conference was being held. As we walked past several little sidewalk eateries, I couldn't help thinking that their food all smelled better than the Chinese restaurant we had chosen.

"I guess we're a little over the top for you, huh?" asked Fig, in a soft voice.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know, all our talk about drugs and about psychedelic thinking. I guess that's pretty freaky for a corporate guy like you."

"What do you mean, corporate guy?" I asked, already knowing what she meant.

"I'm talking about your spirit, your essence, William. I mean Will. Right now you see the world through the lens of corporate America. Only by expanding your consciousness in some way, can your spirit grow large enough to take in the wonders of what is really going on right now, outside of the world of commerce."

"I know, it's an amazing time to be alive," I replied rather weakly. "I don't think many people have even the faintest idea of how much the Internet is going to change things."

"That too, but I'm talking about something much bigger than the Internet," she went on. "I have a feeling that everyone alive right now is about to undergo some kind of marvelous, mysterious transformation. But the only people who are going to get through this without thinking that they are going

mad will be the psychedelic heads. We're the only ones with the training that'll be required to stay sane."

"Are you always like this, so intense?" I asked.

"No. I have my quiet times too," she smiled. "I'm just kind of wound up at the moment. Maybe you should come visit us in L.A. where we're all a little more laid back."

Although my first thought was that the terms of my bail might not allow me to leave the Bay Area, it was quickly followed by a flood of ideas about how to get around that little restriction. As it turned out, my bail bondsman seldom even called me, let alone checked up on my whereabouts. I guess that the weekly phone conferences I held with my design team back at SiAmerica were enough to let the powers that be know where I was.

My memories of the rest of that day have now been superseded by memories of that night's party, which was one of the best I had ever been to. A close friend of Ralua's had a place he called The Magic Funk Palace, which was actually an old row house on one of the more scenic streets in an already unusually scenic city. The smoking crowd was out on a deck just off a small kitchen on the third floor. The mellow crowd was chilling out on cushions near a fireplace in the basement, where a soulful and very gifted musician named Poloka was playing his guitar.

While the big open room on the second floor throbbed to a techno beat, the main event seemed to be all of the various conversations, intense conversations, that were taking place in the kitchen, living, and dining rooms on the first floor. I saw Ralua sitting on a couch and talking with the owner of the house, a guy they called Sinbad Vine, who she

obviously admired greatly. I was a little jealous when I first saw them laughing together, but just then Fig appeared at my side.

“So, have you given it any thought yet?” she asked. “Are you going to come to L.A. next month to hear Stein give his talk at Caitlin's salon?”

“Yeah,” I said, almost without thinking about it. “I'll have to work it out with the bail bond guy, but I think I can do it.” Of course, at the time I had no idea how I would work it out with him, but at that moment it didn't seem to be an issue.

“I think you'll really enjoy Caitlin's salon, it's more or less the center of our community down there. We get together only on the first Friday of the month. So if you miss the next one you'll have a long wait until it comes up again,” she said, as if we had already agreed that I would be regularly attending this somewhat mysterious social gathering. As it turned out, I did in fact become a semi-regular guest of the always gracious Caitlin.

San Francisco Seminar

Chapter 9

Caitlin's Salon

According to Fig, Caitlin's was one of the places in Southern California where the worlds of music, art, and intellectual conversation converged. On the occasions when I attended one of these gatherings, I met movers and shakers from the Hollywood scene, prominent university professors, musicians from all over the world, more writers than you can count, DJs, drifters, old hippies, and young couples, some even with infants in tow. I found that if you used your imagination when you were attending one of these salons, it was easy to think that maybe you were attending a Communist party cell meeting in Chicago during the 1930s. Without a doubt, this was the most eclectic and fascinating crowd that I have ever encountered. Only at Burning Man have I seen its equivalent.

What is most exceptional about Caitlin's house, at least to me, is not its décor or even its funky Goth-meets-art deco design. What I find so unique about her place is the force with which its ambiance hits you when you first walk in the door. Maybe you wouldn't feel it if you came in without first knowing some of the history that has transpired there, but that wasn't the case with me. After Fig picked me up at the airport for my first visit to L.A., we spent the afternoon strolling along the waterfront in Venice Beach, while she told me about many of the great evenings she had experienced at Caitlin's.

So as soon as I stepped down into the sunken living room, I recognized the huge curved sofa where at various times psychedelic elders like Ann and Sasha Shulgin, Oscar Janiger, Arthur Kunkin, and John Lilly

had vigorously exchanged ideas and joined in the group conversations. So vivid had been Fig's description of some of the more memorable nights at Caitlin's that I swear I could see the ghosts of Gary Fisher and Myron Stolaroff sitting on the little couch that squared the L-shaped sofa, talking about the legendary Al Hubbard, the Johnny Appleseed of LSD. What a history that magical room has!

May 7, 2004 — Venice Beach, California

*Myth is neither fact nor history.
Myths are acted out in our own psyches,
and they are repetitive and ongoing.*

Tom Robbins

We arrived early enough to get a couple of cushions to sit on and found a spot on the floor near the end of the little couch. The fireplace was to our backs, but since it was almost summer, there wouldn't be a fire in it tonight. "See those people over there," Fig whispered as she nodded her head toward a little group of four sitting at the far end of the gigantic black sofa.

"Yeah. In fact, isn't that one of the speakers from the ayahuasca conference a couple of weeks ago?" I asked.

"Yes. That's Dr. Grob, but everyone calls him Charlie. He has probably done more kinds of sanctioned psychedelic research with humans than anyone else who is active right now. He did the MDMA safety study, the ayahuasca research you heard him talk about, and now he's working with end-stage

cancer patients and giving them psilocybin to see if it eases their anxiety about death.”

“Psilocybin?”

“Yeah. It's the main active ingredient in magic mushrooms,” she answered.

“He's giving magic mushrooms to dying people?” I asked somewhat astonished.

“I'll tell you more about that later. It was the people I wanted to point out. The lady he's talking to is the nurse who is his research assistant, and her husband is the guy next to her, Ralua's old friend Lorenzo. And he is sitting next to one of the more legendary characters in this part of the country, a guy they call Cassouac, but I think his real name is Mateo.”

Just then Old Joe, Tiger, and Apache began to squeeze into the few vacant spots on the floor near us. As we were rejigging our seating arrangements, I saw that Al and Stein were orchestrating a similar dance in the corner of the room nearest us, from which I assumed they would be leading the evening's conversation. As if some unheard signal had been sounded, people began to pour out of the kitchen and into the dining room that led to the large room where most of us were already comfortably seated. I wound up between Ralua and Fig, which for no reason whatsoever filled me with a strange sense of pride.

“OK everyone,” a voice from the dining room called out, “let's get started. We've got a larger crowd than usual tonight. So everyone scrunch in a little closer, and you guys in the kitchen come on in here if you can fit.”

I turned around to locate the source of this lilting female voice just as Fig was saying, “That's Caitlin. I'll

try to remember to introduce you to her before we leave.”

Within a few minutes, Caitlin had somehow taken control and had quieted the dozens of private conversations that spilled out of the living room and into the dining room and kitchen. “As you know,” she said, “tonight we are going to continue our ongoing search for new myths to carry us into the future. So far we've heard some ideas from our artistic friends in the film industry, and then there was that fascinating talk by Shadow about consciousness evolving to a point where it prefers existence in a silicon substrate over these current organic models.” This brought out some hoots and jeers, along with some rather harsh words about 'those crazy code heads,' which kind of surprised me.

I don't know what I expected to see and hear at one of Caitlin's salons, but I apparently assumed that it would be more of high-class affair, with a lot of people talking about the arts and about psychedelic drugs and other things I didn't keep up with. But as I soon learned, these evenings were more of a raucous, intellectual free-for-all where you had better know what you were talking about, because for sure there would be at least one person there who knew as much about your topic as you did.

As I look back to the times I made it to one of Caitlin's get-togethers, I can see a thread running from her salon back to the eclectic College of Complexes in Chicago during the time Slim Brundage was its proprietor. And from there, this slender little thread of a never-ending conversation continues back through the salons of Paris and on back in time to the public spaces in ancient Athens. How else could we have evolved as far as we have if there hadn't been

countless thousands of these little gatherings where ideas could collide, regroup, and then collide again, until the final seed of some new idea grew into a meme, which in turn might eventually grow into yet another new idea.

“Last month,” Caitlin continued after once again regaining control of the room, “our discussion leader was our British friend Al, or The Alchemist as he is more affectionately known.” With that, the tall, stately, and over-the-top gorgeous Caitlin smiled, blew a kiss, and winked at Al who blew a kiss back her way. “And Al is going to pass the conversation on to Stein, who I think most of you already know. But please stick around after we finish discussing Stein's ideas, because I've got a few announcements about some upcoming events you might be interested in,” Caitlin concluded as she sat down on a chair at the edge of the dining room.

“Thanks, Caitlin,” said Al. “And thank you one and all for being here again this month. I think you are going to find it well worth your time. After I convinced Stein to lead our discussion tonight, I began to think about how I would introduce him to those of you who haven't had a chance to get to know him yet. Now I realize that this is a pretty tough crowd when it comes to giving our discussion leaders any slack, but since I had a hard time talking him into doing this, I hope you will all be on your best behavior.”

“What's that?” shouted a shady-looking character standing near the door. “BUT,” Al went on ignoring the interruption, “BUT you are also a very fair crowd. And since I know that more than one of you is afraid to stand up and speak in public, I promise to not call you out to say a few words yourself as long as you are nice to Stein.”

“Well, that covers almost all of us, I guess,” laughed the shady guy. “So we'll be nice. Just get on with it.”

“Great idea,” said Al, “and now if I may, I'll begin once again. What you are about to hear is way off the charts when it comes to what most of us think of as reality. But this idea of Stein's provides a fresh new way to answer some of the more interesting questions, like What is really going on? What's the point? Why are we all here?”

A sardonic voice from the kitchen rang out, “We're all here because we're not all there, that's why.” Again, the room buzzed out of control until Caitlin stood up and firmly, but not very loudly, said, “OK boys and girls. Don't make me warn you again!” And very quickly, all was quiet.

Al cleared his throat and went on, “To begin with, let me speak to Stein's youth. I would like to gently remind you that most likely some of your own best ideas came to you when you were quite young. If not, that's a real pity. Anyway, here's a thought that your own Ralph Waldo Emerson once had about the ideas of young people.” And with that, he took a small note card out of his back pocket and read:

“Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.”

Al continued, “But there is nothing meek about our dear young friend Stein, here. And, at least for me, he has come up with one of the most novel ideas about living in a quantum universe that I've heard in a long time.”

Before Stein could take over from Al, an old guy with a pony tail, the one Fig said was Lorenzo, kind of rudely cut in and said, "Can I say just one thing before he begins?"

"Sure, and you just did," shouted someone in the audience. Lorenzo ignored him and went on, "OK, two things. And I'll be really brief."

"You'd better be," someone else shouted good naturedly.

"Well, I was about to say that in my thirties and forties I must have been a real jerk. But now I guess I'll have to extend it to my sixties for some of you," Lorenzo said as he smiled back at his hecklers.

"But for sure, I knew everything back then. I was just like these young professionals today who have all of the answers for everything. Granted, these are very bright young people, and they do a good job of taking what they've learned from books and then spouting it back at the generations on either side of them, as if this knowledge were something they arrived at on their own after a lengthy, first hand investigation. And I'm not knocking them. They are very good within their own narrow fields of specialty. But give me a raver like Stein who's self-educated and who comes up with an off-the-wall theory that is completely original, and I'll trade them for a hundred Ivy League Ph. D.s any day." With that, Lorenzo sat down as Stein stood up to applause mixed with cat-calls from the crowd. He was obviously already well known to most of the people there.

"Over the past few months," he began, "we've heard Shadow, Al, Apache, and a few others share their views about what they think is really going on in the world and in this cosmos. But to tell the truth,

none of their stories have been able to move me away from my own take on things. What I think they're missing is something that is going on right in front of everyone's eyes, namely, the world of gaming.”

That brought a round of cheers from the younger people in the room and groans from a few of the older ones. What I didn't know at the time is that there already had been several heated discussions about the importance, or nonimportance, of the gaming industry and its tens of millions of devotees.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to bring that whole discussion up again, because I've got an even more radical hypothesis than the ones we talked about a few months back,” Stein said.

“Here is my idea in a few words: We are somehow stuck in a vast and very complex computer game, and we've forgotten that we're in a game.” A stillness came over the room as Stein continued, “I think that it is possible that the underlying reality for all we take for granted in this material world, including our own bodies, is that everything is code, simply code, in a vast quantum computer. We just may be right in the middle of the most realistic computer game imaginable. I call it The Earth Game.”

“Come on, Stein, get serious,” came a voice from the dining room.

“I am very serious,” Stein replied. “And if you give me a few uninterrupted minutes, I'll present my case.”

Instead, the next few minutes reverted to a verbal free-for-all, as it seemed that everyone there had an opinion that they wanted to inject at that point. I was beginning to get the feeling that my idea of this salon being some kind of fancy intellectual party was

about as far off the mark as could be. The picture that was now coming into focus was one I recognized from my college days, where we would stay up late into the night and solve all of the world's problems. The only difference was that many of the people here had already reached prominence in their careers and had a lot more experience behind them than we did back then.

As if some invisible signal had been flashed, the buzz in the room came to an abrupt stop, and Stein continued, "As I was about to say, even if you just treat this as a new metaphor, I think you will find that it can prove very practical in dealing with the everyday affairs of life. But first let me give you a scientific peg to hang this on. Granted, it's a pretty thin peg, but try to ride with me on this for a bit. If you look back to around the year 1500, you find that most people thought the Earth was flat and that the Sun revolved around us. But over time, the Copernican world view took over and Newton's laws became the bedrock of our thinking. Then, a few hundred years later the world of science springs quantum physics on us."

Just then, a small, dark-haired woman sitting next to Caitlin spoke up and interjected, "I believe it was Nick Herbert who once said, 'Humans can never experience the true texture of quantum reality, because everything we touch turns to matter.' "

"Yeah," came a voice from the big couch, "Quantum mechanics in layman's terms: Reality is in the eye of the beholder."

"True enough," said Stein, "but there's more to it than that. I'm not going to try and explain how a quantum computer can work, but there is already more information about quantum computing on the

Net than you'll ever have the time to read. Besides, we've got a few experts on the subject who are here, and maybe we can have them add some more detail in a few minutes. But for now, you're just going to have to take it on faith that there are serious scientists who are postulating that all of this flickering in and out of material reality that quantum physicists talk about can also be intertwined with some of the ideas surrounding quantum computing. For me, *The Earth Game* is a good description of what underlies physical reality," he went on. "But let's leave that aspect alone for now, and just think about this idea as a new myth, or a new metaphor for life on planet Earth."

"That's one of the things I like about this idea," added Al. "Rather than trying to reshape society through new laws or through violence, why not simply change our myths. I know that I for one am sick and tired of some of our current governing myths, like the one that says alcohol is good for us and marijuana is bad for us."

"Well, I was actually going for something even deeper," Stein said. "I'm thinking about the underlying myths that we build our views of the world on. For some, it's the Christian myth, or the Jewish or Muslim myths. A huge number of people have staked their lives on the myths of science."

A tall blond woman in the back of the room added, "Yeah, but the fact is that right now scientists claim that 75% of the universe consists of something they call dark matter and dark energy. What kind of weasel talk is that? Why can't they just say they don't know what the fuck most of the universe is made of instead of coming up with this dark matter B.S."

"I agree," Stein said. "But before we head down that trail, let me get back to a nonscientific look at the

idea of treating this life as if we were in a computer game. The more scientific details you add to it, the more you'll convince yourself that this is something other than just a new myth or metaphor, but that's not really important here tonight. So just think about this for a minute. All of you have either played a video game or you've seen people playing them in theater lobbies and places like that. Have you noticed how intent the players are? How focused? If they're real gamers you can hardly get their attention while they're playing because they are that avatar. They aren't in some theater lobby. They are an avatar that is usually fighting for its life. While that game is going on, that game is their reality, their only reality. Now what if there was a computer game in which, once you put on a headset and picked up the controller, you were somehow prevented from remembering that you were just playing a game. What if we had games where until someone takes your headset off for you, there is no way you can tell that the game isn't your only possible reality? Well, that's what I think is happening to all of us right now. Our spirit, or our mind or intellect, or whatever you want to call it, is controlling an avatar as it moves through a cyberspace construct we call Earth."

"So what's the point of The Earth Game, then?" asked Ralua.

"That depends on the player," Stein answered. "For me, it's to get to the next level. Right now it seems that a lot of people are still stuck on the Medieval level, some are even back on the Stone Age level, while most of Asia and the West seem to be on the dominator, war-loving level. Personally, I'm doing all I can to make it up another level, to the paradise level. But the complicating factor in this game is that even though the players aren't all playing on the same

level, we're still somehow physically in the same space. Our levels are all merged together.”

“How is this any different from the religious belief in seven levels of heaven, or just in heaven and hell for that matter?” asked Al.

“It isn't, actually,” Stein said. “But religion leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and this seems more realistic to me. Just try this for a while. Try fitting everything that goes on, everything you read, everything you see, into the concept that this is all taking place in some big VR simulation. Start asking that question at least. Ask yourself how you can prove that something you experienced last year wasn't actually a computer simulation that you remember. But don't worry, you'll figure it all out as soon as you take your headgear off,” he laughed.

“Yeah, and the best way to do that is with a little acid. That'll dissolve your helmet right off,” called out a voice from the dining room.”

“I can see one nice advantage to looking at the world as a gigantic computer game,” added Tiger, “and that is the fact that old, long-standing grudges, like the Catholics versus the Protestants in Ireland, the Jews versus everyone in the Middle East, the old wounds from slavery and the decimation of indigenous populations everywhere, all of those old grievances would become nothing more than episodes in a computer game that has already moved to its next level. Once you leave a level, it is easy to leave the memories of old battles behind and concentrate on whatever new conflict has taken center stage.”

Just then, a bearded man wearing very thick glasses spoke up in a German-sounding accent and said, “Are you aware, Mr. Stein, that there is serious

research into quantum computing now going on at various universities around the world? And that some scientists now claim that you cannot prove that we are not actually in a computer simulation of some kind? And these same scientists calculate that there is a twenty to fifty percent chance that this is so? Did you know that, Mr. Stein?"

"No. Wow. No, I didn't. In fact, the truth is that I almost didn't show up tonight because I'd started to think that I was too far out for you guys," Stein said.

"I know that reading isn't very popular any more," Old Joe suddenly said as all heads turned his way, "but almost a decade ago Greg Egan published *Permutation City*, and what you're talking about is essentially his story line. You know, I can remember as a boy being astounded at how many of Jules Verne's science fiction fantasies had already come to pass. Maybe your grandchildren are going to think the same about Egan."

From there, the conversation moved to a discussion of the work of several other science fiction authors and then on to the implications of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Bell's theorem of action-at-a-distance, and several other things that I didn't understand and so held little interest for me. But I did like Stein's idea of treating life as if we were in some grand computer game. While Fig and Ralua joined in the group discussion, I lost myself in thinking about some of the implications of what the old professor had said about Stein's idea being possibly more than a myth or metaphor.

Before I realized how long I had been daydreaming, Fig was telling me that it was time to go. While we were squeezing through the crush of people spilling out the door, a tall man, who was

wearing what I took to be a trench coat or something like that, shunted us off to one side and said, "I'm producing a little gathering tomorrow night that you may be interested in. Here's the location," and he handed Ralua a small pink flyer.

She smiled and said, "Thanks, Twist, but I've given up raves for now."

"So have I," he smiled. "This is the next evolution, and it's only a stepping stone to where we're going."

"Is this something you picked up from Fraser?" Ralua asked.

"Somewhat," he answered, "but we're putting our own spin on it over here, our little own twist," he grinned.

As Ralua looked at the flyer she had just been handed, she said, "Hmmm, now that's interesting. I see that you're including workshops and lectures before and during the party. How does that work? Does anyone leave the dance floor for these things?"

"You'd be surprised," he said with a big smile. "Why don't you come for the first couple of hours tomorrow night and see for yourself. We're kicking it off with a talk by Mateo and Lorenzo about ayahuasca, something you probably know more about than the two of them put together, now that I think about it."

"If I can get someone to drive me, I'll be there," Ralua quickly replied. "Thanks for inviting me, and I assume you're inviting our whole house. Is that right?"

"Of course," he smiled as he was swept back into Caitlin's house, along with the first wave of smokers who were returning for more conversation and a pot luck dinner that was still very much underway.

The Genesis Generation

Caitlin's Salon

Chapter 10

Rindy's Place

After having lived my entire life in the middle part of the country, coming to the West Coast and getting involved with the psychedelic community provided me with a look into a corner of American culture that I once thought existed only in the movies.

On quite a few weekends during the summer of 2004, we attended one or more parties that had evolved out of the earlier rave scene. At these gatherings, a few hundred people would come together for workshops, lectures, visionary art exhibits, spectacular light shows, and all-night dancing with some of the best DJs on the coast. When the full moon came around each month, we joined thousands of other kindred spirits and drove out to the desert where we took MDMA, howled at the moon, and danced until sunrise. At least one weekend each month was devoted to spiritual pursuits. That was when Apache and Al would lead us in intensive, participatory workshops where we learned how to properly and safely use several of the clan's sacred medicines.

For my part, I quickly fell into a pattern of working remotely with my SiAmerica group from my apartment in San Francisco on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays (even though I was technically supposed to be on a partial sabbatical). On Fridays I would fly to L.A. and spend a long weekend with Fig and my other new friends, while doing my best to not think about the legal problems that were still ahead of me. But most of my memories of that summer are mainly of just hanging around in the big old house some of them shared.

I still think of Rindy's place as the clan's command central, even though they have all moved out by now. Besides Fig, Deirdre, Stein, and Ralua there were several other permanent residents, including a mad artist who lived in the attic and came down only to go out and buy food or to show us his latest painting. And then there were always visitors camping in various nooks and crannies of what must have been a mansion when it was in its prime.

According to Fig, the owner is a woman named Rindy, who as a single mother had to struggle mightily just to put food on the table. Somehow she wound up acquiring this large house, which at the time was in a serious state of decay. With the help of an army of volunteers, she brought it back to life again and began renting inexpensive rooms to a few of the young people she had grown to know through her daughter. Over time Rindy's place became a neighborhood institution, and she continued running it as a boarding house long after her daughter married and moved out of the state.

From what Fig told me, it sounded like Rindy became a more-or-less surrogate mother for young people who found themselves adrift in the stormy seas of a big city and didn't have any friends or family to help them. Then last year, a confluence of events led to Ralua taking over Rindy's responsibilities for a year while Rindy went back East to spend some time with her grandchildren.

Although the story of how this close band of friends all came to be living together eventually came into focus for me, it did so only after I pieced several of their stories together and saw the common threads that connected them. It would take too long to tell all of their stories here, let alone all that took place

during my summer in L.A. So what follows are just a few fragments of a couple of conversations that I had as my education into the ways of the Tribe unfolded during my summer of falling in love.

* * *

Summertime, 2004 — Los Angeles

*In the history of the collective
as in the history of the individual,
everything depends on the
development of consciousness.*

Carl Jung

“So tell me again how you all came to be living here together?” I asked Fig.

We were in the kitchen at Rindy's place, as everyone who lived here called it. The first time I was here, between Caitlin's salon and the night after at a small rave, I didn't have much time to focus on what was to me a rather amazing living arrangement. Apparently, no one who lived there had a permanent, full-time job. Instead they worked as contract labor, doing all kinds of things for a few months, and then they took off and traveled the rest of the time. The word career never passed their lips.

Our words echoed in the huge, high-ceilinged, eat-in kitchen where we were looking for an afternoon snack. Distracted from our conversation, I asked Fig why there was a plate of cookies in the fridge with a note on top that read, “Not for human consumption.” She laughed and said, “That's a sign to let you know that you're in a cool house.”

“Huh,” I said.

“It's code. Whenever you see a note like that it is pretty safe to assume that whoever made those cookies, or brownies, or whatever, put some cannabis in them. And from what I've heard, you are someone who definitely needs to be warned about these things,” she laughed.

“OK, so this is a cool house. How did it get this way? How did you all find this place and decide to move in together?” I asked. “I remember that last night of the conference in San Francisco, when we were at the party at the Magic Funk Palace, you said something about a grand tragedy or something and that Ralua then brought you all together. But we were telling each other so many of our stories that night that they all kind of blended together. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” Fig laughed. “I hope you don't intend to give me a quiz about some of the stories you told me that night either, because I'm sure I'd get them all mixed up too. But for now I'll just give you the headlines. I'm in too good a mood today to spend much time revisiting the past. So here is how it all came down.”

Fig sat down across from me on one of the benches that graced each side of the long wooden kitchen table. Pushing a glass of iced tea my way, she said, “You got the part about a grand tragedy right. It was a whole series of tragedies, actually. The chain of events began with Noah, one of our friends from Chicago who died while using one of our sacred medicines in a way that he must have known was unsafe. Yet he screwed up and in a flash he was gone. Noah had been an integral part of our little group ever since we all met at one of the Entheobotany Conferences in Palenque. In fact, I still have a copy of

a recording he made of one of Terence's last talks there. I wonder what happened to all of those tapes Noah made?" Fig mused.

"You guys keep talking about those Palenque conferences," I said. "They must have been amazing."

A big smile came to Fig's face as she said, "Yes they were. Yes they were." And for a moment she seemed to drift away into a pleasant reverie. "But don't get me started talking about the Palenque conferences. I could go on about them all day."

"I know. You already have a few times," I teased.

Ignoring my weak attempt at humor, Fig went on, "But, yes, we do talk about those days a lot because that's where we all met. In a way, sitting around the pool at the Chan Kha hotel in Palenque is where many of us feel most at home. It's almost as if those conferences took place in another, more mythic age. Too bad there isn't a way to track all of the ideas that have sprouted from the seeds that were planted in our minds back then. What an idea nursery those conferences were!"

"Well, I guess in a way we have that in common," I said a little sheepishly. "If I hadn't taken that trip to Palenque, you and I wouldn't know each other."

"Yes, we would," Fig replied without any hesitation. Not knowing what to make of that remark, I just let it go.

After pausing for a moment or so, she continued, "So Noah died. Then two of our little group of friends decided to kill themselves, and their deaths were followed by two more accidental ODs. And all of that happened within a few short months. Needless to say, we all were more or less shattered psychologically and

we were beginning to fall apart ourselves. That's when Ralua rescued us and brought us here."

"Wow. I remembered that someone died, but I didn't realize how many people died in such short order. I thought you guys were supposed to be professionals when it came to using psychedelics. How could people have died?" I asked.

"It's amazingly easy to slip away during an intensive psychedelic trip. Not that it happens very often, but when they are used stupidly people can get hurt."

"What do you mean by using them stupidly?"

"There are a lot of ways to get into trouble with our sacred medicines, and I'm not just talking about getting into trouble with the law. These things are like nuclear energy for the mind. Used properly, you can have a very powerful experience. But if you get sloppy or overconfident they can turn into nuclear bombs and blast you out of your mind. Not that most people don't eventually come back from a bad trip, but they don't always make it back with their psyches completely intact," said Fig.

"Then why do you even mess around with these things?" I asked. "It seems to me that between getting in trouble with the law and possibly going insane, or even dying for that matter, sensible people would want to stay away from them."

"They probably should," she replied. "But who says we're sensible?"

Again, I was left with a comment that I had no quick response for. Having always thought that sensible people were the ones who have the most successful lives, I had never given any thought to

doing something that didn't make any sense. However, thinking back to my first little taste of mushroom consciousness with Shadow and Q when we were in Amsterdam, I knew for certain that sensible or not, I would definitely be back for more experiences with those marvelous little fungi.

* * *

During the course of the summer, I realized that Fig still hadn't come to grips with the suicides of two of her close friends. Whenever I brought it up she would slip into a deep funk, always blaming herself for not noticing how much trouble they must have been in. It was even worse for her when she thought about the accidental deaths. Two of them involved using drugs in water, one in a bathtub and one in a jacuzzi. The other death was a case of a woman mixing several psychoactive substances together while drinking alcohol along with them. She passed out on her back and drowned in her own vomit. Not a particularly good way to begin one's next life.

After what seemed to be a never-ending series of tragedies among this tightly connected little group, all of whom were her friends, Ralua came back from her home in Mexico, rounded up those who were left, and organized a year's worth of workshops to teach them how to properly use their sacred medicines. That's when Apache and Al came into their lives.

It is hard to explain how Apache and Al fit in the picture without sounding like I am being paid to say good things about them. I guess the best way to put it is that if Ralua was the heart and soul of this little clan, then Al and Apache provided their spiritual and intellectual center. However, it seemed to me that you probably couldn't find a more unlikely couple to be doing their kind of work, which was primarily to lead

spiritual workshops, sometimes involving the use of one or more psychedelic medicines.

It was on a lazy Sunday afternoon, after one of these weekend sessions, that I got up the courage to begin acting like I was now a part of their little clan, and so I decided to drop my normally polite behavior and ask a few personal questions. "So, Apache, I have to say that you and Al strike me as, well, and I don't mean to be rude, but you guys are really different from any other people I've known."

"Are you saying that you don't know any other black people?" Apache teased.

Embarrassed, I blurted out, "No. No, I don't mean that at all. I'm talking about the way you talk, what you do for a living, that kind of thing."

"We know what you mean, Will," answered Al. "Apache's just feeling good today and is having a little fun with you. In fact, I feel pretty damn good myself for an old guy who stayed up most of the night."

"You don't look very old," I said. "How old are you?"

"As a wise man once said, 'You are only as old as the last time you changed your mind,' " he laughed. "So I'm going to find something to change my mind about today. That way, in cosmic time at least, I remain a babe."

In my head, I was trying to do the math, since it was obvious that he wasn't going to give me a straight answer. I knew that his father had been in the British diplomatic corps, and that during his most formative years his family lived in a half-dozen or more countries. I had heard stories about Al receiving an honors degree in philosophy at some prestigious

British university, but I never asked him directly about that. My guess was that he must be close to forty by now.

“I heard that you two met at one of Fraser Clark's Megatripolis events,” I said, trying to sound like I knew what I was talking about, while the truth was that I was just dropping the name of someone everybody in the Tribe seemed to know.

The look Apache and Al exchanged, as their eyes met and their smiles grew, told me everything I wanted to know about their love for one another. I don't know if it was their love or their state of enlightenment that made it appear as if they were glowing. But whenever I saw them my first thought was of those old Catholic “holy cards” that showed golden halos around the heads of the saints.

Just then, Ralua came into the living room where several of us were still trying to ease into the afternoon. “Hey, everyone. Are we talking about something intellectual, or something more interesting, like gossip?” she asked with a soft smile.

“Both,” said Fig. “We're talking about the love life of our two most intellectual friends.”

“Actually,” I said, “all I wanted to know was how Apache and Al met.”

“Ah, so you're leaning toward the gossip side,” Ralua said. “But I think you would find it more interesting to ask them exactly what it is that they're doing. Ask 'em what they're up to,” she finished with a smile.

“OK. So what are you two up to?” I asked.

Al spoke first, "In all seriousness, I can tell you in just a few words what our mission is. We are doing things that we think will help to create a transitional society that one day will lead to a true psychedelic society, the kind that Terence spoke about."

"What do you mean by psychedelic society?" I asked. "Are you talking about a society where drugs are legal or something?"

This brought on another round of laughter at my expense, something I had by now actually begun to look forward to. At least it was a form of recognition.

"Let me get him the book," Stein said as he headed into the library.

"You guys are cruel," Fig said in my defense. "Just because you learned these things before Will did isn't reason to make fun of him."

"Oh, that's OK, Fig," I said. "After last night, I know that everyone here loves me." And with that a huge hug-fest began. Feeling so wonderful the day after an all-night party was something new to me. Just a few months ago, when alcohol was my drug of choice, I wasn't fit to be around the day after an all-nighter. Somehow I just can't imagine saying something to my hungover buddies that would cause them to get up and give me a hug. I guess that is why MDMA is called the love drug and alcohol is just plain booze.

As we were all getting untangled from our little love puddle, Stein returned with a small paperback book in his hand. "Looks like I missed something fun," he said. This of course brought on a second wave of group hugs, which were gradually beginning to feel a little more natural to me.

Breaking free of our love puddle, Stein handed a book to Al who, after looking at the chapter listing, turned to an essay by Terence McKenna and said, "This essay, simply titled 'Psychedelic Society,' is actually the text of a talk he gave back in 1984. You can read it for yourself. It's not very long. But I'll just read a few things at random that someone highlighted here, just to give you a small idea of what we're talking about. McKenna writes:

When I think of psychedelic society that notion implies creating a society which lives in light of the Mystery of Being.

What needs to be done is that our fundamental ontological conceptions of reality have to be remade.

What I am advocating is that we each take responsibility for the cultural transformation by realizing that it is not something which will be disseminated from the top down. It is something which each of us can contribute to by attempting to live as far into the future as possible.

We must transcend the historical moment and become exemplars of humanity at the End of Time.

"Old Terence sure could get melodramatic from time to time, couldn't he," said Old Joe from his supine position on one of the couches that flanked the room's huge fireplace. Joe was the first to fade last night. So Tiger made a little bed for him on one of the living room couches, and except for getting up to go to the restroom, he hadn't moved from his spot in almost ten hours.

"That's one way to take it," said Ralua, "but I also think it should be taken literally. Even if the world wasn't in the mess it's now in, why wouldn't we want to become exemplars of humanity at the End of Time? Can you think of a better thing to do?"

"I stand corrected," said an abashed Joe.

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time, Joe," said Ralua, as she smiled and winked at him.

"I know," Joe smiled back. He then closed his eyes and shifted his body around a little, as if to settle in for another long nap.

"What exactly does he mean by 'lives in light of the Mystery of Being'?" I asked of no one in particular.

"Ah, that's the thing about Terence that is often overlooked," said Al. "At heart, he was an Irish bard, a poet of the first order. And so there is a lot of room for interpretation in his work. To be honest, my take on what he means by that keeps changing."

"So what do you think about it right now?"

"Anyone want to answer that?" asked Al.

It was Apache who spoke first. And I noticed that as she began speaking, everyone readjusted themselves to better focus on what she had to say. Even Old Joe propped his head up on one arm and turned to her. "It isn't actually possible for us to explain that to you, Will," she said, "because you don't have the proper vocabulary we must use to describe it."

"Try me," I said rather boldly.

“Any takers?” asked Apache. “Who would like to tell Will what living in light of the Mystery of Being means.”

“I will,” smiled Fig as she turned toward me and said, “but you aren't going to understand a word I say.”

“Go for it, Fig,” shouted Stein. “Give him your best gobbledygook.”

“OK, here goes,” she said. “Remember the color of the light in the first few minutes after a big hit of NN-DMT?” Heads began to nod.

“Well, if you intensify that color of light to the point where it was as bright as the sun and at the same time bring to mind the first few minutes of consciousness just after smoking some 5MEO-DMT, well, THAT is what I think it would be like to live in light of the Mystery of Being.”

“Maybe so,” Joe chimed in, talking with his eyes closed, “but we sure wouldn't get much done if we were that spaced out all the time.”

“You know that's not what she means, Joe,” scolded Tiger. “You know very well that Fig is talking about a state of consciousness, the state of our conscious BE-ing as we move through this world.”

“You see, Will,” said Al, “we're dealing here with experiences that, while we are having them we understand them fully, yet they transcend the limits of language. And by trying to put words around these experiences we end up almost making fun of them. What our language needs, if we are to speak of these experiences in ways that enable others to understand our meaning, would be the equivalent of perspective in painting. Once perspective was discovered, and

keep in mind it *was* discovered, meaning it had always been there, the world of painting erupted as if shot from a volcano. The same will be true once we discover a way to put into language exactly what we see and learn on our voyages of discovery into entheospace.”

“And are you saying that you can do this only with drugs?” I asked.

“No, there are a lot of ways to expand your consciousness,” said Tiger. “But you just asked how a psychonaut would describe a particular state of mind. And that's what Fig just did. If you ask someone who uses yoga, or meditation, or any of the many ways that are available to us for cleansing our doors of perception, as Aldous Huxley framed it, you will find similar descriptions. But most of it is in a language that the strangers do not know, as that old song goes.”

“Here's the thing about psychedelics, Will,” added Al. “While they are by no means the only tool for enlightenment, they are by far the quickest and easiest way to get there.”

Apache quickly interjected, “Quick, yes. Easy, no. If learning how to use our sacred medicines properly was easy our friends wouldn't be dead right now, and we wouldn't be holding these intensive sessions.”

This compelled me to blurt out, “I guess I still have enough MDMA in my system to be completely honest, and so I have to say that in a way you guys act like an exclusive little club that I've got to pay some kind of dues to before I'm admitted. If you remember, last night I did my best to convince you that I was ready to try DMT, and you wouldn't let me.”

"I understand why you feel that way, Will," came Apache's soothing voice. "But just now you let me know that you are still too easy-going about these things. You said you thought you were ready to try DMT, but you didn't say which kind of DMT, NN or 5MEO. There's a huge difference, you know."

"We love you, Will," interjected Ralua. "That's why we're trying to properly prepare you for these experiences before hand. Our methods have been used by indigenous people for hundreds of years, and they are designed to gently lead you up that rainbow spiral to your higher self. But it is important to tread this path with a slow but steady pace. We have already lost too many good people who simply burned out by jumping right into the deep end of the psychedelic pool without first learning how to swim. After all, you didn't learn to ride a bicycle in just one or two tries. And you probably weren't very great at making love with a new partner the first few times either," Ralua said with a wink in Fig's direction.

"Don't feel bad, kid," added Old Joe, now sitting up and appearing to be fully refreshed. "This gang now doesn't want me to use anything but mushrooms, grass, and ayahuasca. They worry that my heart might give out and they'd be stuck with a lot of explainin' to do. But I don't feel like I'm missin' out on anything. Hell, if you can't become enlightened with what's in my medicine kit you ain't gonna' get there any other way either."

"Actually, until I met you guys I never thought about becoming enlightened. It didn't sound like something people worked on. I thought it just happened, like it did to the Buddha," I said.

"It sounded to me like the Buddha had to work his ass off to become enlightened," said Stein.

"Of course, we haven't actually described what we mean by enlightenment," Al interjected. "And if we did try to describe it, I'm sure no two of us would agree. As Terence said, gaining a more cosmic perspective is something that almost has to be triangulated. And it may be that we can grok it only fleetingly."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Here, let me see that book again," he said.

Turning again to the McKenna essay, Al read: "The psychedelic substances can be conceived of as points on an informational grid. They provide new perspectives on reality, and when you reconnect all the points of view that you have collected regarding reality then a reasonably applicable model of reality begins to appear."

"Well, I hate to be so negative," I said, "but coming into this scene from the everyday world of corporate America, I have to admit that living like you do doesn't really appeal to me."

Old Joe laughed and said, "If this life doesn't appeal to you, then why do you spend every weekend down here?"

"Good point, Joe," said Ralua. "So, Will, if our lifestyle doesn't appeal to you then I guess we are to assume that it must be love that brings you back."

Totally out of character for me, I smiled, crawled across the carpet to the pile of cushions where Fig was sitting, and put my head in her lap, a big smile on my lips, and said, "Maybe so. Maybe so."

"Ahhh. Isn't that sweet," Stein said in a tone that sounded truly sincere.

Lying on my back, with my head on Fig's lap, I continued, "But you took what I said the wrong way. All I was trying to say is that I'm not sure I could live like you guys do, never knowing from one month to the next where you'll get enough money to keep going. I guess it's the lack of financial security around here that would make it hard for me to live like you do. And it isn't just the money thing, I have to admit that I really enjoy being alone some during the week. There's just a lot more togetherness that comes with living in a group like this than I think I could handle."

It was as if all of these little complaints had been building up in me for a month or so, and in the afterglow of our all night MDMA session I felt free enough to express myself without the fear of being rejected. While I could see the benefit of living in a mutually supportive community like theirs, I knew that to remain a part of their little clan I would have to find a way to do it on my own terms. Without realizing it, my little outburst was the exact catalyst that Fig and I needed to begin an open and honest discussion about our futures. It was becoming more obvious every day that such a strong bond was growing between Fig and me that we were both already thinking about compromises we would be willing to make in order to stay together.

"Well, that was a mouthful," said Apache. "Maybe we should explore this a bit. The two things that seem to be bothering you the most are money and privacy."

Before she could continue, Al said, "Let's get the privacy thing out of the way first. That's easy. You see, Will, with the exception of this little group here at Rindy's place, most of the other people we're working with either live alone or with their family. We're not trying to replicate the old commune model from the

Sixties, not that there isn't a place for communities like that. But that isn't our focus. What we are trying to do is to help people create their own spiritual practices and ways of living that they can adapt to their current lives. When we speak of a psychedelic society we aren't talking about a specific place where like-minded people live together in harmony. The world isn't ready for that just now. Our aim is to help our fellow psychedelic thinkers become strong pillars of their local community. And by interconnecting what I like to think of as neighborhood nodes of consciousness, we hope to provide a psychic safety net that holds our species together during this time when change is so rapidly accelerating."

"Can I say something about living in a group house like this?" Stein asked.

"Of course, dear," answered Ralua, who Stein once admitted to thinking of as his surrogate mother.

"I can see how," Stein said, "coming from having your own place and a lot of money, you wouldn't want to live like we do, but one of the reasons living in a group situation like this doesn't seem so bad for some of us is that the alternative is moving back in with our parents. And unless they were like Old Joe, and mine aren't, that'd be a real bummer."

"As for what you call financial security," Deirdre added, "I got to the point where homelessness would have been preferable to going back to my last full-time job, with all of those cranky supervisors and gossiping coworkers. Security or sanity, that was my choice. And the ironic part is that some of my friends who chose security are about to get laid off. Granted, they have nice houses and new cars, while I use public transportation and just rent a room here. But look at this place, it's bigger and fancier than their houses

are. And now that their kids are leaving home they say they're lonely at nights when they're home alone. I don't have that problem, because if I want company there's always someone in the kitchen or library to talk to. And I can be alone in my own room whenever I want to. On top of that, I get to travel all over the world for about six months a year," she added. "It's all about the choices you make. I chose to not have children, and that wasn't an easy decision. But I also wanted to experience as much of the world as I can in this lifetime. And so I made the difficult decision to not have a family in exchange for a life of travel and adventure. But it's not for everyone. Even though it's perfect for me."

"I'll tell you what's perfect for me," said Stein. "It's not spending the best hours of the best days of my life on an assembly line, in a cubicle, or trying to sell something to someone. No slave job for me, man. That Protestant work ethic is a con, and everyone knows it but is afraid to say so because they think they'll be called a slacker. Basically, these Establishment guys think that work is an end in itself. That's the shit they learned from *Atlas Shrugged*. What they don't want you to know is that the real point of all these cubicle jobs is to humble your soul to the point where you'll do whatever you're told. It's not about production, man, it's about conformity. And by the end of your mind-numbing day you're too fuckin' tired to even think for yourself, let alone man the barricades."

"That sounds great," I said, "but still, it seems as if everyone is living on the edge, just barely getting by, earning only enough money each month to survive. I don't know how you can put up with the stress."

"You must be lucky to live without any financial stress," teased Ralua.

"Maybe we humans aren't designed to have our physical beings totally secure," a more thoughtful Stein replied. "I know that without a little tension in my own life I start to come unraveled."

At the time he made that comment, I didn't yet know how much tension Stein had intentionally introduced into his life. A few months before his eighteenth birthday, and only a few weeks before he was to graduate from high school, he ran away from home. The triggering event was a drug test his parents forced him to take, but the other factor was his fear about coming out of the closet to his parents. The irony here is that now, he tells me, he knows his parents would welcome him back even though they now know that he's gay, but he is still afraid to tell them that he has developed a deep spiritual practice that involves the use of psychedelics.

"You know, Will," came Ralua's gentle voice, "to some people it may seem like we are living a marginal life, but the edges are where the most interesting new things always happen."

"Hmmm. I'll have to think about that for a while," I said as I closed my eyes and adjusted my head on Fig's lap.

* * *

Frequently, on a Saturday Fig would get called in to work on some big emergency problem or another that just couldn't wait until Monday. She was a legal secretary and had a more-or-less permanent temp job with one of the largest law firms in town. The time-and-a-half overtime pay that she got on the weekends

meant she could begin her next trip even sooner. Her current plan was to travel to Bali in December and then on to Thailand and India from there. It was a route she had taken before, and so she was looking forward to reconnecting with old friends along the way. Although we had only known one another for less than a month when she first told me about these plans, I have to admit that the prospect of me being back at my job in Dallas this coming December while Fig was in Bali didn't do much to improve my outlook on life.

When Fig was at work, I would spend most of my time in their library. It was a large room, twenty feet or so on a side, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining three of the walls. A tall fireplace dominated the far end of the room, and the mantle above it was covered with what seemed to me to be a clutter of bits and pieces of stone, bone, and feather. However, it turned out that every object on the mantel had some heavy significance for one or more of the residents. And I quickly learned to call it an altar, not a mantle, even though that seemed a bit awkward to me. But, hey, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Right?

Thinking back, I wish that I had done an inventory of the books in that room. It seemed that every book I read that summer shifted my understanding of the world ever so slightly in a new direction. This was no ordinary collection of books and music. At least it wouldn't be considered ordinary in Dallas.

However, I now know that psychedelic libraries like this exist in thousands of homes around the world, and the books are in dozens of languages. It turns out that there is a rich world of psychedelic literature, but it was once as difficult to find one of these books as it was to find an ancient book about alchemy. However,

that situation has now changed dramatically, and a rich new vein of psychedelic literature has begun to grow exponentially with the advent of the Web.

On my first Saturday alone, I was absent-mindedly looking at the book titles on a shelf labeled McKenna when Stein walked in and said, "If I were you I'd read Jack Herer's book first."

"Which one is that," I asked.

"*The Emperor Wears No Clothes*," he answered. "It's about cannabis, marijuana the cops call it. Here, let me show you."

Stein took a book down from an eye-level shelf next to the door that led to the living room and exclaimed, "Ah, I love this book."

"Let me see," I said, reaching for it. In my hand, it fell open to Chapter 2, "A Brief Summary of the Uses of Hemp," and a quick glance at that chapter told me that there is a huge piece of history that has been left out of our school books. Much to my shock, I discovered that until relatively recently hemp was one of the most important plants humans cultivated, and the list of its historical uses went on for several pages. But it was the first paragraph in that chapter that really grabbed my attention. It read:

**Our Challenge to the World:
Try to Prove Us Wrong!**

If all fossil fuels and their derivatives, as well as trees for paper and construction were banned in order to save the planet, reverse the Greenhouse Effect and stop deforestation; Then there is only one known annual renewable natural resource that is capable of providing the overall majority of the world's paper and

textiles; meeting all of the world's transportation, industrial and home energy needs; simultaneously reducing pollution, rebuilding the soil, and cleaning the atmosphere all at the same time. . . . And that substance is—the same one that did it all before—Cannabis Hemp . . . Marijuana!

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I was about to say that that statement couldn't possibly be true, but if the reward the publisher is offering in their challenge is real then I guess everything it says can be backed up.”

“Oh, the reward is real enough,” said Stein. “Wait'll you read it. You'll never believe another word any government tells you after you read this book. Because if they are willing to tell such big lies about something as beneficial as cannabis, then there is no limit to their lies.”

“I've heard that a few politicians are beginning to call for reform and legalization,” I said a little weakly.

“Sure, they all talk a good game. And a lot of 'em even admit to having used cannabis when they were in college. But in my opinion they are all hypocrites, because they only talk. They don't actually do anything about the fact that we're putting close to a million people in prison each year for having done nothing more than have a little bag of pot on them. Now, all of those people who have been in prison for a nonviolent crime, and it's in the millions now, all of those people are prevented from voting, holding a public office, getting a student loan, or from even getting a decent job.”

“Millions?” I asked. “What do you mean? Are you saying that literally millions of people have gone to prison for simple possession?”

“Go check it out for yourself,” Stein replied. “So far over twelve million human years have been lost in this country alone by locking people in prison cages for the simple crime of possession of a little bit of plant matter. Just for having a little bag of pot. Plant matter!” he shouted. “Who the fuck do they think they are to outlaw a plant that has been growing on this planet for a lot longer than we humans have been walking around. And I'll bet that over half of those assholes in Congress still smoke pot. But since they were able to dodge the cops and not get arrested they can still hold office. How someone who used drugs when they were young can get elected to a public office and still not work to change this horrible situation is something I can't figure out. What's wrong with those guys?”

* * *

Weekday evenings at Rindy's place had a completely different vibe from the quiet, laid-back pace of the afternoons when not many people were home. But by the time dinner was over, the drone of multiple conversations had seeped out of the kitchen, into the dining room, and eventually seemed to fill the entire building. One night a few of us were hanging out in one of the guest rooms where Apache and Al were staying for a few days. Tiger had joined us for dinner that night and brought copies of a little card she was giving to her clients at the free legal clinic where she volunteered.

“Are you saying that you tell people to read this at their job interview?” a seemingly shocked Deirdre was saying. “I don't think I could do that.”

“No,” answered Tiger, “we just want them to get the gist of it so they will have some confidence to challenge any positive findings that may come back.”

“Read it again,” asked Stein.

“Sure,” said Tiger, and she read:

Yes, I am more than happy to take a drug test as a condition of employment. However, I have seen on television, heard on the radio, and read in the newspapers that these tests generate a false positive 10% to 40% of the time, and I am assured that you will not take offense if I ask you to list the prescription drugs, the nonprescription drugs, common foods, liquids, and spices liable to generate a false positive. I am also assured that in event of a false positive you will use a backup test to either confirm or disprove that false positive.

“I can't imagine saying that on a job interview,” I said.

“I can't imagine you doing that either,” laughed Tiger. “The point is to let people know the facts about drug testing. It is definitely not an exact science. And as an employee, or even as a potential employee, there are still a few rights you that you have left.”

“Not for long if that Bush guy gets reelected,” said Al. “The way things are going, it looks to me like the beginnings of another police state. The trouble with you Americans,” he went on, “is that you declare war on everything that scares you, and let's face it, you are a very terrified nation, indeed. That's why these substances are banned. Not because they are dangerous to the individual, but because they scare the power brokers by causing their version of reality to

come into question. McKenna called them 'catalysts of intellectual dissent.' And that is why prohibition remains the law of your land. The politicians are afraid of the dissent that would follow their widespread use."

"Until recently," Apache said, "the power elite have had control of most of the information that people were able to share. But things are changing. The Internet is changing everything, in fact, and the power elite can no longer keep the information about our sacred medicines locked away in some deep vault. No longer are we dependent on someone else telling us what the world is all about. Now that we are relearning how to use these precious substances, we can experience for ourselves what this mystery is all about, for as dear Terence once said, 'These are *experiences*, and as such they are the primary data for being.' "

"These are delicate days, Will," came AI's soft voice. "We humans have begun to extend our nervous systems with machines, but without our sacred medicines to help us maintain control, our machines will gain control over us. Only our psychedelic medicines are powerful enough to keep us from becoming so intertwined with machines, and the hive-mind they encourage, that humans may come to resemble the Borg. We can't afford to let that happen, Will. And it is the psychedelic community that understands this best and provides our species with its best hope for continuing survival. That's why it is so important to not only find the others, but to remain deeply connected with them as well."

"And that, my dear friends, is why I'm leaving you all tomorrow," announced Ralua.

In fact, that was why Apache and AI had come for a visit. It was time for Ralua to leave on her annual

journey through Europe. It was part of what she called her great work, which consisted of leading women's groups in medicine circles, as she called them. This annual pilgrimage was originally begun by Ralua's mentor and teacher, Apache. Over time, Ralua had taken up the mantle, freeing Apache to expand her work on the West Coast.

That night before Ralua left, the last thing Fig and I did was to spend a few minutes alone with her so we could thank her for bringing us together. To be honest, I now realize that I had never actually been in love before. Now, it seemed like whenever Fig and I were together it was as if we were on MDMA. And we had Ralua to thank for it. Our goodbye was somewhat bittersweet, of course, because Fig and I had come to cherish the time we spent hearing about Ralua's adventures both on and off the planet. Had I not known her since we were children, I never would have believed that anyone could become so transformed in a single short lifetime. But there was no question about the fact that Ralua had discovered some brilliant new way of living as a fully human being. I can still remember her radiance as we parted at the top of the creaky old stairway and headed to our rooms.

"Be sure to use a condom, Will," she smiled. "I don't want Fig to be pregnant when I see you two in November."

Once we were in Fig's room, I said, "I'm sure going to miss seeing Ralua's hat on the rack when I come back each Friday. That's the first thing I always look for when I come in the door."

"Aw, you don't look for my hat first?" she teased.

"I look for yours too," I said rather lamely, "but since hers is always on the top of the hat rack it's the easiest one to see."

"I know," came Fig's quiet reply. "I was just teasing. But I know what you mean."

Just inside the front door there was a tall coat rack that was used as a crude semaphore to let everyone know when you were home. We each had our own definitive hat, even me, not that I ever wore it outside. In fact, Ralua was about the only one who actually used her hat as a hat. The rest of us just left our hats on the bench next to the coat rack and put them on our assigned peg only when we were in the house. Ralua's spot was at the very top of the pole, as everyone agreed it should be.

"Did she ever tell you the story about that old hat?" I asked.

"Yeah," Fig said, as a little smile forced its way out. "She said that her mom got it for her and embroidered the words 'Scout Girl' on it for her, but I can't remember why she did that, though."

"I don't remember the whole story either," I admitted. "But I think it was to make up for not letting her join the Girl Scouts. Her parents thought little kids running around in uniforms smacked of Fascism."

"Good for them!" exclaimed Fig. "There's already too much regimentation for little kids. The last thing they need is to be marching around in uniforms and swearing allegiance to god and country before they even know what they're saying. But, in a way, I guess that old hat now is a uniform of sorts for Ralua," Fig went on. "I have to remember to ask her again why she still wears it all the time. But I do have to admit

that it makes my heart sing to come home from work and see that faded old green beret sitting up there on top of our coat rack.”

“Maybe I can find another way to make your heart sing tonight,” I whispered to Fig, as I turned out the light and slipped next to her under the cool August sheets.

Normally I fall into a dark mood for a few days after saying goodbye to a friend who I won't see for a while. But there was no room for that after Ralua left. We had only two weeks until we leave for Burning Man, and getting ready for that adventure completely occupied everyone's time. Even thoughts of my former and future life in Dallas seldom had a chance to form. All I could think about was that before long I would be able to claim the coveted title of *burner*!

Rindy's Place

Chapter 11

Burning Man

Before I set foot in Black Rock City for the first time, my expectations were way off the chart. I had already read several books about Burning Man and had watched dozens of videos about it as well. So I had a very clear idea of what it would look like, at least in a general sort of way. I knew that this so-called desert was actually a playa, or dry lake bed, and that the overall shape of the temporary city remains essentially the same from year to year.

Basically, Black Rock City, which is what they call the encampment, is laid out in a series of concentric circles. This year there were ten circular streets beyond the inner Esplanade, each given the name of a planet in our solar system. So if you knew the order of planetary orbits around the Sun, you already knew the names of the streets as they radiated out from the center.

The town isn't laid out in a complete circle, however. Looking at the city from above, as if it were a clock, it is essentially vacant from the 10 o'clock point to the 2 o'clock point. At the exact center of this mile and a half diameter circle is a huge, neon-lighted stick man. And it sits atop a platform that pushes the top of his head almost 80 feet up. And on Saturday night, the entire town of over 35,000 people gathers around The Man and watches him burn.

As much as I would like to talk about the Burning Man Art Festival itself right now, it really wouldn't serve much of a point. Basically, there just isn't any good way to explain the transformation of consciousness that can sometimes take place there. In a way, talking about Burning Man reminds me of the

Burning Man

times I've been in other countries and heard people talk about coming to America. I have always thought that when people, particularly in the Third World, dream of coming to America, what they are actually dreaming about is the state of mind that is possible here. They fantasize that this is the place where, if they work hard enough, all of their material dreams will come true. And for some families they do come true. For example, close to one-third of all California businesses are owned by immigrants.

To me, Burning Man is also a state of mind, but I didn't figure that out until my first step on the playa. And unless you take the plunge and go there yourself, there simply is no way to understand that when people say that they are burners, what they are referring to is actually their state of consciousness. And the strange thing is that this magical transformation doesn't come about because of the excitement of a week-long party with few holds barred. No, the real magic is in what happens during the tens of thousands of chance meetings and little conversations that take place during the long, hot, and often dusty afternoon hours when most people are staying close to their camp sites.

* * *

September 3, 2004 — 3:30 and Pluto, Back Rock City, NV

...the place to seek wisdom is where life is hard.
Timothy Ferris

“Man, am I ever glad you insisted that I bring a bike,” I said to Fig, who was riding alongside me. “But this deep dust on the ground makes it almost impossible to pedal.” We were heading back to our tent after picking up some ice at Center Camp. I was having trouble balancing two heavy bags on my handlebars while at the same time trying to steer clear of the deep ruts in the playa.

“At least the wind isn't as bad today. Those whiteouts really wear me out,” Fig said. “But we'll forget all about the bad weather a month from now. By then it'll be a badge of honor to have lived through another burn.”

“Now that the wind isn't howling all the time, I can hear what you mean about the sound level,” I went on. “I think I've heard more techno this week than in all the rest of my life put together.” That was another thing I hadn't been prepared for, the almost constant, loud din. It seemed as if there was music of all kinds coming from every direction, frequently punctuated with the blasts of flame throwers.

Fig's reply surprised me. “Don't you just love it! Normally I'd hate an environment with so much continuous sound, but it's so enveloping that after a while it recedes from the foreground of consciousness . . . actually it's kind of like being back in the womb with those strange new exciting sounds going on all around you.”

“I'll have to think about that a little more. Maybe when I'm lying awake with the ground shaking under me all night tonight I'll have time to think about how much I enjoy all this music,” I said as sarcastically as I could.

“Well have fun thinking,” Fig laughed, “because while you're lying awake thinking, I'm going to be right in the middle of the world's greatest party. That's why I want to get back to camp and get a little sleep right now. Let's hope we don't get trapped in one of the clan's great debates. I come here mainly to party, but Tiger, Joe, Al, and the rest of 'em seem to return each year mainly to get back together with their long-time friends. You'd be amazed at who all comes here. I've heard it said that on a per-capita basis Black Rock City has more billionaires than any city on Earth,” said Fig.

“So they make deals here?” I asked.

“No. At least I don't think so. It's more like a long philosophical discussion where they exchange ideas about what's going on in the world and how they plan on interacting with it in the year ahead.”

“Sounds like a big bullshit session to me,” I said.

“Exactly!” said Fig. “So let's hope we don't get trapped in one of those interminable conversations right now. Those constant dust storms the first three days prevented the usual amount of strolling around the city that sparks these little, chance mini-salons. But I have to admit that even though I prefer to sleep and party, I have heard some really amazing discussions here on the playa.”

“Here they are! And not a moment too soon,” shouted Old Joe as he saw us walking our bikes up to the little oasis we had built. Joe and Tiger were sharing a big motor home with Shadow and Deirdre. Nosed into the back of the motor home at a ninety-degree angle was Al and Apache's little camper. A huge tarp served as a patio roof and stretched from the top of the motor home out past the end of Al's camper and

was supported on the open ends by several fake palm trees. Our tents filled in the other two sides.

Within hours of our arrival, the tarp was up, the ground under it was covered with several large pieces of carpet, and furniture magically appeared, as did a sound system and a bar. Joe was sitting at the bar as we parked our bikes and carried the ice his way.

“What took you so long, kid?” he asked as he looked my way.

Before I could think of something clever to say, Fig looked at him sternly and said, “Listen old man. If you're not going to be nice to us we'll take our ice to a more friendly camp.”

Leaping off the bar stool and falling to his knees, Joe implored, “Oh fair maid. Forgive me. Never again shall I accuse you of being, of being,” and then he stood up and said in quite a loud voice, “of bein' so fuckin' slow that my goddamn Guinness is gettin' warm.” And with that the two of them embraced in a gale of laughter and fell onto the big couch next to the bar.

“How've the first few days here on the playa been for you so far, kid?” Joe asked Fig. If you haven't noticed by now, Joe tends to call almost everybody kid. I asked him about that one day, and he told me that once he got involved with the dance community, where people were often changing their names every other weekend, he simply gave up trying to remember anyone's name. So he just calls us all 'kid'.

I sat down on the couch next to Fig just as she was saying, “It's been OK so far. Not great. Not bad. Like always, there are a few things that I miss from last year, and it seems to be getting too big. But then

there's all the new art, the new friends, and, well, you know. It's the playa. It's where we recharge. It doesn't have to be good or bad. It just has to happen each year so we know that all is not yet lost."

"Cheer up, kid," Joe said. "From where I started, things today couldn't be goin' better. We're definitely on schedule and under budget."

Before I had a chance to ask Joe what he meant by that, Fig said, "Have you ever noticed how much time you spend thinking about being somewhere else, rather than thinking about how great the place is where you are? Even when I'm in a tropical paradise, I sometimes find myself thinking about how great it would be to be somewhere else. But that never happens to me here on the playa. I wouldn't want to spend a month here, but when I am here there is never any place on Earth that I'd rather be at that very moment in time."

"I know what you mean, kid," laughed Joe. "Here I am. I hate camping, don't particularly enjoy the desert, and have a tough time in the heat. Yet here I am and lovin' every god-damned dusty minute of it."

Just then Tiger, Apache, and Al came out of the motor home in an obviously good mood. It was hard to miss the fact that they were all slightly stoned. Drug use on the playa was another surprise for me; if you want to smoke cannabis at Burning Man you have to be very discreet. It is really hard for me to understand why the government is so paranoid about people smoking that little plant that they even send some of their drug enforcement goons out to this campground in the middle of a desert. I guess they want to remind us that we are still living in a police state, even here in Black Rock City. So whenever one of our little group

disappeared into the motor home, I knew that it was probably to have a couple of tokes.

“Hey, Tiger, how'ya doin',” Joe hollered across the way.

“I'm doing just fine, my love,” she smiled. “How about you?”

“As soon as my Guinness gets cold I'll be as good as it's possible for a human to be,” he laughed.

“You could also be as loved as a human can be if you'll step into the motor home and prepare some more medicine for us,” Tiger smiled back.

Joe leaned over to Fig and me and whispered, “If I were to list one survival skill as more useful than all of the others combined, I'd have to say it is the ability to roll a good joint. It'll get you laid and fed anywhere on the planet.” And with a wink and a twinkle in his eye he was off, skipping and bouncing his way to the motor home.

Apache came over and sat on the couch next to Fig, while Al dusted off one of the bar stools before sitting on it. Just then an art car stopped on the road in front of our camp. Music was blasting from it at a decibel level that wouldn't be permitted in a normal neighborhood. This particular art car was a two-story affair that looked as if a couple of VW buses had been precariously stacked on top of one another and then plastered over in fake fur. Actually, it looked more like an art car project by a bunch of stoners who ran out of energy, or time, or money before they finished building it. But that didn't seem to faze the dozens of people hanging onto it and obviously having the time of their lives.

The reason they stopped became apparent when a skinny, half-naked kid with short sandy hair slid down a fire station pole in the back of the vehicle that provided the main exit for people on the top deck. I have no idea how they got up there in the first place.

Stein's strong voice rang out. "The love that you need will never be found at home. Run away. Turn away. Run away. Turn away. Run away."

"Run away. Turn away. Run away. Turn away. Run away," he sang over and over along with the loud music, which featured a lead singer with the most haunting falsetto voice I have ever heard.

"Run away. Turn away. Run away. Turn away. Run away," Stein sang on as if his life depended on it. Then, without a backward glance, he strolled over to a pile of cushions next to the couch and collapsed without another word.

"Hey, that's a great song, Stein. Who sings it? I've never heard it before," I said.

Stein propped his head up on one arm, gave me one of his most charming smiles, and said, "It's our anthem man, at least one of them."

"Anthem?"

"That song is about me and every other gay person who has had to leave home just so they can be themselves. It's 'Small Town Boy' by Bronski Beat. I could listen to it a hundred times in a row and not get tired of hearing it. But if you like that song you should hear them sing 'No More War.' It'll bring tears to your eyes, man."

"Thanks. I'll give it a listen," I said. "I guess there's still a lot of American culture I'm not aware of."

"It's a world culture, Will," said Fig. "The gay and lesbian communities have a better defined global culture than almost any other group I know of. Hopefully, one day the Tribe will be as unified and strong as the lesbian and gay communities already are."

"That's one of the things that I like about Burning Man," Apache interjected. "Within Black Rock City there is an extremely wide variety of cultures, cultures of almost every stripe, yet most people here think of themselves primarily as burners, and not separate from everyone else, no matter how strange they might look or act."

"Yeah, look at that guy, for example," said Al. "Like most people here, he looks like he belongs in that bar scene in Star Wars. Yet he's probably a neighborhood dentist in the default world."

I sat up to look at where Al was pointing and saw a naked man on stilts. He was painted all over in shiny gold and was shouting through a megaphone that the end was near. A week ago a sight like that would have blown me away, but by now it didn't even seem all that creative when compared to many of the other ways people were expressing themselves here.

"That's no dentist," laughed Tiger. "That's Earl the Swede. He comes to Caitlin's salon every once in a while. If I remember right, he said he's a Ph. D. in astrophysics, teaches at one of the more prestigious universities in the L.A. area."

"Hey, Earl!" she shouted. "Why don't you come over and join us?"

I guess I should also get this off of my chest. One of the things that made me want to come to Burning

Man in the first place were the stories I had heard about there being a lot of naked people walking around. And be honest now, who doesn't like to look at naked people? Well, a week at Burning Man should cure you of that fantasy. I hope I'm wrong about this, but it seemed to me that most of the naked people there were men, fat, ugly men. Sure, there were a few beautiful naked women, but my memory of nudity at Burning Man is one of seeing guys like Earl the Swede, who looked a lot like what I'll probably look like in another 20 years or so, and believe me, it isn't a pretty picture.

As Earl was sliding his stilts under the motor home, the door opened and out came Shadow. "Hello, naked guy," Shadow said, as he smiled and held out his hand. "Are you joining us?" As much as I had been trying to ingratiate myself with Shadow, he still hadn't treated me as courteously as he was now treating a guy, who to him, was just a naked stranger. I guess I still have a lot to learn about Burning Man etiquette.

"What's in the cooler?" Tiger asked, as she got up to help Deirdre, who was now sliding a big ice chest out of the motor home. It was one of those oversized ones, complete with wheels.

"Guess!" she replied. "It's one of my favorite drugs." Before anyone had a chance to venture a guess she yelled, "Popsicles for everyone!"

After handing out popsicles to our little group, she got on her bike after first tying the cooler behind it like a wagon, and headed toward the Esplanade where she was meeting several other popsicle girls. Apparently this is the only time they see one another each year. The Annual Friday Afternoon Popsicle Give-Away, they call it. In Black Rock City, some people give away jewelry, some give alcohol, or a free shampoo, or any

of a thousand other things. Deirdre's thing was to give away popsicles.

At first I found it hard to get used to having a stranger come up and give me something. I would fumble around trying to find something to give back. But it doesn't work that way, I discovered. Burning Man isn't about bartering, even though that is how it felt to me at first. They call it a gifting community. And that is part of what alters your consciousness, I think. Because once you are in the flow, you begin looking around for people you can give something to. Fig and I made a bunch of little beaded bracelets to give away. They weren't anything fancy. In fact, they looked like they were made by preschoolers, just a few beads strung on a colored pipe cleaner.

But Fig turned them into something special by reciting a poem, or singing a song, to the person she was putting a bracelet on. And you wouldn't believe the responses she got, hugs, kisses, weeping, 'I love you's'. The simple act of approaching someone sitting by themselves on a wooden bench in Center Camp, and then giving them a bracelet, a song, and a smile might wind up being the most memorable event of the entire week for that person. You just never know.

"So where are the good parties tonight?" the golden naked guy asked. "I got here only this morning and haven't gotten my bearings yet."

"This whole city is going to be a good party tonight," laughed Shadow, "but give us some news from the outside world. What's been going on since last Sunday? How'd the convention go?"

"That's the main story right now. Close to two thousand people were arrested for demonstrating against four more years of rule by the Bush Crime

Family,” said Earl the Swede, whose nakedness no longer seemed out of place to me, although I was beginning to worry about whether his gold paint would rub off on the bar stool, where he was sitting next to Al.

“I heard there were some large demonstrations,” said Al.

“Actually, New York City looked more like a gulag than a city in the so-called free world. It was an armed camp, complete with police, the military, and even undercover FBI operatives trying to stir up trouble,” said Earl.

“When you look at the new and improved fortress-America you are seeing the kind of future that the power elite are trying to create,” said Shadow. “Last week I read that this was going to be the biggest security lock-down in history. Am I the only one who sees the irony of the so-called leaders of the free world being forced to meet under prison-like conditions?”

“Democracy is finished in this country,” lamented Earl. “Those damn Republicans are either imbeciles, bigots, or the biggest bunch of lying crooks this country has ever produced. They pass a platform one day, and the next day they make speeches to disavow it. All they want is the raw power necessary to continue looting our treasury.”

“Not every Republican is a crook,” said Apache, who was always trying her best to keep the group focused on the more positive aspects of life.

“The ones who aren't crooks are even more dangerous,” interjected Stein. He startled me, because I thought that he had fallen asleep.

"I'll tell you who the most dangerous ones are," Stein went on. "They're the religious fundamentalists who want to bring on some kind of an Armageddon so that their imaginary Christ guy can return. What a bunch of kooks. Those damn fascist Christians have taken over the entire U.S. Government, and now they have the rest of the world in their sights."

"I don't think they'll get away with it. These past four years have been a disaster, and almost everyone knows it. I think we're coming to the end of the Bush regime," I said, instantly realizing that it was probably a rather naive thing to say.

"You still have a lot to learn, young William," said Shadow. "You're kidding yourself if you think there is even a remote possibility that Kerry is going to be elected. The fix is in, my friends. Haven't you noticed that he belongs to the same secret society as Bush? And these bastards don't even care that it's obvious that they are stealing the elections. It wouldn't even surprise me if that asshole Kerry conceded before all the votes were in. I know for a fact that he's already been ordered to let Bush win. No, we're stuck with another four years of the Clinton/Bush gang pulling the strings."

"So you're saying things are going to get worse before they get better?" Apache asked.

"A LOT worse, I'm afraid," Shadow replied.

"Well, I guess we can put up with almost anything for another four years," said Al.

"Who said it's only going to be four years," Shadow shot back, more wild-eyed than usual.

“You don't think they are going to try to impose martial law or hold onto power some other way, do you?” an alarmed Tiger asked.

“They don't need to.” said Shadow. But you are mistaken if you think that they are the people you see on the news every night. No, the real powers-that-be know how to maintain control without being so blatant about it. And they always know what kind of figurehead the Great American Public needs to have in order to remain docile and unwitting servants of their own subjugation.”

“You know, Shadow,” said Al, “sometimes I can't follow you at all, particularly when you get on one of your anti-American rants.”

“I may be on a rant, but it isn't an anti-American rant. It's the god-damned Bush people who are anti-American.

“No, what I'm saying is that there is a small group of people in the world, probably no more than ten thousand of them, whose influence is the main driving force of almost all of the economic activity on this planet. And like it or not, economic activity of one kind or another dominates all our lives,” said Shadow.

“I'm not saying that they all agree or get together and plan things. It's not a conspiracy, nothing like that. But they generally vacation at the same spas. They go to the same select circle of schools. And their personal fortunes are for the most part intertwined. For sure, there is a relatively small super class of people who effectively control what we loosely call the System. You can even figure out for yourself who they are. This isn't any big secret. But these are the people who ultimately call the shots when the really big decisions are to be made. Do you want to run for President?

Then you'd better have a lot of these dudes on your side, because without them you simply aren't going to move up the political ladder. And you'd better believe that no matter how great you think your newest politician is, she or he is still a politician, and they are ultimately beholden to the the real powers-that-be."

"I hate to continue sounding so naive," I said, "but it seems to me that if we have to go through four more years of Bush that there is no way another Republican is going to get elected. And so the pendulum will begin to swing back to the left. Isn't that how it always goes? The pendulum swings back and forth between two extreme points of view."

"It certainly looks that way, doesn't it?" Shadow replied. "But there is something about the laws of pendulum motion that you seem to be forgetting."

"What's that?"

"Friction. Eventually all pendulums stop swinging due to friction." said Shadow. "But once they stop, you can restart them . . . and on a completely different plane if you like."

Old Joe, who had just returned to the couch after successfully completing his little mission, added, "Tell the kid about the friction, Shadow."

Shadow smiled and said, "Ah the friction, the friction to stop this mad pendulum. Why, WE are the friction. You, me, the Q-teams. The entire Tribe as Ralua likes to think of it. We are the friction in the works, and if we do our jobs right this sucker is going to come to a screeching halt long before Old Joe takes his last breath."

"I damn sure hope so," Joe said as he rested his head on the back of the couch and closed his eyes.

“So you don't think that even in four more years the Democrats are going to be able to nominate someone who can both win and turn things around?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” laughed Shadow. “The Democrats don't exist. When is the last time you saw them do anything at all to push back against the current shredding of the Constitution? They are simply another faction of the Republican Party. There aren't two balls between the lot of 'em. They'll nominate whomever they're told to nominate. And you can bet that she or he will be the best con man since Roosevelt, because things are going to be that dire by the time the next actor fills the White House role.”

“What do you mean by con man?” I asked Shadow.

“Just what it sounds like. A confidence man, someone who has the oratory ability to persuade the great mass of people to keep going to their shit jobs every day. Someone who can restore the people's confidence in the consumer society, the so-called American Way of Life, that's the kind of person they'll push on us after Bush.”

“Well, that certainly cheers me up,” I said.

A voice from the road called out, “What cheers you up, Sweetie? I'll give you a kiss if you tell me what it is.”

“Caitlin!” squealed Fig. “Come on over and join us.”

“I can stay only a minute,” she said as she pulled one of the bar stools over toward Stein's pile of cushions. “I've got to go get ready for tonight. So, Will, what is it that cheers you up so?”

“Actually, I was being facetious,” I said. “After listening to Shadow spread his doom and gloom around, I doubt if anything can cheer me up.”

“Oh, fuck politics, you guys,” Caitlin said. “Hey. It's Burning Man. We're on the playa for two more nights, and you guys are talking about politics. Get a life, or get stoned, or get drunk, or get laid, but don't waste this great moment talking about politics.”

“The lady has an excellent point,” said Shadow. “So, Caitlin, what have been the high points for you so far this week? No pun intended.”

“I think it was the Palenque Norte talk that Michael Brownstein gave yesterday,” she said.

“I'm sorry I missed that,” said Shadow. “Have you read his prose-poem, *World on Fire*? It should be mandatory reading in every ecology class, civics class, and history class in the land. I think it ranks right up there with *Howl* as one of America's premier works of art.”

“I heard that Lorenzo wasn't here this year,” said Tiger. “So how did Palenque Norte happen?”

“Raphael and Sobey took it on themselves to keep the series alive. I think Lorenzo helped a little with a little Web work, but it was Sobey and Raphael who did most of the heavy lifting,” said Caitlin.

“I'm sure glad they kept it alive. “Last year I heard Allyson and Alex Grey at one of those lectures,” said Shadow. “Their daughter was with them, and their presentation was titled, 'Art, Love, Family, and Psychedelics.' I hope that someone got a recording of it, because it's a talk that every psychedelic family should hear about the necessity of being truthful with your children about these sacred medicines.”

“Yes,” said Apache. “I was there too and was very impressed with some of the practical advice they gave. All three of them have their own Web sites, by the way, and you can spend days on them. I’m sure that you can find some of their talks there.”

“My favorites from last year’s Palenque Norte were Bruce Damer and Erik Davis,” came Stein’s somewhat sleepy voice.

“Yeah, I hope they keep those lectures going,” said Al. “Even though this is billed as the world’s greatest party, it’s also where some of the world’s most interesting minds have a chance to interact in person. I think a little intellectual stimulation is just the right spice to add yet one more distinct flavor to the playa.”

“Speaking of spice,” said Earl, “anyone here going to do anything interesting tonight?”

“Nope,” said Joe, “playa dust is my drug of choice out here. There’s already too much stuff goin’ on. This is the last god-damned place I’d waste a good drug on.”

I was about to say that Fig and I were thinking about taking some MDMA tonight when Apache very authoritatively said, “We mean what we say about our medicines being sacred to us, Earl. Once you’ve outgrown the recreational stage and moved on to the spiritual plane you become very particular about set and setting. And Burning Man just isn’t the right setting for most of us. I’m not saying that that was the case a few years ago, but we’ve moved on to less dusty settings for our pleasure and recreation.”

Only after Earl the Swede had climbed back up on his stilts and continued on his way was I told that even

though he was a semiregular at Caitlin's salon, no one actually knew very much about him. And until more was known about him it was safest to be polite but think of him as a possible narc. It is a real shame that people have to treat one another with such great suspicion, but that is the climate of distrust that the government has managed to provoke in the Tribe.

Just then we heard a woman scream, and a big commotion broke out in the camp next to us. We all rushed over to see what the emergency was and discovered a middle-aged man on the ground. He wasn't moving, and none of his friends seemed to be able to get their act together enough to help him.

"What happened?" Tiger asked. "Should we call the rangers and send for a doctor?"

The semihysterical young woman who was bending over him said, "No. You don't have to call a doctor. He is a doctor."

Although the situation still seemed grave, her remark sent us all into fits of laughter. And before anyone could point out the folly of her remark, the prone figure began to stir and soon he was sitting up and drinking some water.

"It looks to me like you're dehydrated," Shadow said. "How much water have you been drinking today?"

"I don't know," the still confused doctor said. "I think I've been drinking enough."

"How's your piss?" asked Shadow. "Is it clear? That's how you know you've been drinking enough water out here. You've got to piss clear. If it's still yellow, you're on your way to a medical emergency."

“So that's where the name of that Burning Man newspaper comes from!” I exclaimed, no longer concerned with the stranger's condition. However, everyone ignored me and remained focused on the now ambulatory doctor.

“I'm sorry to ruin your party,” he said. “I guess I'm getting a little too old for these things.”

“Bullshit! You're never too old for Burning Man. You've just got to use some better drugs,” said Al, smiling as he pointed to a big tub full of empty beer and wine bottles. “I can't handle alcohol in this heat, myself. It seems to accelerate dehydration and gives me a massive headache.”

“Something other than alcohol sounds good to me,” said one of the doctor's friends. “Got anything you want to share?”

“Sure,” said Apache, “I've got some herbs and supplements that will get you back on the playa before the sun goes down. I'll be right back.”

“Don't get your hopes up,” smiled Al. “Apache's medicines aren't going to get you high. But they will make you feel better.” And with that our little clan began to find our way back to the comfort and security of our own little nest.

“I don't mean to be so critical,” began Stein, “but their camp is a pile of shit, moop everywhere.”

Moop was a new acronym to me when I arrived in Black Rock City. One of the prime directives of the Burning Man community is to Leave No Trace. And long-time burners take that admonition very seriously. Most of them will stop in the middle of a bike ride across the playa just to pick up a piece of trash that got away from someone. That's where the acronym

moop comes from. It stands for Matter Out Of Place or something like that. Basically, moop is trash, and a real burner will always pick it up.

“I'll tell you what kind of drug I'd give those guys. I'd give them something that would give 'em an orgasm every time they picked up some moop,” said Stein.

“Can you imagine how great a drug like that would be,” he went on, the idea now gaining some momentum in his mind. “With a drug like that, all the governments of the world would have to do is give a bottle of it to everyone, and the whole planet would be cleaned up in a day or two.”

“Now that's the first good idea for a new designer drug that I've heard in a long time,” said Shadow. “We should ask Sasha if he can come up with something like that.”

“It also might solve the problem of population explosion,” laughed Tiger. “Not many of us would want to get it on after picking up the trash and having a dozen orgasms on our walk home from work.”

From there, the conversation descended into a tangle of ideas about how to best distribute this new drug to the power elite in order to get them to clean up some of the messes they have been making lately. Needless to say, the silliness of our conversation, coupled with another round of cannabis, helped us shake the mood of doom and gloom Shadow's little rant had brought into our camp.

The sun was just beginning to drop down below the mountains to the West, and for a brief moment there seemed to be a lull in the noise and activities of the city. As the sun dipped out of sight, a cheer went

up all around us. Cheers also rang out every sunrise, but not as many voices joined in the morning greeting.

A couple of us had climbed up on top of the motor home to watch the sun set behind the mountain. Shadow stretched out his arms and said, "Look at this. In a week's time a city of thirty-five thousand people grew out of this desert, and in another week or so there will be no trace that we were here. What an amazing example of human ingenuity."

"This is the future," Apache said. "Not this big city that looks like Mad Max built it while on a bad acid trip, but a massive group of humans who are cooperating, not competing. A place where anarchy is the only acceptable political philosophy."

"Anarchy?" I said. "That doesn't sound like a very good future to me."

"If you think of anarchy as a state of lawlessness, Mad Max style, I agree," said Apache. "But there is another aspect of anarchy that most people forget about. To me, anarchy means that there is no government that makes the rules. Instead, each person takes responsibility for their own liberty without intruding on the space of anyone else."

"Until the first time I came to Burning Man," Shadow said, "I didn't think a large group of people could get along without an iron-handed government keeping a lid on things. But this place proved me wrong."

"Yeah," said Stein, "this is an anarchist's heaven. I love it!"

"I have to admit," I said, "this is the most counter-cultural event I've ever been to, or even known about for that matter."

“There is nothing counter about this culture,” Fig said very firmly. “This is what mainstream human culture is really like. It's fun, creative, and playful, because we're playful, fun-loving creatures. And this is our true element. Even here, under some of the worst possible physical conditions on the planet, we've built a little temporary paradise. It isn't a physical paradise, but it sure is a mental one.”

“No,” Fig continued, “it's the rest of the world whose culture is counter to human nature. As Apache just said, this is the future. A future where there is enough freedom to create the lives we all dream about.”

“Long live anarchy!” shouted Stein.

“Or better yet,” Shadow said, “Down with anarchy!” Which seemed to perfectly sum up the jumble of thoughts that raced through my mind as we climbed down from the top of the motor home and began to get ready for a long night of fun.

Chapter 12

Long Beach Interlude

The two months following our return from Burning Man are now no more than a distant memory to me. I wouldn't say that after the burn I fell into a state of depression exactly, lethargic is more like how I felt. If anything, I was just emotionally exhausted and was beginning to get seriously worried about my upcoming trial. I spent every weekend in L.A with Fig, except in October when she took off work for two weeks and we hung around my place in San Francisco. If you haven't already figured this out, Fig and I have fallen in love. Some day I plan on writing more about our first few months together, but right now I have to hurry and finish telling you the story of what happened to our little clan and where I am now.

As much as Fig and I tried to avoid the corporate-controlled media, there was no way to ignore news about the upcoming U.S. Presidential contest between Bush and Kerry. But after hearing Shadow's opinion about the election being rigged, Fig and I lost interest in the news and instead tried to focus on how we might be able to build a future together. But we never got very far in making any firm plans, primarily due to my uncertain status with the law. We both agreed that Dallas was not where we wanted to end our days, but that remained a problem for me. I still wasn't quite ready to give up the nice apartment, car, and vacations that my job with SiAmerica provided. And so living and working in Dallas wasn't as much of a show-stopper for me as it was for Fig. At least so I thought at the time.

On top of that, a new problem was also beginning to raise its head. Even though I didn't want to give up

my interesting and well-paying job, I also didn't want to leave the West Coast. By then I had become so accustomed to being around the Tribe, as Ralua calls these free spirits, that I was beginning to think about joining them. One of the possibilities that Fig and some of her friends were considering was a move to South America, where several little eco-communities were being established by other clans in Al and Apache's extended family.

But for the first two months after leaving the playa, for the most part, my mind went into neutral, and I simply lived in the moment, trying to not allow myself to even think about what the future might actually hold. However, I have to admit that hardly an hour went by without me worrying about my upcoming trial for drug smuggling. But before I knew it, the election came and went. Bush was still there, and everyone instantly knew that life in this land was about to get significantly worse.

Before we left Burning Man, plans were solidified for what had become an annual gathering of the clans in British Columbia. Coincidentally, it was scheduled take place on the weekend before my court date. So the idea was for me to ride up with Old Joe to help him drive. Then we would hook up with Fig and the rest of the clan on the little island where the gathering was to take place. Afterwards, Apache and Al would drive me back to San Francisco and accompany me on my appointment with the law.

But first, Fig and I agreed to help Joe pack for his big move. He and Tiger were leaving Southern California and were moving to somewhere in the Pacific Northwest, where they would begin a new life together. But, after two quiet months, the tempo of my life was about to pick up once again.

* * *

November 6, 2004 — Old Joe's Place (Saturday Afternoon)

*Every man has his own destiny:
the only imperative is to follow it,
to accept it, no matter where it leads him.*

Henry Miller

“So, what's the deal with Old Joe?” I asked, as Fig drove us down the 710. Fig had just picked me up at LAX, and we were on our way to Long Beach to help Joe get ready for his move.

“Why are he and Tiger moving? Where are they moving? And what's going on with everybody? Why all the mystery?” I wanted to know.

About two weeks ago something shifted in the mood around Rindy's place. Whenever I asked a question, it was like the first few times I was with them and asked a question about Shadow. Very early on I learned that anything and everything about Shadow was not to be discussed. So I learned to live with that, but now it seemed like every topic was being treated this way.

At first I attributed it to the fact that their lease was up at the end of November, and they were all going to have to find another place to live. But much to my surprise, nobody would even talk to me about that, even Fig. All they would say was that they were weren't making any plans until they heard what Apache and Al had to say at the gathering of the clans.

So I decided to keep my inquiries about Tiger and Joe as innocuous as possible.

“All that you or anyone else has ever told me about him is that he's this old ex-Navy guy with a big truck that comes in handy for hauling speakers out to the desert for full moon parties. There's got to be more to his story than that.”

“Oh, there is,” said Fig. “There's a whole lot more. But for the most part he doesn't like to talk about it.”

“Something shady?” I asked.

“No. I wouldn't call it shady,” answered Fig. “But it's something that seems to really bother him. So we never bring it up, other than the times when it comes up on its own. And that's usually when he's doing MDMA with us. Apparently he had some kind of a nervous breakdown while he was in Viet Nam. I think he was involved in those river boats, or swift boats, or whatever they call them.”

“What do you mean, he had a nervous breakdown?” I asked.

“You'll have plenty of time alone with him over the next few days. So ask him yourself if you feel like it. But he asked us to keep his stories to ourselves, and so I'm afraid I can't help you there,” answered Fig. “But be sure to choose the right time, because if you're not careful you can send him into one of his deep funks that can take weeks to come out of. To be honest, I think he's still suffering from a little Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or something like that.”

“OK, but how did he get connected with you guys?” I asked.

“Oh, that's simple. One month a few years back, Stein borrowed some huge speakers for us to use at one of our desert raves, but they were so big no one had a large enough truck to carry them. So Stein quite literally flagged Joe down on the street one day and asked if he would rent his big flat bed truck to us for the weekend. And Joe said, 'Sure, as long as you hire me to do the driving too.' And the rest is history, as they say.”

“And that's how he met Tiger?” I asked.

“Yep,” Fig answered. “Tiger had been connected with the rave scene out here almost from the beginning. Without her free legal clinic, half of our friends would have been locked up by now, and for nothing more serious than having a little grass in their possession. But don't get me started on that again.”

Just as I was about to change the subject, a huge truck cut us off and forced Fig onto the narrow shoulder of the bridge we were going over. She barley kept control of the car before merging back into traffic. “Ahhh! That was close,” I shuddered, as an adrenalin rush brought all of my senses into focus.

Our brush with death didn't seem to faze Fig. I guess California freeway drivers are used to these close calls. Without missing a beat, she blithely went on, “Have you ever thought about what people would think of you if you suddenly died? For example, what books are next to your bed right now? Were you actually reading them, or had they been lying there for a year, always waiting for you to get to them next week? What will they find on your computer? People will have to go through your stuff, you know. What messages or clues have you left about your interior life? Because, whether you like it or not, what they would find is exactly who you are.”

“Now that's a pleasant thought,” I said, as I mentally made a note to delete all of the porn I had recently downloaded from the Internet. Even though I already knew that Fig also enjoyed the occasional X-rated movie, I still carried that lingering guilt about enjoying sex that had been drummed into me in Catholic school.

“Actually, dying can be a pleasant thought if you are living an impeccable life,” she replied.

“So are you saying that right now you are ready, right now, right at this very moment, to die,” I shouted, suddenly angry at her for no apparent reason.

“Oooo. It looks like I've hit a hot button there,” she teased.

“No. It's not a hot button, but sometimes I feel so inadequate, so uncool, or unaware, or something when I'm around you. I guess I still don't understand where you're coming from sometimes.”

“I'm sorry, Will. And you're right. Sometimes I can be a real bitch, but I don't mean to be that way. And, no, I'm not ready to die. In fact, I'd be kind of embarrassed about some of the things you would find on my computer right now. Not that there is anything wild or strange. It's more like I'd be embarrassed by all of the frivolous emails and IMs I've saved. I know that you think I'm some kind of super-girl, but the truth is I like gossip and goofy stuff just as much as the next person does.”

I had no idea what to say next. While it was obvious to everyone that Fig was nowhere close to being frivolous or shallow, I could tell that this wasn't the right time to state the obvious. So I decided that

the best thing I could do was to simply wait for her to start talking again. Fortunately, I didn't have long to wait.

“Did I tell you about the first time I visited Old Joe?” she asked.

“No. Tell me about it.”

“I drove Tiger down. It was her first time too. She and Joe had already kind of hooked up at one of our gatherings in the desert, but she wasn't ready to spend a weekend alone with him just yet. So the two of us drove down for dinner one Saturday. It was a riot. We parked down the street and as we began walking to his apartment we couldn't help but notice that the entire neighborhood smelled like everyone had their windows open and were smoking pot. So we mention this to Joe when he opens the door, and he turns around and runs back into the living room without even saying hello and begins shouting something we couldn't understand.”

“And Tiger still wound up falling in love with him?” I asked rather incredulously.

“Oh, yeah. What had happened is that when Joe was lighting the gas log in his fireplace, a bag of pot had fallen out of his pocket and was burning away without him noticing. Poor Joe couldn't even save enough for a single joint out of that bag.”

“He must live in a pretty cool neighborhood to get away with something like that,” I said.

“He does, but you wouldn't know it from Joe. He's really paranoid about his use of cannabis. And he even has a doctor's recommendation. You'll see. He's constantly going around 'sanitizing,' that's what he calls it, sanitizing his apartment just in case his

landlord stops by for a visit. Apparently, his lease explicitly states that he is not a medical marijuana patient, and he's been freaked out about being forced to move."

"I don't think that's legal. Has Tiger read his lease?" I asked.

"It's not. But that doesn't keep Joe from worrying all the time. In fact, I was there with Tiger one time when his landlord actually did stop by unannounced. And it was obvious that the reason he liked to stop by was that he really enjoys Joe's company. That guy would never force him to leave, but we couldn't convince Joe of it. And the really funny thing to me was that when his landlord was leaving he said, 'I'm gonna go home and have a drink.' The same guy who was trying to discriminate against medical marijuana patients was on his way home to alter his consciousness with alcohol. Yet he thinks grass is bad somehow. Go figure."

We parked a short way down the block from Joe's place, and as we walked up to his front door I braced myself for some kind of a wacky greeting by this obviously eccentric character. What I got, though, was a simple bow and a "Welcome to my humble abode, kids. Tiger's already here. She rode down with me last night."

"Hi, guys," came Tiger's voice from a big room off the entrance hall. "Welcome to Joe's treasure trove, the detritus of a life."

Tiger was sitting on the floor, wrapping some old beer mugs in newspaper and packing them in a box. "We're about to significantly lighten Joe's load. If it won't fit in the shipping container that's going on his

truck, then he no longer needs it," she said, seemingly with great authority.

"What Tiger means," said Joe, "is that I am in the process of becoming wealthy beyond measure. I don't know who said it, but it once was said that real riches are measured by one's degree of freedom. And without any unnecessary stuff to hold me down, I'll be about as free as it is possible for me to be."

"I thought we were going to be helping you put some of your things in storage," I said.

"Nope. What's the point?" answered Joe. "I'm never going to have the time to pick up any of this stuff and go through it again. And without my stories that go along with all of this junk, well, that's all it is, just junk."

"But with one of Joe's wonderful stories attached to it, this so-called junk takes on a magical hue and may enchant you forever," added Tiger. "So today we are going to detach Joe from his enchanted junk and help him lighten his load by listening to his stories as he plants them in us and leaves their physical forms behind."

"Have you two already started smoking?" smiled Fig. "You're already stoned, aren't you?"

"This is a sacred ceremony, Fig," said Tiger very solemnly "And so, yes, we began it with a sacred rite. Would you like to join us?"

And with that, Fig and I pulled up cushions on either side of Tiger. Joe sat opposite her, and he began to perform what I now think of as a sacred ritual.

The loving care with which he cleaned a few buds of cannabis, and then very expertly rolled two thick

joints, was, without a doubt, the work of a sacred artist. Watching Joe, as he intently focused on his rite, transported me back to my childhood days when I was a Catholic altar boy and watched the priests treat their unleavened bread with the same degree of respect. Only this time the sacrament was real.

As he finished, Joe looked up and grinned, and said, "I know almost exactly what I'm doing."

Tiger gave Joe a sweet smile and said, "OK. So here's the plan you guys. At random you pick up something from somewhere in the apartment and ask Joe to tell you its story. Then, after he tells his little and hopefully short story, we will either recycle the object, put it in a trash bag, or add it to the Goodwill pile, because the storage container is almost full already. So no matter what it is, this will be the end of it in Joe's life, and unless one of you brings these stories back to life some time in the future, they will never again enter a human mind, because Joe and I are moving on."

"I'm not sure I'm up for such a heavy trip," I immediately said, as the three of them began to laugh.

"There's nothin' heavy about it, kid," said Joe. "My sentimental days are behind me. All I'm doin' now is sayin' goodbye to a lot of great, and some not-so-great, memories. But it helps to have you guys here because that way it kinda validates my life, at least that's what Tiger's been tellin' me."

"So let's get going," Fig said as she picked up a photo album that was on the floor next to Tiger, opening it at random.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Joe went to the door and we could hear him giving someone a hard time about disturbing people with such a hateful message. I couldn't imagine who would be going door to door with a hateful message.

"Those fuckin' cult kids. Their parents should be arrested for child abuse," said Old Joe when he returned and sat on a cushion by the fireplace across from Tiger.

"Cult kids?" I asked.

"Yeah, the Mormons. If that isn't a cult I don't know what is. 'Elder' one called himself. Like I really want to waste my time listenin' to two kids who've never smoked pot try to explain metaphysical concepts about god to me. Fuckin' organized religions. The scourge of the planet."

"Now Joe, be nice," Tiger pleaded. "We both know a lot of people who are committed to their religions, and they're really nice people, too."

"Yeah, but imagine how great they'd be if they weren't carrying all that fuckin' guilt and sin and other shit around with 'em. Most of 'em are tortured souls, the way I see it."

"Well, you don't always see things the best way," chided Tiger. "For example, it looks like you were about to throw some of your old pictures into the fire, and that's a no-no."

"Huh?" said Joe.

"There are kids in this neighborhood. You can't just burn those photos. It'll send toxic chemicals all over the place."

“If you two are going to get into one of your arguments, then I'm out of here,” said Fig, as she put down the photo album, got up and walked into the next room.

“Me too,” I chimed in, even though they didn't seem to be arguing to me. But I decided to defer to Fig, and thankfully the conversation shifted ever so slightly.

“Ah, we aren't arguin', kid,” said Joe. “What's really goin' on is that Tiger has to keep remindin' me about how tightly screwed down I can be at times. And sometimes I let these door-to-door do-gooders get to me. All I really want is to be left alone.”

Slipping into a more pensive mood, Joe went on, “You know, for a long time Igor's ears really bothered me when they'd flop back half way, and he wouldn't shake his head to fix em.”

“Who's Igor?” I asked.

“He was my dog, my long-time, perfect companion. But he died a couple a years ago, poor guy,” said Joe.

“But for years it bothered me when Igor's ears would stay flopped back. Finally, I realized that it didn't bother him at all. It only bothered me, and if it ever did bother him, he'd just shake 'em out and be done with it. And so I got ta thinkin' about how that's the way it is with a lot of religious people, and liberals too. They're all great people, but sometimes maybe they shouldn't be tryin' to fix things that aren't really botherin' the people they think they're helpin'.”

“Hey, look at this. You can't get rid of this, Joe,” came Fig's voice as she walked in from the next room holding what looked like an accounting ledger book.

"It's an old journal that you must have started when you were in the Navy."

"Oh I remember that!" exclaimed Tiger. "I read parts of it a year or so ago. I think it should be published under the title, 'Diary of a Working Class Intellectual' ".

"What do you mean by 'working class'?" I asked. "Isn't almost everyone in the working class?"

"I'll tell you how I define a workin' class person," said Old Joe, suddenly more animated than usual. "It's someone who's had to work for every damn thing they've got, including their education. Nothin' big was given to 'em. They didn't have any trust funds, or inheritances, or daddies to pay for their college education. Nobody bought 'em a car or gave 'em a house. A workin' class person is someone who scraped and scratched for everything they've got, whether they're rich workin' class, poor workin' class, or the disappearin' middle workin' class. And I'll tell you somethin' else about bein' workin' class. It can really suck at times, even for the rich ones."

"Well, I'm glad we got that out," said Tiger. "That's what we're here for, to help Joe let off all his steam."

"It looks like he let off a little steam here in his journal, too," chimed in Fig. "Listen to this William Burroughs quote you copied here, Joe:

Young people pose the only effective challenge to established authority. Established authority is well aware of the challenge. Established authority is moving against young people everywhere. It is now virtually a crime to be young. This is all-out war in which the

opposition will use the dirtiest tactics at their disposal. The Western establishments offer nothing. They have nothing to declare but their bad intentions. If it comes to that, any number can play. The student rebellion is now a worldwide movement. Never before in recorded history has established authority been so basically challenged on a worldwide scale.

“What's the date of that entry, Fig?” asked Joe.

“You wrote it here on February 11th, 1973,” answered Fig. “But it doesn't mention when Burroughs first said it.”

“That was right around the time the American war in Viet Nam was comin' to an end,” mused Joe. “I was livin' back in Texas then, workin' on a shrimp boat outta Kemah.”

Fig went on, “Well, you must have been in a pretty good frame of mind back then, because the next day here is what you wrote:

I periodically have these flashes that bring me such peace. They last only an instant and are of some distant memory of a farm on a cool summer day. The screen door on the back porch springs closed. I know the sound well. There is such a promise of tranquility in the air. And then it is gone just as fast as it comes on, leaving only a strange melancholy in my soul. How then to create that moment in more permanent form in my future? Could it be the future itself that is calling on me to create it? Does déjà vu work both ways?

“Now that's an interesting question, don't you think?” I asked.

“Did you mean like foreshadowing in the movies?” asked Fig.

“Hell if I know,” answered Old Joe. “I was usually so stoned when I wrote in my journal that not much thought went into it. I just wrote down the words that came to me at the time.”

“To me,” interjected Tiger, “it seems like it would be something more than a simple foreshadowing. Whenever I’ve experienced *déjà vu* it has been more of a physical sensation, almost as if I was actually reliving something. To experience it in the reverse direction, at least to me, implies that I would actually feel like I’m there in the future, have a tangible experience of it.”

“Speaking of *déjà vu*,” Fig said, as she held up a photograph that had been stuck between two pages in the journal, “look at this.”

The picture was of a group of a dozen or more people gathered around a bonfire. I recognized most of them, and there was Old Joe right in the middle. He appeared to be about to toss a small wooden sign into the fire, and it was obvious that this was a happy occasion of some kind, for everyone in the photo had a huge smile on their face.

“What does the sign say?” I asked. “I can’t quite make it out.”

“SNAFU on one side and TAFUBAR on the other,” said Joe.

“Situation normal, all fucked up,” said Fig. “But I can’t remember what TAFUBAR means.”

“Things are fucked up beyond all recognition,” Joe laughed. “Sorta the direction the world is heading in right now, if you ask me.”

“What were you doing in the picture, burning it?” I asked.

“Yep,” said Joe. “It’s a long story, but that was my first so-called Tribal ceremony . . . breaking a link to my sordid past.”

“Sort of like your Fuck You I Quit dance,” teased Fig.

“Let’s not go there again. OK?” I pleaded, as I picked up another photo that had dropped from the journal and landed on the floor between Fig and me. “What’s this?” I asked and passed it to Joe.

“Ahhh. I’d forgotten about that,” he mused. “That was the plaque that hung on the wall in my parents’ living room. My dad was a craftsman and spent a lot of time creating that little piece of folk art. Read what it says,” he instructed as he handed the picture back to me.

I had to strain my eyes to make out the text in the faded old black and white photo as I read, “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. Thoreau.”

“Yeah, the old man loved Thoreau and Emerson, and all of those old transcendentalists. He never made it to college himself, but he was one of the best educated men I’ve known, read all the time. But you know, it’s my father’s eyes that I remember the most about him. He’d always look you right in the eye, but not with any kind of a challenge or hardness. No, he

always looked straight into your heart, while his eyes seemed to say, 'I know. Life is hard for me too, but we'll be OK.' "

With that, a little lull seemed to come over us. No one said anything for what seemed like a long time. I was thinking about my father, and Old Joe was probably thinking about his. I was about to ask Fig and Tiger what they were thinking when Joe decided to take it upon himself to liven things up a bit.

"OK, this is gettin' too maudlin for me. I thought we're supposed' to be havin' a good time," Joe said as he got up and headed toward the kitchen.

In a short time he was back with a bottle of red wine and four glasses. As he began to open the bottle he casually commented, "I thought I'd invite a few hundred of my closest friends to join us."

"Huh?" I grunted.

Tiger winked at Fig and said, "I can't believe it has taken this long for Will to hear Joe's parade-of-life story."

"I didn't realize that I told it that often," apologized Joe.

"You don't," said Fig. "That's the point. We all really like hearing it because it's so different each time you tell it."

"That's because it's not just one story. It's the story of all of us," said Tiger. "It's about how incredibly interconnected we all are and yet how easy it is to not think about it. So, Joe, I've heard the story from you over breakfast, at dinner, and having an ice cream cone on the pier, but never over a bottle of wine." Then Tiger smiled and said, "So really, Joe. Sincerely. I

would really, sincerely love to hear the story once again about our wonderful parade of life.”

Without acknowledging any of the previous conversation, Joe began his story as if he had just stepped upon a stage and had a tight spotlight focused upon him. “This bottle of wine,” he began, “was given to me several years ago by my dear friend Higinio, and he is most certainly with us here in spirit tonight. Now if you look at the label, you see that it originally came from France. I don't know if it came by land, by sea, or by air, but no matter how it was transported, no doubt a large number of people were at least marginally involved. Someone had to move this bottle from its vintner to a freight yard somewhere in France. And from there, how many times do you imagine it was in some way handled by a human? They too are all here with us tonight. And what about the hundreds of people, thousands most likely, who are all integral to the smooth operating of the companies that so efficiently moved this bottle from its cellar to our table. I invite all of them to join us as well. Also, there are other people who most certainly deserve a place at our table. And not just the wine makers, but what of the people who designed and printed the label, not to mention the builders of the press on which that label was printed. Someone, somewhere had to make this glass bottle, and my guess is that quite a crowd was also involved in that process. So make room for them as well. Do you see where I'm heading. If we sat here for a while and added up all of the people who, even in the slightest way, were somehow involved in us being able to enjoy this lovely beverage right now, I'll bet it would number in the tens of thousands.”

Holding up his glass after first pouring each of us one of our own, Joe said, “And so I propose a toast to

all of the brave and dedicated souls who have in any way participated in our enjoyment here tonight. I salute you all.”

After taking a small swallow, I said, “Wow, Joe, you're a real poet.”

“He can be when he wants to,” smiled Tiger, “but there are other times when he's just a plain old curmudgeon.”

“You think it's difficult living with me sometimes,” joked Old Joe, “but you should try being me. It's a real bitch being me. Of course, I can't think of anyone I'd rather be. In fact, I'd be a really hard person to live with if I were someone else.”

“Joe,” I said, “I don't know if it's the wine or the cannabis talking, but I can't understand a thing you're saying.”

“Neither can he,” laughed Tiger. “Let's get back to business here. We've still got some more stuff to go through. Here, let's see what's in this little box, looks like some old love letters you've saved, Joe. Maybe there's something here I need to know.”

“You can read 'em all if you want to,” said Joe. “Those are from so long ago that I probably can't even remember who some of 'em were from. But those were the good old days, huh? There were few things that brought more of a flutter to your heart than to open the mailbox and find a letter from your girlfriend.”

“Now we use email,” said Fig.

“Not even close to the same thing,” groused Joe, then he brightened up and added, “But I'll tell you when I will agree that an email love letter is as good

as a snail mail one. It's when I get a perfumed email, that's when. I can still remember smelling a letter over and over after I read it. Ah, young love. The only thing that beats it is old love." And with that he crawled over and gave Tiger a big kiss.

"Joe," I can't put your journal down," Fig said. "You really saved some interesting thoughts, like this one about Alice in Wonderland. This is priceless, Joe. You wrote: 'My role model is Alice, that chick in Wonderland. I love the line where Carroll writes, *She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it).*' "

"I've never read that book," I said. "I thought it was a kid's book."

"It is a kid's book," answered Tiger, "only they don't tell the kids what the story is really about. Apparently, Carroll had been using Amanita muscaria mushrooms and then wrote about his trips using the allegory of Alice. The drug references in that book are impossible to miss if you have any clue about these things at all."

"Gosh, I'd forgotten about that book," said Fig. "I'm going to have to reread it now."

"I'm glad to hear that you're still readin', kid," said Joe. "It's a cryin' shame that people don't read as much any more. That was all I did when I was young."

"Yeah," teased Fig, "when you were young they still hadn't even invented electricity so books were all you had."

"Well, maybe I did do a few other things besides read," Joe agreed, "but I sure did read a lot back then. Still do!"

“You know,” a thoughtful Tiger added, “the reason I think we are becoming a nation of illiterates is that we force our kids to read Dickens in high school. Trying to read that shit is enough to make anyone quit reading. They ought to let each kid pick her or his favorite genre, like science fiction, or romance, or sex, it doesn’t matter. Just be sure they get to read some of the best work in whatever area interests them the most. It’s really not very complicated, getting people to read.”

“Now that’d probably work,” laughed Old Joe. “Get ‘em reading sex books, and they won’t be able to wait to get to school each day.”

Tiger laughed back and said, “Maybe I’m mad, like some people may say, but as my dear, sainted mother would say, there’s a method to my madness.”

The next few hours were spent sorting through the bits and pieces that composed the physical record of Old Joe's life. For example, he had little home-made signs all over the place that had quotations artistically painted on them, things like, “Obedience, the bane of genius, virtue, freedom, and truth,” and under it he had scrawled, “Can’t remember where I heard that, but it sounds about right to me.”

As the afternoon began to fade into evening, Joe let out a sigh and said, “You know, the main way I know I’m getting old is to realize how much history I seemed to have lived through. This is wearing me out. Let’s centerline and call it a day.” And with that, we all headed to the kitchen.

Watching Old Joe cook was as enjoyable as watching him roll a joint, which is what he did before any of his other kitchen chores. “There are only two rules to cooking a meal that your guests will

remember for years,” Joe told us. “Rule number one is to get 'em stoned before you do anything else. Rule two is to saute a little garlic in some olive oil, whether or not you're gonna use it later. Once you're stoned and smellin' a little fryin' garlic, well, your brain is permanently set to like anything that follows.”

Tiger smiled on as she watched Joe's ballet-like moves around the kitchen. And it truly was a joy to behold as he chopped, peeled, sliced, and diced his way around the spacious U-shaped room. Fig, Tiger, and I passed the joint between us, as we stood around the large butcher block table in the center of the room. “You know,” Tiger said, “life presents many opportunities for joy, but for Joe, few exceed the pleasure of cooking while stoned.”

“And don't forget my other drug of choice, my little Chickadee,” crooned Joe, as he pulled the cork out of a bottle of two-buck-Chuck, the latest rage in local table wine. “Here, have some of California's finest.”

“Well, some of its least expensive anyway,” I lamely added.

“Nothing wrong with that,” said Joe, “In fact, that's one of my finer points, for I am the most sensible of men: I have cultivated a taste for inexpensive whiskey and cheap wine.”

“We'd all better start learning how to enjoy the simple things in life,” said Tiger. “The way things are going, I'm beginning to think that we may be getting very close to the end of an economic system that only gets by on cycles of never-ending growth. A system like that has to come to a crashing end eventually. And it looks to me like that time is near.”

“I know what you mean,” said Joe, as he added a package of spaghetti to a pot of boiling water. “I can still remember that sickening feeling you have when you’re in a small, open boat on a stormy sea. A big wave goes by, and the little boat drops out from under you. For a second, you feel like the boat is going to move on while you’re still in the air and leave you to drown in the sea. That’s kinda how I feel now when I watch the news. In fact, I’ve gotten to where the only news show I can handle any more is Jon Stewart’s.”

“Speaking of the news,” Tiger said, “I saw a really funny story last night. It was a near tragedy, actually. But I thought it was pretty funny the way they presented it. There was this window washer whose equipment broke half way up a skyscraper. He had to hang on by a single rope for half an hour with the wind beating him against the side of this building, until two guys smashed out a window and pulled him to safety.

“But it was really classic when the TV crew interviewed this guy, he spoke only Spanish. But you could tell that he was really wound tightly, because he talked about a hundred miles an hour for what seemed like a long time. The funny part, though, was their translation. It wasn’t even a tenth as long as it sounded in Spanish, and the translator’s interpretation was simply, ‘MY GOD! That was a very unpleasant experience.’ Right. I’ll bet that’s what he said. I could tell by the look in the poor guy’s eyes that he was really pissed. My guess is that a correct translation would be more like, ‘You fucking gringos send me to the top of this building with no training, bad equipment, and then think you’ve done something good for me by saving my life after first trying to kill me. Fuck you! Fuck all of you Norte Americanos!’ At least, that’s what I would have said.”

Only later did I come to realize how often Tiger rescued us from getting too far afield in a negative direction, even when it was one that she may have nudged us in herself. Usually, she did it by telling a funny story and getting us all to laugh. Once the laughter began, it usually led to other funny stories, and before long we were all in a jolly mood once again. Not everyone can do this as well as Tiger does, but when she is around I never worry about becoming overly focused on the doom and gloom aspects of life. I guess her work as a lawyer gives her all the doom and gloom she can handle, and so she needs to always stay close to the lightness of being that laughter brings and which suits us all so much better than does being serious so much of the time.

And thus we ended our day, laughing and enjoying Joe's cooking, sharing a bottle of wine and passing a few joints around, doing the things that make life worthwhile. We humans have been spending nights like this ever since we first learned to tame fire. Sitting around a kitchen table, or a fireplace in a small cabin, or on a beach in the South Pacific, it doesn't matter where you are, what matters most is who you are with. Being with Fig and Joe and Tiger, I found, was as perfect a way to spend an evening as there is.

* * *

**November 7, 2004 — A walk around town
(Sunday afternoon)**

*The aim of life is to live,
and to live means to be aware,
joyously, drunkenly, serenely, divinely aware.*

Henry Miller

We were up early on Sunday morning, because Tiger had to be in her office by noon, and she was riding back to L.A. with Fig. The plan was for me to stay with Old Joe and help him finish moving out of his apartment. Then the two of us were going to drive to San Francisco and spend a night at my apartment before heading on to British Columbia, where this mysterious gathering of the clans, or whatever they called it, was going to take place.

Fig and Tiger left in such a big rush that they didn't even take time to eat, causing Old Joe to sigh and say, "Look at 'em, driving off to work. A can of soda for breakfast, a cell phone stuck to the side of their heads. At least today they don't have the stress of rush hour traffic. But just go stand on any corner during rush hour tomorrow morning and you'll see the same thing. Hundreds of people on their way to a job they hate but that they stay at so they can pay the bills and support a family that is beginning to act ungrateful anyway. But they've been able to afford a new car every few years, and their miserable lives are definitely made easier by the sea of home appliances they keep buying like the consuming robots they've become."

"And the sad part, Joe," I added, "is that it isn't just happening here in America. A lot of the rest of the people in this world are in the same boat. Hell, I'm in that boat. It's just that we Americans have more appliances and other toys. Of course, we don't have time to play with them because all we do is work."

"Now you're gettin' there kid," said Joe. "It's about time I heard you talkin' like you're startin' to figure things out. Now let's get somethin' to eat and

get outta here. We've got a long hike to take yet today."

When Joe said that, my first vision was one of walking on the rolling bluffs along the Pacific Coast just South of here. But Old Joe's idea of a hike was nothing of the kind. What it was, actually, was a very long and roundabout walk from his apartment to the downtown Gold's Gym and back. Had he just told me that we were going to take one last, sentimental walk around town, I wouldn't have begun to think that he was starting to lose it mentally, because we sure followed a circuitous route. After the first fifteen minutes or so of gradually winding our way down to the path that ran along the beach, I began to get a little frustrated with the caution Joe was showing each time we came to an intersection.

"Hey, Joe," I called as I got ready to bolt across the street in the middle of a block. "No one's coming right now. So let's cross here because we'll have to wait for the light at the intersection."

"Nope," said Joe. "Bad idea," as he nonchalantly continued heading toward the corner.

I came back to the sidewalk, and catching up with him, I asked, "Why are you being so cautious about something like jaywalking? Nobody gets tickets for that any more."

"How do you know?" asked Joe. "Is that a statistic you follow closely?"

"Well, no. But you don't ever hear about people getting tickets for that, at least I don't."

"Ya see, kid, in a police state you've gotta be very meticulous about following the rules in public. Ya know

how most people get busted for simple possession? Through stupidity, that's how."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Most of 'em involve routine traffic stops, busted tail lights, that kind of stuff. The rest are either the result of having friends, ex-friends I should say, roll over on you, or by doing something stupid, like jaywalking. See that cop up there?"

"No," I answered. "Where?"

"He's up ahead, sitting in a cruiser on the opposite side of the street."

"How do you know there's anyone in there?"

"I watched it pull up, and no one's gotten out yet. You always gotta pay attention to little things like this, kid. Maybe he don't like the way we look. Maybe he's just short of his quota of tickets today. Hell, it could be any one of a hundred reasons that he's lookin' to bust someone. But if we just follow all of their stupid little rules when we're out in public, then we should be all right. At least for now they can't just stop us and ask for our papers."

"Are you always this paranoid?" I asked.

"There's a big difference between being paranoid and being smart," Joe answered, as he picked up the pace, walking very business-like by the time we passed the patrol car parked across the street.

"Let's take a little detour for a minute, kid. It isn't much outta the way, and I may never get to walk down there again."

"This whole walk has been a detour," I teased. "Where to now?"

“The pier. I've always loved walkin' down the fishin' pier on Sundays,” said Joe. “If you want to see an interestin' cross-section of the workin' poor, the women and men who keep your world turnin' for ya, then all you have to do is to take a walk down the Long Beach pier on a Sunday afternoon.”

Shortly, we reached the foot of the pier and began strolling out to its far end, where it was dominated by a large cement building whose only operating business today was a bait shop. As we walked along, I saw old people, young people, families, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Caucasians all spread out along the pier, most with several fishing poles leaning on the railing. The young men, whose wealthy counterparts were no doubt hanging out in the yuppie fern bars down the way, have their baseball caps on backwards and are laughing and playing with their young children, while their wives look on, smiling.

A tiny black toddler, wearing only a diaper, arms thrown up in the air and squealing with delight, is wobbling ahead at top speed while his four-year-old sister rushes after him, arms out as if to catch him should he begin to fall on the concrete pier. The little boy's father, sitting in a low chair near his fishing poles, wears a big smile that stretches from ear to ear as he watches the little boy run toward his mother who is fishing just across from them.

An Asian man of indeterminate age awkwardly jerks up on his pole and we barely dodge the fish on the end of his line as it plops down next to us. The fish comes off the hook, and the man chases after it. Lots of kids of all ages down here. It's the only place they can afford to go and relax outdoors on the weekend.

“Look at all these great people,” Joe was saying, as his nonstop monologue continued. “These people are the backbone of America, and they are totally shit upon by the System. They've been intentionally dumbed down by the public non-education system, and then, through the propaganda put out by the corporate-controlled media, they've been brainwashed into buying into a cultural divide that pits them against the so-called Liberals who favor a woman's right to control her own body over the dictates of some old white men who do their dirty work under the guise of organized religion.”

“Tiger told me to warn you when you start getting too carried away again, Joe,” I said. “I think this may be one of those times.”

“Yeah, I know,” replied Joe, “but it just makes me so damn mad to see how the System actually owns these people. Without their slave wages they'd starve. They're no better off than serfs under the feudal system that we thought we escaped from a couple of hundred years ago. The brand of capitalism we've been buying is nothing more than a morph from feudalism. We've replaced absentee landlords with absentee shareholders. Slavery is still the rule of the day, kid, yet these poor, hard-working people have no idea of what a vice-like grip they're in. They are the working poor, and for them freedom is just another hollow word right now. So they bring their families to the pier on weekends and enjoy life as best they can.”

Just then a young couple stopped us and asked for directions. They were well-dressed, obviously tourists, and as soon as they began to speak it was clear that English was not their first language. Joe took a lot of time helping them. He even drew a little map for them. As they were leaving, they couldn't seem to

thank him enough for his help, and I could see that it made Joe feel really good too.

“That was nice of you to spend so much time with them,” I said.

“Do it all the time,” Joe answered. “That way I always expect people to help me when I'm in a strange land and can't find my way around. And since I always expect help, I always get it. Pay it forward, somebody said. Pay it forward. Works like a champ.”

Then a familiar little twinkle sparkled in his eyes, and he added, “The last time I was in Dublin I got this wild hair and sent myself an email giving directions to some pub I picked out at random. Only I made up the directions in such a way that at first they made some sense, but if you followed 'em you'd get hopelessly lost. Then I went and stood outside of Grogan's, my favorite pub, and puzzled over my fucked-up directions until someone would stop and ask if I needed help. It never took more than a minute or so for that to happen, and so I'd hand 'em my directions. Most of 'em would start laughin' after a few seconds and tell me what I already knew, my directions made no sense. And then, almost always they would say, 'Let's go into the pub, and I'll buy you a pint while we sort things out.' That was my best trip to Ireland ever . . . lived on Guinness and toasties for a week . . . never got past Grogan's.

“Funny, just last week I had a little flashback to a moment I had in that pub back then. It only lasted a second, but for that second I was back in Dublin,” mused Joe.

“You have flashbacks?” I asked.

“Everybody does,” he answered a little curtly. “Only most people call it déjà vu.”

I could tell by the sound of his voice that Joe was about to go off on yet another of his little rants. It didn't take much to set him off, just a stray thought now and then was enough to get him going. “Why do you think people are like that?” he asked.

“Like what?”

“Like they come up with a new name for déjà vu when it happens to a drug user because they want to stigmatize us. Déjà vu doesn't happen any more among the psychedelic community than it does with the straight people. But when we talk about it, the straight people have convinced us to use the word flashback instead. I guess they figure it sounds cheap or something that way. Who knows. It's just one more way they get us to forge our own chains,” Joe was saying as we turned the corner and at last had Gold's Gym in our sights.

“You know,” he went on, “the Golden Rule says 'love your neighbor as you love yourself.' But the reason that rule doesn't work on this planet is that so few people actually love themselves.”

“You're probably right,” I said, “but how do you do that? How do you fall in love with yourself?”

“Hmm, I hadn't thought about it that way. I've fallen in love a few times in my life, but I can't say as how I've ever felt that way about myself,” said Joe.

“No, wait a minute,” he continued. “Now that I think of it, there have been a few times when I've been deep in entheospace and had the experience that there was nothing but love, and that was what I was made of. So I guess it is possible to fall in love

with yourself, but all that really means is to remember who you are, who you truly are at the core of your being.”

“My god, Joe. I hate to be rude,” I said, “but you are really a deep thinker, aren't you. I never would have expected you to say some of the things you do.”

“What you're saying,” said Joe. “And don't get me wrong, I'm not taking offense, kid. But what you're saying is that because of how I look, how I live, and the fact that I never went to college, you automatically assumed that I don't have anything to add to the intellectual dialogue.”

“No. That's not what I meant,” I stammered.

“Sure it is, kid,” said Old Joe, “I don't mind. But it should be a lesson for ya, never let appearances fool you, there are millions of people like me, sitting alone in their apartments, writing in their journals, building Web sites, connecting with other minds around the planet. And while you will never know the names of any of them, these are the people who are actually seeding the noosphere. They're the ones with the new ideas. It isn't the big name celebrities you see on television who are the ones that are building the future. It's the quiet ones. The people who sit alone at home at night, thinking about things, wondering how to make their lives a little better each day. But I'm afraid that for every one of 'em like that, there are a hundred who mindlessly go through the day, never thinking beyond the next vacation or sporting event. Did I tell you about the guy who lived next door to me?” Joe asked.

“No, I don't think so,” I answered, without actually knowing whether I had heard this particular story

before, along with all the others I had heard in the past twenty-four hours.

“He was like that. Never did anything but watch sports on TV and go on a fishin' trip once a year. We'd talk a little when we'd be out working on our lawns or somethin', but we never became friends, didn't know much at all about one another, actually. Then a couple of months ago his wife left him, and it was obvious that he was really depressed. I guess it was becoming obvious to him that his life didn't have any meaning. He wasn't suicidal or anything like that, just kinda moping around all the time, not taking care of the little things, like edging his lawn and things like that. Then, one day about two weeks ago, there's a big commotion goin' on over there. So I go over to see what's up and hear that they just found this guy dead. After he hadn't shown up for work for the second day in a row and wasn't answering his phone, his boss came to check on him. The poor guy had been trying to hang something up on a ceiling rafter in his garage when the stool he was using must have slipped out from under him. His head must have hit first, because there was a huge pool of dried blood circling it like a red halo.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “Do you think it was suicide?”

“No, not a conscious one at least,” Joe answered. “Apparently it happened on Sunday, two weeks ago today, actually. I remember seeing him late that afternoon cutting his lawn, and the poor sap had a major scowl on his face. I wonder what he would have thought then if he'd known that his final hours on Earth would be spent cutting the grass?”

And then, somewhat pensively, Joe added, “Makes you think, doesn't it?”

“Boy it sure does,” I answered. “That was something I read in one of the books at Rindy's place, that it is important to be constantly aware of our own impending death, because for sure it is going to arrive one day. But you know, it's really not possible for me to think of every action I take as possibly the last thing I'll ever do in this life.”

“Give it a try, kid,” said Joe. “You might surprise yourself.”

“Well, I don't see how it's possible to think of mowing the lawn as having enough meaning that it could be worthy of the last thing I ever did,” I said.

“You still lookin' for meaning in this life, kid? Well, I'll tell you what. The only meaning you're gonna find is the meaning you create for yourself. Make your life meaningful to YOU, Will my boy. Then you'll have all the meaning you need.”

“That's a lot easier said than done, Joe,” I said.

“I don't see why,” he answered. “All you've gotta do is take it one day at a time. Don't just wait for the weekend to do something for yourself. Do something meaningful every day. You've gotta have one thing every single day to look forward to or else you're just gonna go nuts. You see, kid, there are dozens of little ways each day that the System interjects itself between you and reality. The true reality for us should be Paradise Now! Paradise right here on good ole planet Earth. You already know that the purpose of life is joy, not some phantom material dream that the System promises. But even when you are aware of what's really going on, the fucking System will still be able to capture some of your consciousness. Whether it's remembering when to move your car for the weekly street sweeping, or checking to see if your

social security payment made it into your bank account on time. There are a million ways every day for those fuckers to grab your mind. So you gotta be on constant guard against their never-ending insistence that you give your attention over to some System-related business. That's why I force myself to set aside a little time every day to spend envisioning who I really am, and what I plan to do with the time that's still left to me."

"So, what's your plan then, Joe?" I asked.

"I'm movin' to a small town up north and becomin' a 'character'."

"A character?"

"Yup. You know, the old guy in the town square who everyone thinks is a little wacky, but they love him anyway because he's always got a good story for 'em."

"Don't you think you'll eventually run out of stories?" I asked.

"If I do, I'll just move to another town," he joked as we walked into the gym to retrieve some things from Joe's locker and cancel his membership.

The next morning we left before dawn in order to make it North of L.A. before the morning traffic begins to slow to a crawl. By early afternoon we had made it to my apartment in San Francisco where we would be spending the next two nights before driving on to British Columbia. There we would be joining Fig, Deirdre, Stein, and Tiger who were flying up with Shadow in his private plane.

I can still remember the goofy grin on Old Joe's face when, within seconds of throwing our backpacks

on my living room floor, he was already busily engaged in rolling another joint.

“I have a hard and fast rule,” he smiled, “No cannabis on Mondays! The only problem is that I haven't figured out how to enforce it.” Obviously, Joe and Alice will get along famously in Wonderland one day.

Chapter 13

The Genesis Generation

Although Joe and I had planned on arriving at the campground on Friday night, we didn't allow for the fact that there were several water crossings involved in getting from the mainland to the remote island where the gathering of the clans was taking place. By the time we reached the final ferry terminal, we had missed the last boat and so had to share a motel room for the night.

We arrived at the campsite late Saturday morning. Everyone else from our little group had already pitched their tents and were off somewhere. As I looked around the little circle, I noticed that stuck to the top of most of the tents were hand written signs displaying the name of the person who would be living there. In addition to the residents of Rindy's place, I noticed Shadow's name on a tent that also had Deirdre's name on it. I found the tent that Fig and I would be sharing and discovered that she had already decorated the inside with scarves and beads, giving it a little of the Burning Man vibe. There was no sign on the tent next to us, but since I didn't see Ralua's name anywhere, I figured she hadn't arrived yet and would be camping next to Fig and me later on. At least that is what I assumed, but I also noticed that there was a tent that had only Cisco's name on it. Maybe she would be staying with him, I thought, noting that my former jealousy about a possible relationship between them had now dissipated.

On the drive up the coast, Joe told me a little more about this so-called gathering of the clans. To begin with, these clans were actually the secretive Q-

teams that I first heard about way back in Palenque, when this adventure first began.

From what I could piece together out of what Old Joe told me, Q and Shadow had organized a sizable group of top level IT people, and they were in the process of infiltrating computer systems all over the world. Here on this little island in the Pacific Northwest they were gathering under the guise of a music festival. Over the weekend I learned that this event was actually the combination of a geek convention and a summer vacation. All expenses were paid for by the various contract labor companies they worked for. Needless to say, these companies were controlled by Shadow and Q. There was hardly a major government office or Fortune 500 company that one of the thousand or so people gathered here hadn't worked for at one time or another under a temporary programming contract. Based on some of the random conversations that I listened in on over the weekend, in addition to a long talk that I had with Shadow about the Q-teams, my assumption was that they were working out protocols for circumventing any government attempts to end network neutrality. Later on I learned that they also had placed backdoors in a significant number of corporate and government email systems.

* * *

November 13, 2004 — An island in British Columbia (Saturday Afternoon)

Humanity has just entered what is probably the greatest transformation it has ever known . . . something is happening in the structure of human consciousness. It is another species of life that is just beginning.
Teilhard de Chardin

It didn't take Joe and me long to find the rest of our group after we dropped off our backpacks in the tents that Fig and Tiger had pitched for us. As we followed the little trail that led from the main camping area through a beautiful patch of old growth forest, the amplified voice in the distance began to become intelligible, and Old Joe said, "It sounds like Al is about to wind up his talk. Let's hurry up and listen."

Just then we stepped into what appeared to be a natural clearing in the woods. It was filled to the edges with people sitting in a circle on the grass. Al was standing in the center of this circle and speaking in a serious tone of voice.

After clearing his throat, Old Joe whispered, "What'da ya wanna' bet, that this clearing was intentionally created? Look at this! There's no way that these trees all agreed to not drop any seeds in the middle. Some of these guys may have been standing here for almost a thousand years now. Can you feel it, kid?" Joe asked. "Can you feel the eyes of those people who planted these trees watching us right now. They might have done that around the time of the end of the first millennium. Maybe they thought the world was coming to an end, like some people believed about the Y2K scare. But they're still here, watching, waiting for something big to happen. Who knows, maybe they aren't going to be disappointed after all."

While Old Joe was taken with the natural beauty of the scene, it was the people sitting in the circle who stood out to me. For an instant, I had the impression that I was looking through one of those old kaleidoscopes I had when I was a kid. The word rainbow didn't come to mind because of the patchwork nature of the assembly, but for sure almost every shade of every color in the rainbow was represented here.

Not wanting to disturb anyone, Joe and I sat down at the edge of the clearing just as Al was saying, "I think it is pretty obvious that there is no single, perfect way for us humans to live. For one thing, it depends upon the age in which we are living. And now, we humans have once again reached a bifurcation point, and we are about to begin an entirely new era of civilization. Sadly, as has happened before with earlier versions of us walking and talking apes, those of us who are not willing to adapt to a rapidly changing world will see their line come to an end."

After a brief pause, Al continued and said, "However, that isn't going to happen to you and me as long as we refuse to settle into the sad, robotic lives of conspicuous consumption that we see all around us. A life like that doesn't interest us, because we see that way of life to be degrading and dehumanizing. And so we have come together once again to make our plans for another year of personal growth and adventure. Obviously, we don't know how sudden and disruptive the great shift will be, but we do know that a change in civilization on a massive scale is needed if our descendants are to have any chance at all of living gentle lives.

"We are no longer willing to let the Chambers of Commerce dictate the parameters of what constitutes

an educated person. Our idea about education points in a different direction, and we have a very different objective," Al went on. "Forget getting a permanent job. Forget careers and the quest for financial stability. They are all false gods, sent to you by the Capitalist elite on Wall Street, whose primary goal is to trap you into a life of servitude. Granted, those who choose our way of living won't be driving the latest gas-guzzling automobile or living in a mansion, but it is possible for you to live a comfortable and joyful life largely outside of the System, without ever crossing any line that would cause you a problem.

"Worst-case scenarios for the decades ahead speak of today's societies undergoing a process of steady degeneration, which will most likely also be punctuated by natural and man-made disasters. If we are lucky, society won't completely disintegrate but will gradually transition into a new culture, one that is more at peace with the Earth and with our neighbors. And so I applaud each and every one of you who are here today for being self-aware enough to recognize that, as the old song says, the times they are a'changin'. And we should also keep in our thoughts the countless others who are not as fortunate as we are to be here today, but who are as deeply devoted to this mission as we are.

"In *Dune*, Duke Atreides said, 'Without change something sleeps inside us, and seldom awakens. The sleeper must awaken.' Well, my dear friends, change is in the air once again, and if we do our jobs right, this time we are going to wake up a lot of sleepers."

With that, a big roar went up from the crowd, as Al did his best to shout above the din, "I'll see you all again tonight. Don't forget, we begin promptly at ten."

As we made our way through the crowd to where we had seen Fig and Tiger sitting, Joe grouched, "These guys get a little too melodramatic for me, kid. How about you?"

Before I could think of an answer, I heard what I thought to be Stein's voice coming from behind me and saying, "Aren't you guys even going to say hello?"

Turning around, Joe and I were greeted with a sight right from the playa at Burning Man. Stein had a long, shimmery gold sash wrapped around his waist as a skirt, and then he looped the rest of it up his back, over his right shoulder, and back down again to where it was fastened to the skirt part on his left side. To me it looked like a big, out-of-place suspender holding up a golden diaper, but it was his hat that really got my attention. He was wearing a large coolie hat that had a pattern on it made out of EL wire much the same as the one on his beer mug. My guess was that it would be hard to miss in the dark once he turned it on.

"Meet my friend, Sebastian," he was saying, as Joe and I closed the gap between Stein and his friend.

I knew that Stein had recently begun a relationship with someone he met at one of the Hidden Theater productions, an actor I was told. But I certainly wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted me just now. Sebastian's already tall frame was topped by the most outrageous hat I have ever seen. The only way I can describe him is that he looked like my image of a Greek god who was playing the role of one of the Three Musketeers.

When Joe held out his hand to greet him, instead of reaching out and shaking hands, Sebastian took off his hat, and with a grand bow to Old Joe, said, "Sebastian Melmoth, at your service, sir."

Taking his clue from Sebastian, Old Joe took off his own hat, a greasy looking old gray baseball cap, and bowing back said, "Just plain Joe, and back at ya with the service, kid."

Just then, the rest of our merry little band reached us, and a round of hello-I-missed-you's were shared, as we explained why we arrived late. Before I could get back to my conversation with Stein and Sebastian, the authoritative voice of Shadow took charge and asked of no one in particular, "So, what do you all think about AI's assumption that we humans are at another bifurcation point?"

"What does that mean," I asked, "bifurcation point?"

"In simplest terms," Shadow said, "it means that our species is splitting into two parts, just as we have done several times before. But like the most recent changes in the way we classify humans, it doesn't always require a change in physiology. Of course, while AI may be using the term only metaphorically, it could be argued that when a large group of humans, like the world-wide dance community today, will no longer mate with others who don't share their Earth-friendly, nonfast food diets, then it could be argued that even from a scientific standpoint this is a new species of humans."

"You know," he went on, "It wasn't until I reread DeLanda that it became clear to me that, at a tipping point like the one we're approaching now, it takes a change in the degree of intensity of just a single parameter to cause a system to switch from one attractor to another. I think it is really possible, in the strictest scientific sense, to induce a bifurcation of our species in the very near future."

“So how do we do that?” asked Deirdre.

“By just keeping on doing what we’ve been doing all along,” answered Shadow. “Every time we gather together in a medicine circle, or to dance, we pump more positive energy into our collective unconscious. We already number in the many millions now, and soon our hundredth butterfly will join us. Of that I am sure. But right now I think we should all go and have something to eat.” With that we all headed back to camp.

“So tell me again what this parameter is that can be used to raise the intensity?” I asked Fig, as we lagged behind the rest of the group.

“The Tribe,” she answered without any hesitation. “the world-wide psychedelic community. We’re only now just coming to realize how many of us there are.”

When we caught up with the others, I overheard Sebastian saying to someone who was walking between him and Stein, “As Emerson once said, ‘We are not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors . . . advancing on Chaos and the Dark.’”

And I thought to myself, “Yes! Now there’s an image of the adventure lying before us that I can hold onto. Maybe there really is a way to have some fun on this journey.”

November 13, 2004 — An island in British Columbia (Saturday Night)

The generation you belong to is of key importance.
Timothy Leary

We gathered on a bowl-shaped hillside, a natural amphitheater of sorts. I tried to take a rough count of the people as they brought their blankets and pillows to sit on, but I gave up when I realized that our gathering numbered in the hundreds. A large fire in the center of the stage area up front had already burned down to a soft amber glow, with little flames leaping here and there from the fresh logs that were thrown on during the course of the evening.

Fig and I were sharing a blanket with Deirdre and Shadow, who was giving us the latest news about Ralua. "Since there's no connectivity out here, I sent Q to town to try and track her down."

"Q's here!" I exclaimed, looking forward to getting to know him a little better, now that I felt more like I was one of them, whatever that meant.

"Of course," said Shadow. "How else do you think we'd get all this news back to the Old World?"

"There are a lot of secure ways to do that without traveling," I boasted. "But it'll be fun to see him anyway."

"There's only one secure way to communicate. Period!" returned Shadow. "Even with the best tech on the planet, and believe me, we've got it, but even as highly sophisticated as we are, there are others who will eventually be able to crack our codes. So for some messages, ones that might affect someone's freedom, we pass them only face to face, and in secure spaces."

"You know, Shadow," I said, finally gaining a little more self-confidence when I was around him, "you tell me that you aren't breaking any laws, and that you have no plans to disrupt anything, but why all the secrecy then?"

“You still haven't figured it out yet, have you?” began Shadow. “It should behoove us all to take the words of the Empire's leaders at face value. They have declared what they call a War on Drugs. Of course, that's a lie on its face, because they aren't putting drugs into prison cages, they're putting people in them. This is no war on drugs, William, this is a war on consciousness, as Richard Glen Boire says. It's a war on people who aren't satisfied with the status quo. It is a war on the very people that we are going to need to get us humans out of this mess we've created for ourselves. And if this is really a war, as they want to call it, then you and I, young William, you and I are their sworn enemies. Now I never set out to be anyone's enemy, but then no one ever consulted me before declaring a war on my mind. So it's time to wake up the sleepers, as Fraser Clark calls them. They're the people who experimented with psychedelics during the Sixties. Those days, those trips, have got to haunt them more than ever right now, because they know the truth. They know what's really going on here with this so-called War on Drugs. They know that this is a War on Consciousness. It's a massive mind-control experiment that until the Internet came along was about to come to a sad end. But now the rules of the game have changed. The Net, and all of our sub-nets, our so-called Shadow Nets,” he smiled, “these have changed everything. Now the shoe is on the other foot, as they say.”

“I hate to interrupt this lofty discussion,” Fig said, “but weren't you about to tell us where Ralua is?”

“Oh. Yeah,” Shadow said somewhat sheepishly. “Sorry. I guess I caught the get-up-on-your-soapbox bug by spending so much time with Old Joe this afternoon. He certainly is wound up these days, isn't he? Anyway, Q got back just as we were leaving camp

a few minutes ago. He'll be here soon," Shadow said as he nodded my way.

"But he told me that there was an email from her saying that their mutual friend, José, had just made some kind of a breakthrough on a project that they had been working on, and that she was heading to Lisbon for a quick visit with him. Her current plan is to meet up with you guys at Rindy's place next weekend."

"Aw, bummer," Fig said.

Just then, someone struck the huge gong that was standing behind the fire pit, and before I could get turned around and resettled on my cushion, the drumming began. What followed, I later learned, was what they called their opening ceremony. But had you been there, I doubt if the word ceremony would have come to mind. It was more like a Broadway musical, which included guitars, flutes, dancing, singing, and poetry, all accompanied by a spectacular light show. Where they got the electricity for the lasers and other lights I never figured out, because there was no sound of generators at all.

Eventually, the music slowed and became softer. As the lights grew dim, the long diaphanous veils of the last dancers seemed to evaporate into the darkness at the edges of our gathering. With only the fire's glow for her spotlight, Apache began to speak.

"My dear fellow aspects of creation. For the next few minutes, we ask that you suspend the inner dialogue of your primate ego-mind, and listen only with your heart. Become this group mind that is our little family, out here on the edge of the Tribe. We come here tonight to take stock, to take an inventory, of where we are and of who we are. And we hope to

come to some conclusions about the direction in which we now must proceed. Where we are at this moment in time has become obvious to us all. We are at what many believe to be the most pivotal moment in human history that we know of.

“The arrow of unsustainable consumption, powered by the bow of credit, has reached the top of its flight. There is nowhere for that arrow to go now but down, and where it is going to land is anyone's guess. After joining in some of the discussions that have been taking place here the past few days,” Apache went on, “I have noticed that many among us are clinging to a desperate hope that all we need to do is to make it through another four years of the Bush Crime Family running things, and the worst will be over. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but after Bush the worst is still yet to come. His gang of international criminals has been systematically looting the treasury for years. The Empire is now bankrupt, but nobody is ready to acknowledge that fact just yet. All things come to an end eventually, and there is an excellent chance that some of us are still going to be around when the USA comes to its natural end, as did the Soviet Union and so many other empires. That is the march of history, and it cannot be stopped.

“However, if we truly believe our present situation to be unique, then how do we proceed from here? We are now heading into uncharted territory, and so how do we find our way? Well, to begin with, we keep in mind that locals always survive empires. Which implies that we must become as deeply interconnected with our neighbors and local communities as possible. So let's take a look at this logically, and with as little emotion involved as we can manage. For sure, for sure, there is going to come a time in human history when it will become too

expensive for us to continue using oil to power our lives. Some people think this will occur soon, others believe that day will not arrive until the end of this century or later. But it seems to me that rational people will not quibble about when the shift away from a petroleum-based civilization will absolutely have to begin. It seems to me that rational people, knowing that there is even the slightest chance that when the seventh generation of our descendants is born they will find themselves living in a world without oil, then right now, today, we should begin to do whatever it is we can, with whatever it is we have, to ensure that our descendants don't just survive. No, we want more for them than that. We want the generations that come after us to thrive.

“A thousand years from now, humans will most likely still be walking the Earth, as we have done for over a million years already. Some of those future humans will have genetic links to us. However, our names and our deeds will have long since faded from living memory. Yet that does not mean that we will be forgotten, for those future humans, those future reincarnations, will look back to the age that is just now beginning, and they will remember us. They will remember you, not by name, but as having been part of a new generation of humans. They will remember you as one of the people who helped to build a civilization that should last for yet another thousand years. And those people of the future will be alive because they had at least one ancestor, maybe you, who was a part of what their historians will call the Genesis Generation.

“This generation isn't bounded by the age of its members. That isn't how it is defined. Members of the Genesis Generation distinguish themselves by the way they think and the way they live. It is a state of mind,

not a state of body. We are the people who are preparing the land for whatever comes next, a new foundation for a new civilization. And that is precisely what we are all about. You and I *are* the Genesis Generation. However, before I say more, I would first like to bring up our lawyer friend, Tiger. And she will share with you a few things that you might want to think about regarding your dealings with the Empire, now that it is on its final downhill run.”

Then, a female voice coming from the darkness behind the fire pit said, “Thank you, Apache,” and Tiger walked to other the side of the fire and began, “Like it or not, it behooves us all to pay close attention to the American Empire right now, if for no other reason than to simply stay out of its way. Unfortunately, at the present time it isn't very practical to be completely detached from any of our governments, even outside the States, because without us realizing what was happening, they have gained control over our food supplies, along with a host of other niceties. And so, like it or not, even the most dedicated among us cannot yet completely detach from the System just now. As we all know, for several generations now the word was that without a college education you would never get anywhere. But if you do get that little piece of paper, we are told, it will be your ticket to riches.

“The truth of the matter, however, is something far different. Because your diploma isn't the only thing a college education will bring. It also comes with a massive amount of personal debt. So you can't simply go to college and learn something you are interested in. No, instead most people begin a particular field of study for the potential it may hold for getting the high-paying job that they will need to pay off their college loans. Seldom do I hear of students choosing a field of

study because it is their passion. So it doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that this is nothing more than a kinder, gentler form of indentured servitude. We are raising our children to become serfs! However, by not becoming too deeply entangled in the System, we will be better able to evolve ways of living that will free our grandchildren from the oppressive yoke of a national debt so massive that in fact it can never be repaid. By keeping our taxable incomes as small as possible, we can significantly reduce our contributions to the American war machine. Today, over half of all the taxes we pay in the States goes to supporting military misadventures around the world. I have no problem paying taxes to support the women and men who, for whatever reasons, have been injured as a result of their service. No group of people deserve our support more.

“But that is only a small part of the nation's war budget. So let the flag-waving, mindless patriots provide the money to continue the slaughter of innocents abroad. If they feel that threatened by the lies put out by the Bush Crime Family, then let them enslave their own families into perpetual servitude in order to pay off the arms dealers who sell their murderous weapons. Our families are detaching from the monetary system and applying their energy in different directions, like raising some of their own food, and entertaining ourselves without spending exorbitant amounts of money. By keeping our incomes small, we not only reduce the amount of money the looters in Washington have to spend on their deadly affairs, we also become invisible to the powers-that-be. And so we appear to be in the System while contributing as little as possible to the Empire's treasury. Instead of working like slaves in order to send more money to a bunch of mindless politicians,

we do our work locally, helping our neighbors and strengthening our local communities.

“Unlike the Flower Children of the Sixties, however, we are not dropping out and moving to communes. No, our role is to stay in place physically while removing ourselves from the financial aspects of the System as much as possible. And by not agitating for political change, we in truth pose no threat to the currently established order. Our mission is to change the culture, and then the politicians will adjust accordingly. You see, there really are no leaders left in the world of politics. All we have is front-followers who base their decisions mainly on the latest polls. As you already know, it is the System itself that must be changed. Merely exchanging one politician for another, no matter how promising she or he may seem, is nothing more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

And so, the time has now come for us to also remove our minds from the System, and that means doing no more than what we agree to do when we take a job to earn what money we need to survive. If you agree to work for forty hours a week, then give them no more. Since we aren't looking to build a career or get rich, giving your employer your overtime hours for free gets you nothing. Unlike that insidious John Galt, I am advocating that We the People go on strike and remove our minds from their System of servitude. For we are fully aware that it isn't the handful of CEOs who are the producers. No, in fact, they are the looters now. It is time to keep our best ideas to ourselves, here in our own community. No longer are we willing to lend our minds to the vast corporate empires whose only objective is to accumulate ever more wealth. It is time for consciousness itself to go on strike!”

Tiger's rousing ending brought an unexpected cheer from us all, as she began to make her way to a spot on the hillside where Old Joe was sitting. It was then that Fig leaned over to me and whispered, "I'm glad you were cheering, Will. I hope that means you have come to a decision about what to do next."

Her comment stopped me in my tracks, because until that moment I didn't realize that there was no turning back for me anymore. And I realized that these people, most of whom I hadn't even met, had now become my new family. Even though my trial for smuggling drugs into the country was still a few days away, I knew in my heart that no matter what happened on Wednesday, I was finished with Corporate America. Without consciously making a decision, I had come to the point where I could no longer participate in blindly consuming everything that struck my fancy.

I don't know if it was my participation in several medicine circles or if it was simply by spending so much time with these incredible people that caused this shift in my mind. But that no longer mattered to me. At last I understood what Ralua means when she says, "Once you discover the Tribe, you also discover that your home isn't a particular location on Earth, it is the entire planet. You finally grok the fact that you aren't simply a detached individual moving around the world, but that you are an integral part of the fabric of life that covers Mother Earth like a blanket." And as those thoughts flooded my mind, I could sense Ralua's spirit among us. How I wished that she was here tonight for me to talk with.

My reverie was broken when Apache began to speak once again. "It is therefore imperative that our community continue to grow and join together with

other people such as us, so as to collectively create a critical mass of Gaian consciousness. A great moment of decision is breathing down our collective human necks right now, for it is becoming obvious to even the most lumpen among us that we simply cannot continue living as we have been for the past one hundred years. Some people are saying that the global conflicts we are now experiencing are indications of a clash of civilizations. I don't see it quite that way. It seems to me that we are actually in the early stages of a conflict between two great ages. This is a battle that is taking place in our collective human consciousness. It is a battle between a mentality that belongs in the Middle Ages and another mentality that is appropriate for the 21st century. What we are actually witnessing is a clash between civilization itself and the type of primitive, barbaric behavior that has characterized so much of humanity until now. The age of Pisces is ending, and Aquarius has begun to rise. What we are witnessing today, my dear friends, is most definitely not a clash of civilizations, because by strict definition, *civilized* people do not clash."

With that, Apache paused for a moment and asked, "Does anyone have something they would like to add before I go on?"

"I do," spoke up Stein. He and Sebastian were sitting in the front row, just to the left of the fire pit. The overcast sky effectively blocked any chance of moonlight, which made it difficult to see him without his lighted hat until he stood up and took a step or two to be closer to the glow of the flames that were now shooting up from a big log that Al threw on the fire a few minutes ago.

"If the worst does happen," Stein began, "and a great Malthusian correction does take place, then the

people who survive to repopulate this planet are going to be those of us, or our descendants, who truly care about the Earth and about one another. But for sure, those looters who are so misusing the world right now aren't going to be around to rebuild. That much I'm sure of."

"The lad is right, I believe," yelled Shadow from just behind me. I hadn't expected him to speak up just then, and startled, I gave out an unintelligible shout of some kind. Once again, the laugh was on me, but my unintended little outburst was just what it took to break the heavy mood that had begun to descend upon us.

"I didn't mean to scare you, William," said Shadow in a tone that actually sounded as if he was concerned about my well being. "So I guess I'd better stand up and request the floor," he continued to several hoots and jeers from people I again realized had become my family.

Standing just behind Fig and me, Shadow went on, "I only wanted to point out how much I agree with both Stein and Apache. The way I see it, history is on the march once again, and I'm not talking about the history we are fed in schools. If you want to read the true history of this country read *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn. That's the kind of history that I'm talking about. But those school book histories that were forced into our young minds were all written by the winners. If you look at those books objectively, you will notice that they are mainly stories about rich and powerful people trying to expand and preserve their wealth. For example, did you realize that George Washington was the wealthiest man in America at one time? There have been many attempts by 'we the people' to wrest control from the rich and

powerful, and most often they came in the form of revolutions, generally violent revolutions.

“But what has all of that bloodshed gained us? Not very much, I think you'll agree. No, violence and revolution are not the correct tools for this age we are entering. Evolution is the name of the new game, the conscious evolution of our own selves. This, in turn, will propel the evolution of human culture as a whole. And once human culture reaches its next plateau, the political changes will follow. As Apache just said, we are finally experiencing the end of the medieval feudal system, and so we must be clear about the fact that it is an entirely new way of living that we are about. Getting distracted by the carnival of political action is something we must carefully guard against. Now I'm not talking about things like working for the release of men like Mumia Abu-Jamal and other political prisoners. It is politics itself that I am talking about. While there is nothing wrong with spending a small amount of your time on a political cause or working for a particular candidate, it is important to keep in mind that all political activities right now are rear-guard actions at best. The main event, the place where we should be investing the majority of our time, is in learning how to touch Mother Earth evermore lightly, and once again live sensibly. What we need is a new breed of human.”

After the cat calls about my unintentional shout, I expected to hear a loud round of applause for Shadow's little speech, but as he sat down he was greeted only by silence. It was at that moment when it finally dawned on me that this gathering was far more than just another excuse to party all night with some friends you haven't seen for a long time. What I was witnessing, here on this little island in the Pacific Northwest, was nothing short of the conscious

evolution of a new kind of human being. These people were not only fun-loving, free spirits, they were also hard working, dedicated individuals whose mission in life is to prepare places where the children of their great-great-grandchildren can live peaceful, joyous lives.

“I agree with you, Shadow,” said Apache, “except about the new breed part.” Then, as if she had been reading my mind, she went on, “You see, we are not actually a new breed of human, because we have always been here, living quietly just beneath the gaze of the average eye. We are the original human line, *Homo divinus* is what Lorenzo calls us, and we will be here for many generations yet to come. Empires merely wash over us, for we are the children of the children of Atlantis, and we have come back to Earth at this particular moment in time to once again become the catalyst for yet another major shift in the way people think about life, all life.

“Millions upon millions of old souls have come back to Earth just now to help start yet another turn of the cosmic wheel. We have returned to lay the foundation for the Earthly paradise that is now technically within our grasp and awaits only an overall change in the way people think. It really is as simple as that, changing the way we think about how we best fit into the fabric of life on this little planet. As simple as changing one's mind is, however, it is seldom easy. Often it takes a major tragedy, or illness, or some such thing to trigger the need to change the way one thinks. Fortunately, we have our sacred medicines to serve us, and so for most of us, we have been able to change our world view without having to first experience a major trauma.

“And now we have reached a point in our lives where we understand that only by remaining as far removed from the nets of capitalistic consumption as possible do we have any hope of building a sustainable future for those who will come after us. So it is imperative that you not get sucked back into the System, the global financial system that wants to own you until you die. It does this by chaining you to your debts, your promises to give your hard-earned money to a cabal of greedy bankers. It's all about economics. That's how they keep you trapped. Once you have a bank account, a credit card, and other debts, they hold you captive forever. We don't have to agree on anything else, but to survive as a coherent Tribe, we must first evolve a new economic model, for ourselves and for any others who care to join us.”

Just then, Fig squeezed my hand then leaned over and gave me a kiss, as if to say, “I'm glad you joined us.” For a moment, I was transported out of my body and was looking down on the gathering of souls on this little hillside. I felt more at peace than ever before. The experience was so transformative that I completely lost track of what Apache was saying for a moment or two.

When I returned to the present, I heard her say, “It is an historical fact that colonies that were tightly controlled by a remote political administration were the ones to most quickly form their own unique identities. The more outside control that is imposed on people, the easier it becomes for a new culture to spring up among them. For some reason, social creativity seems to thrive on pressure. So let's be thankful that the Fascists in Washington have decimated the Bill of Rights, because they are applying so much pressure that it is going to make our

mission to change mainstream culture significantly easier.”

Just then, a voice from the darkness off to my right and a little higher up the hill shouted, “So what's the plan?”

Even in the dim light from the fire, I could see a smile cross Apache's face as she said, “Many of us have been given the gift of directly and deeply experiencing the divine spirit that animates our bodies. This is what some of you so cavalierly call your moments of being a goddess or a god. When it comes, the freedom and sense of power we experience is awesome, beyond words. Yet when this same spirit of ours is concentrated in a human form, we discover that it often takes almost all of our energy just to perform the minimum daily tasks required to keep our bodies alive. Perhaps that is where our lesson lies, for while our disembodied spirit seems all-powerful, it really isn't. And so for me, the plan then is to get some help, because to accomplish any of the tasks that I see with my cosmic vision, I realize that I must first join with others if I am to have any hope at all of fulfilling my destiny. So to answer your question more directly, I would say that the plan, as the great bard McKenna often said, the plan is to find the others. It is as simple as that.

“For you see,” Apache concluded, “we are the living heirs of countless centuries of human spiritual evolution, and now the time has arrived for us to declare ourselves free from the foolish attempts to make laws declaring Nature's own plants to be illegal. How dare they! How dare they attempt to enslave our minds with their sick morality! How dare they! But we will have no more of it, no more of their attempted tyranny over our minds. And so we declare ourselves

to be free from the politics of control. We hereby declare ourselves to be free of their inhuman religions. We hereby declare ourselves to be free from the jackboots of Empire, free of their inhuman attempt to turn honest, hard-working people into mindless consumers in an unsustainable society. We reject your ways, you sad old Empire, and we reject your mindless attack on our Mother Earth. Ah Ho!"

In unison, several hundred voices thundered, "HO!" and the gathering came to what I felt was a rather abrupt end. Before I could comment on this fact, Shadow said to no one in particular, "We may be outcasts, but we are the outcasts who will ultimately reweave the tapestry of human consciousness into the beautiful design it once was."

After gathering up our blankets and pillows, we were joined by Stein and Sebastian as we headed back to camp to prepare for a night of dancing under what had now become a starry sky, and I said, "I have to admit that I'm kind of disappointed that Apache didn't lay out some kind of a plan for us. I thought she was going to tell everyone where to move and what to do. Granted, her words did inspire me to become more aware of how I'm living my life, but I was hoping for some kind of master plan to take over the world."

Shadow laughed and said, "Then I'd say she did her job perfectly tonight, young William. You see, the great work we are about begins and ends with ourselves. We aren't out to change the world, only to change ourselves. And if we do a sufficiently good job of it, then others will want to live as we do. It isn't our way to try and talk anyone into living like we do, but it is our hope that they will want to copy us."

“Yeah,” said Stein, “while the default world is worried about full employment, we are into full enjoyment. It's an easy choice, I think.”

“Well, I still don't feel like I've got a handle on this whole Tribe thing,” I said. “Sometimes it feels to me like a house of cards.”

“That's life, William,” said Shadow. “As the great Irish writer Flann O'Brien once said, 'De Selby likens the position of the human on Earth to that of a man on a tight-wire who must continue walking along the wire or perish, being, however, free in all other respects.' ”

The Genesis Generation

Chapter 14

A West Coast Drive

Although most of the people attending our gathering of the clans headed back home on Sunday afternoon, I stayed behind with Apache, Al and a few others to do a final clean-up of the campground. Originally, Fig had planned on staying behind with us, but since Ralua hadn't been able to get back in time, Fig agreed to fill in for her and accompanied Shadow to Mexico in his private plane. Their mission was to make contact with several of the more remote groups that Al and Apache worked with, and to give them all the latest news about who would be where and when. It seemed like overkill to me, when a simple email would have done as well, but Shadow seemed to have his reasons for keeping as much of our group's affairs off the Net as possible.

After we were sure we had left no trace of having been there, Apache and Al drove me back to San Francisco where they also lived. The plan was for them to be with me on Wednesday for my trial, and then we would all drive down to L.A. on Friday for a final weekend of ceremonies at Rindy's place, before everyone went their separate ways. After that, Fig and I were planning on flying back to the City by the Bay, pack my car, and head to Dallas. At least that was our optimistic dream, assuming that my case would be dismissed. And both SK and my lawyer assured me that that would be what happened.

However, when I returned home late Monday night, there was a message on my answering machine from SK. It was a very short message, saying only that he had been called out of the country due to some emergency with one of SiAmerica's foreign

subsidiaries, and that he wouldn't be able to come and testify in my defense. Needless to say, I was devastated, because my lawyer had told me that his testimony was the key to having my case dismissed.

To make a long story short, when I arrived at the courthouse early Wednesday morning, I was quickly swept up in a confusing series of conferences with my lawyer, the judge, and the prosecuting attorney. I'm still not clear about how or why I agreed to plead guilty. But at the time it seemed to be a better bet than to go to trial on drug-smuggling charges without my only witness being present. Plus, the judge agreed to suspend my sentence for one year, and that after that he would then vacate it, as long as I kept my nose clean. I swear that's what the old man said. It was a very degrading experience to say the least.

Now I have a suspended felony conviction hanging over my head for the next twelve months. But if I stay on the straight and narrow for that time, the judge has agreed to vacate my sentence and restore my citizenship rights. Until then, I have been ordered to return to Dallas, where I have been released to the supervision of none other than SK, who apparently was behind this arrangement somehow. The whole thing stinks, if you ask me, but not having any experience with these matters has left me in the hands of some people who I no longer think have my best interests at heart.

If you want to know the truth, this turn of events almost did me in. I was a complete basket case for a few hours after leaving the courthouse, and had Apache and Al not been there for me, I doubt if I could have held myself together. All I wanted to do was to stay in my apartment and feel sorry for myself. Eventually, they convinced me to ride to L.A. with

them, where Fig would also be and could help me get my act back together. Like a zombie, I agreed to whatever they suggested, and on Friday morning we headed back to L.A.

* * *

November 19, 2004 — Driving down the Pacific Coast Highway

*We must undergo a metamorphosis
in order to survive the momentum
of the historical forces already set in motion.*

Terence McKenna

We left quite early, in order to avoid the morning traffic, and so Al suggested that we take our time and follow the old coast highway for most of our way south. It would add several hours to the drive, but it would provide not only some spectacular scenery that can't be seen from the freeway, but also some more time to talk about the decision I had come to.

"I feel like for the first time in my life, everything has come into focus," I said from the back seat, as we were crossing the Bixby Creek Bridge. And for a moment I was so taken with the spectacular view from the middle of its towering span that I had to ask Apache to repeat what she had just said.

"What I said, William, was that just because everything is in focus it doesn't necessarily mean you can see very far. And I'm afraid there are a lot of things you haven't thought about yet if you are really serious about leaving the country and not showing up

in Dallas by the end of next week like the judge ordered.”

“How can you expect me to do that,” I pleaded. “I’ve been railroaded, set up, screwed big time, and I’m as angry as I’ve ever been in my life. I just don’t understand how this could happen. One day I’m just a normal tourist coming back from out of the country, and the next day I’m in the criminal justice system as a convicted felon. It all seems like a bad dream to me.”

“Well, the up side,” said Al, “is that a year from now this can all be behind you if you do what they say.”

Before I could raise another objection, he went on, “I know. I know. It isn’t fair. And I agree with you. But there are a lot of things that aren’t fair in this life. How do you think a young black man, sitting in jail for simply possessing a couple of joints would feel if he heard that you received only a suspended sentence for bringing drugs into the country?”

I started to defend myself, knowing that I was completely innocent, but I could see his point. Looking at it objectively, I had to admit that I had received special treatment. Had I been a person of color and not working for a powerful defense company, I no doubt would be sitting in jail right now myself. However, to me, being essentially sentenced to live in Dallas and work at SiAmerica for another year seemed almost as tough a sentence as doing hard time. That was how different my life in Dallas now seemed to me when compared to these past few months on the coast. Life certainly is different out here on the edge of the West.

“And do you really think that Fig is going to go along with your plan?” asked Apache. “You still have a lot to learn about some things, William. I don't think you could handle a life on the run. Maybe we should introduce you to our friend Nick Sand, and let him tell you what it is like to spend every day looking over your shoulder, worrying about being found out. It is no way for a person like you to live. Sure, you are going to have to compromise with the authorities for a year or so. But big deal. A year can go by quite fast if you stay focused on your continuing personal growth. Some of us have had to spend years sweeping out an ashram in order to become better focused. You can take the same approach to your work in Dallas.”

“It's just so unfair,” I whined.

“Just remember, William,” Apache said, “in this consciousness game it doesn't matter what happens to you. The only thing, THE only thing that matters is how you react to the things you encounter along your path. Epictetus pointed that out two thousand years ago, and it still holds true today.”

“And don't think that you're the only one whose life going to be turned upside down for a while,” added Al. “It's still a few years off, but by the beginning of the next decade the entire world is going to begin to experience some gut-wrenching changes. Since the end of World War II, we humans have been playing a massive game of musical chairs. And now, the big question we all have to answer is where do we want to be when the music stops. Some people believe that it is entirely possible for the U.S. to come completely unraveled within the next ten years or less. If that actually comes to pass, where do you want to be when that happens? Because when the God Bless America

music stops we are most likely going to discover that all of the chairs are gone.”

“Which seems like all the more reason for me to head south of the border and get the hell out of this place,” I said. “Or maybe I should go underground and throw a monkey-wrench or two into the System's gears.”

“I wouldn't do either one, if I were you,” said Al. “You see, William, by pushing against them you only make their resolve stronger. Now, more than at any time before, it behooves us to become as invisible as possible. And if you let your anger take over you run the risk of going mad. I've seen it happen over and over again. Look at our dear friend Cassey, the injustice of the War on Drugs drove him over the edge to a point where he got right up in people's faces, pointing out the lunacy of their ways. But all it got him was twenty years in a British prison cage. Now he's a prisoner of war, and we have lost a brilliant mind for all that time. My advice is to stay under the radar and just ignore all of those moronic screwheads who want to prevent you from controlling your own consciousness. Eventually they are going to lose interest in you as well, and in the mean time you can help us change the culture, one mind at a time.”

“Just remember,” Apache added, “the path you choose is your destiny. So be very careful in making a choice right now, William, because it could well determine the remaining course of your life.”

“I've actually given that some serious thought,” I said, “and in my imaginary fantasy life I still see myself as the hero of my own story, but, of course, that's just my imagination, not in my reality.”

“Just your imagination?” laughed Apache. “This world exists only in your imagination. Have you forgotten that?”

Her comment stopped me in my tracks. Here I was, feeling properly sorry for myself and trying to gain a little sympathy, but all I was getting from Al and Apache was a nonstop pep talk. So I thought I would give it one more try and whined, “I used to see life that way, Apache, but to be honest, almost all of the hopes and dreams I had as a boy are long gone. Now that I've had to make my own way in the world, I guess I've come to a point where I've begun to live without any new dreams that really excite me.”

In an effort to snap me out of my deep funk, Al said, “You know, William, my friend, Lorenzo, says that the most despicable murderers are the ones who kill our youthful visions. Maybe you should put yourself on trial for murder, because ultimately you are the only person in the world who can bring your dreams to an end.”

“I don't see how you can say that,” I replied. “I'm essentially being forced to work for SiAmerica for another year. My only other option is to go to jail.”

“That's one way to look at it, William,” Apache said in her most gentle voice. “But we have all been forced to serve the System at one time or another. What is different for you now is that you have begun to see the wiring under the board, and you are no longer simply another innocent, consuming little worker bee. Thanks in a large part to the work you have been doing with our sacred medicines, you have been able to see things from a different perspective.”

“Didn't you once tell me that your father was a big fan of Emerson?” asked Al.

“Yeah. My high school graduation present from him was a book of Emerson's collected works. But I've really never gotten around to reading it yet,” I lamely answered.

“Maybe this would be a good time to dip into it a bit,” he replied. “One of his more famous quotes is, 'Idealism saith: matter is a phenomenon, not a substance. . . . The Supreme Being does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, . . . Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.' ”

“I'm sorry,” I said, “but I just can't get into that old way of talking. I can barely understand what he means half the time.”

Even from the back seat I could see a smile cross Al's lips as he said, “Well maybe you should quit reading the easy things and try a little harder to understand what Emerson, Thoreau and the rest of their transcendentalist friends had to say. Maybe it's time to move up to more lofty thoughts than what you are getting from the latest soap opera on television.”

“Didn't you tell me once,” Apache chimed in, “that when you were in college Ayn Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, was your guiding light?”

“Well, yes. But that seems like a long time ago. Now I guess I'm beginning to come around to the way I told you my friend Russ thinks about that book.”

“Good. That's a good start. It shows that your mind is becoming your own once again,” she said. “As you know, Rand's point of view was basically that there were prime movers, and that almost everyone else was a second hander who lived off those few

great people, mainly men. It is actually the pinnacle of Western hierarchical thought, which worked fine for a few people in the last century, but everything is changing now. Today, that outdated philosophy is of no further use for our species. In fact, her literary heir and pupil of 30 years, Leonard Peikoff, said that *Atlas Shrugged* was Rand's way of understanding why these prime movers, as she called them, hadn't gone on a strike before. She believed that people who were creators were being leached off by everyone else. It boggles the mind to see how she so misunderstood the motives of creation. It is actually the reason we exist, all of us. We are all the creators of our own lives. It doesn't matter how much wealth or power you accumulate. That's not a valid measure of creation. What matters, to you more than anyone else, is the kind of life you create for yourself. It is essential, I think, that we see ourselves as artists who are in the process of creating a beautiful work of life."

Apache went on, "Rand saw her so-called prime movers as enslaved by the people that they supported financially, which is what still gives her novel such power today. All you have to do is to listen to the way the Wall Street millionaires lament the long hours they have to work to continue building their fortunes. And they claim that they are doing it mainly for the sake of their families, who, of course, they are otherwise ignoring. They are slaves all right, but their master is the global financial System, not the consuming public.

"Rand was right about the looters, however. But today, the looters are those hard-charging young bankers on Wall Street. Which brings about the most ironic of all events: eventually the engine of the world actually is going to be stopped by the John Galt crowd. But like someone who saws off the tree limb that they are sitting on, today's looters are stopping the

economic engine of the world through their excessive greed. Eventually, they are going to come to a moment of truth, and it will be very interesting to see how they react when that time comes.”

I really didn't want to even think about that whole looter business, let alone get into a discussion about it right now. What I had hoped for was their support for what I thought to be my firm decision to go underground. Instead, I felt as if I was at the receiving end of a lecture on good citizenship or something.

Just then, Apache cried out, “Look. Dolphins!”

The road had been hugging the side of a steep cliff for the past few miles, before winding back down to the ocean's edge. As we finished negotiating a little switchback that snaked around a sandy beach, we came right up almost to the water's edge. I could see the small pod of dolphins swimming just past the surf line, and for a moment, I forgot my own problems and wondered what life would be like as a dolphin. Besides spending the day with your family, swimming, eating, and playing, what else did they do, I wondered. I suppose they have stress in their lives too, but at the moment I would have traded places with any of them.

Thinking it was time to change the subject, I said, “So how did the two of you get to where you are? You seem to have all the money you need, but as far as I know you don't have real jobs. I don't mean to sound so nosy, but whenever I've asked someone about you they always change the subject.”

That brought a big laugh from them both. Apache spoke first.

“Like a lot of the people you have met in the past few months, we have taken many paths to get here,

some of which were dead ends. But the reason we don't talk about our own lives very much is that our paths are just that, our paths. And it wouldn't be wise for you or anyone else to try to try to find a similar one. While we are all in this wonderful Earth Game together, there is no single right way for us all to follow. It is up to you to clear your own trail."

"I didn't mean to be so personal. I'm just curious about where you came from, how you got started," I said.

"OK. That's easy enough," grinned Al. "My story is the simple one. I began this life as Albert Themquist, the privileged son of well-placed parents. In college, although it was only my minor subject of study, chemistry became my passion, psychedelic chemistry to be precise. And so I soon morphed into being called Al the Chemist, which in turn became The Alchemist. And that's about all there is to tell."

"Ha!" exclaimed Apache. "That's all there is? Since when did you become so modest, my love? You see," she went on, "by the time I met him he was deep into the rave scene in the UK, but he was one of the rare ones who salted away most of his money. So by the time we connected one night at the Megatripolis, he was primed and ready to go. All I had to do was to give him a little guidance."

I noticed that as Apache said that, she reached over and gave Al's hand a squeeze. He smiled, and said, "The real story is Apache's. She's the one who has lived the epic life."

"Not so," she said. "There is nothing epic about it."

“Oh, I don't know about that,” Al replied. “For example, did you know, William, that Apache's father was killed in Viet Nam?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “What happened?”

“I don't want to dwell on it, William,” she said. “But since I have the feeling that you are going to be working with us in the years to come, I'll give you the big picture. Contrary to what you may think, I don't actually have any Native American blood. When she was seventeen, and an illegal immigrant in this country, my mother ran away and married a soldier, who was soon to be shipped overseas. He never returned, and so he never even had a chance to hold me in his arms.”

I could tell that she was having difficulty controlling her emotions just then, as she rigidly looked straight ahead, not allowing me to see her face from my seat directly behind her.

“Since my mother hadn't even met my father's family, when he was killed she had no choice but to return to her own family in Mexico. At the time, it would have been difficult for her, and even more so for me, if the people in our little village knew that my father was black. And so she lied about him and said he was a Native American. That is how I came to be called Apache. I doubt if anyone believed her story, but everyone went along with it anyway. As it turned out, though, things worked out, as they usually do, for the best. You see, my grandmother helped to raise me. She was a curandera, and she came from a long tradition. As I grew older, she taught me the ways of the healer, which I, in turn, have been passing along to other advanced spirits like Ralua.”

“So much for our roots,” said Al as we began to leave the coast and head into a lovely little valley. “But you may also be interested to know that Apache's father served on a river boat with our friend Cisco. He was with him when he died, and it was Cisco who supported Apache's family and paid for her college education,” adding with an over-the-shoulder smile at me, “just thought you'd want to know.”

Not knowing what to say after that little bit of news, I remained quiet as we passed through the town of Big Sur. Other than a few comments about the scenery, the three of us seemed to retreat into our own private reveries while we passed through a high valley where we could no longer see the ocean. I don't know how much time passed until the hills on our right side slid back down to the Pacific shore, but just as the ocean came back into view, Al said, “Maybe we're all trapped in what I call the plight of the forgetful Bodhisattva. What if we approach this life with the assumption that everyone alive today is an enlightened being who took the Bodhisattva vow, but after reincarnating forgot who we were.”

“That's an interesting thought,” Apache said. “I don't remember hearing you say that before.”

“That's because it just now popped into my head for some reason,” he answered. “But you can see something like that in William, can't you?”

Still being new to this game, I had to admit to myself that I had no idea what a Bodhisattva was, but for some reason I decided to not say so and just let them go on, particularly since it sounded like they were saying something good about me.

Al was saying, “Think about it for a minute. In far too many cases, the body's primate ego-mind takes

over and costs people their mission. But with the proper use of the right medicine at the right moment, people can unlock the unused part of these magnificent monkey brains and begin to live as the gods we know ourselves to be. That's all you have to do, you know, William. Just live properly, and others will naturally be drawn to your joyful way of life. Now that's as naively simple as I can be, but I deeply believe that once a critical mass of humans begins to live properly, we will tip the waking consciousness of our human holon into an entirely new basin of attraction."

"You know," I said, "sometimes it seems to me that you guys have gone way overboard about these sacred medicines, as you call them. It sounds as if they are the only answer to getting people to look more closely at the way they are living. Aren't there other ways that are safer?"

"I assume," Al replied, "that by safer you are referring to legal consequences involved with using psychedelic medicines and cannabis and not the health consequences."

"Oh, yeah, sure," I mumbled.

"Good," answered Apache. "Because I don't want to have to repeat my lecture to you about how to use these various substances properly, which also means safely. However, some day, you might want to read a few books like Paul Devereux's *The Long Trip* and *Sisters of the Extreme* by Palmer and Horowitz if you want to better understand the role that these medicines have played in human history, ever since the late Stone Age, by the way. It's an amazing story when viewed as a whole, and it is primarily about repression by the ruling elites, the first of whom were Roman priests.

“In fact, just a few months ago in a talk at the Oxford Union, Fraser Clark did a wonderful job of explaining the last two thousand years of prohibition. Basically, he asked a question something like, 'Why did the Roman Church become so hysterical about the ancient natural drugs that had been the center of human societies' harmony for so long? Until the Catholic Church forced its way onto the scene, psychedelic sacraments were the keystone of many, if not all, human societies. In other words, the War on Consciousness began in Constantine's Rome.”

“And it's glaringly obvious when you think about it,” added Al. “These medicines are a direct line to the essential source energy that some people think of as a god. They very clearly do reveal the godforce that is within us all. And on top of that, you don't need a priest, king, or emperor to furnish your divine inspiration. This is a do-it-yourself religion, if you want to think of it that way. But as Fraser also said, if I can steal your thunder, Apache,” Al went on, “those priests are sitting on cushy careers as long as everyone is forced to follow what they so deceptively call Holy Mother the Church. Their entire house of cards would be swept away in a single day if every one of their slavish followers had the courage to take an heroic dose of magic mushrooms.”

Apache let out a little chuckle and added, “I also thought it was a brilliant insight when Fraser said that the Roman Christians did not deny the power of the vegetable allies, of the shamans, witches and wizards. They agreed they were powerful.' And that is why they murdered hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people that they branded as witches and shamans, along with their followers. In order to maintain their iron-fisted control over the world, they had to eliminate the use of mind-altering substances from

every society they encountered. No enlightenment plants for the Church! Alcohol, bloody alcohol was their drug of choice. People think that oil is the fuel for war, but it is really alcohol. Drunks fight, while stoners eat and make love, and there really is no disagreement about that little fact.”

“And look at what it has now come to,” said Al. “The emperors and priests have now been replaced by the bankers, the so-called gnomes of Zurich and other financial capitals. What they are up to is becoming more obvious each day. These guys aren't stupid. They are very much aware that unchecked capitalism cannot continue. It isn't only we so-called tree-huggers who have realized that at our current rates of consumption we are going to face extreme scarcities of food and water in the not-too-distant future. We humans have quite literally raped this little planet, and before long our chickens are going to come home to roost.”

“I can't say I am exactly following you,” I said. “Granted, we're still recovering from the burst of the dotCom bubble, but by most indicators I've seen things are starting to look up again.”

“You are only seeing what is happening in the high tech circles you have been involved in, William,” said Apache in her most gentle voice. “What you are missing is the growing disparity in incomes in this country. The middle class has almost disappeared when compared to the 1950s and 60s. In another ten years it will be gone completely unless some drastic changes are made by the ruling oligarchy. And I'm afraid that those changes aren't going to be voluntary on their part. But once people wake up and realize that the coming economic collapse has been well-planned ahead of time, we may begin to once again

see an aroused populace. And that is when real change is going to take place. But it isn't going to be pretty," she added.

"What do you mean?" I asked, the pitch of my voice slipping into a higher octave. "Are you trying to tell me that some mysterious cabal of bankers is planning on bringing down the world economy?"

"Just watch," smiled Al. "It won't become obvious to everyone until near the end. But once the dollar is no longer the world's premier currency, it is going to feel like an economic tsunami has washed over us all, which is why Apache and I are spending so much of our time helping our clans become independent of the Empire's food and water supplies. Their plan is to rule the world through a new global banking system. It is to be a world in which national governments get their marching orders from the same people who have been doing so on a local level for centuries. And should they succeed, well, there really will be a supreme world government of sorts. But if they fail, it is going to be mass chaos. That's why the ruling elite have to appoint a new face to the U.S. Presidency every eight years. The next time they are going to need to find the best motivational speaker we've ever seen. The person standing behind the presidential bully pulpit once young Bush is gone had better have a lot of charisma, because without a calm presence to convince the masses that all is well, there will most certainly be riots in every major city in the land."

"Well, this time your gloom and doom scenario seems to be working in my favor," I said. "If what you say is correct, then this may be the perfect time for me to drop out and go underground."

"Just the contrary, William," came Apache's quick reply. "The last thing we need right now is another

drop-out on the run. Whether you realize it or not, if you actually do run away right now you are significantly adding to the burden all of your friends in the Tribe will have to bear. Anyone you contact, once you go to ground, automatically becomes a coconspirator for not turning you in. In effect, you put all of us at risk if we decide to maintain our contacts with you. You may not have thought about that, but it is a fact that you may want to take into consideration before you come to a final conclusion.”

“Hmm, you're right, I hadn't thought of that before,” I admitted. “I guess I'd better hold off on my decision until I talk with Fig.”

“You mean you haven't even discussed this with her yet?” an amazed Al exclaimed. “Maybe it's time to quite feeling so sorry for yourself, William, and start thinking more about how your decisions might affect people, like Fig and Apache and me as well. We're all one, you know, and we take that statement quite literally in case you are wondering.”

“I guess you're right. No, I know you're right,” I replied. “It's just that I feel like it would be more heroic to go underground and work with Shadow and the rest of you to bring about a change in our culture. And being forced back to work in the defense industry seems somehow cowardly.”

“Look, William,” said Apache, “you do not exist to impress us or anyone else in this world. You exist to live your life in a way that will make you happy, and for the next twelve months I truly believe that you and everyone you come in contact with will be significantly happier if you weren't on the run, than we all would be if the Empire was hunting you down like an animal.”

“I understand what you are saying, and the truth is that I really don't want to become an outcast. But what I want more than anything right now is to move out here permanently and be done with my old way of living. And I don't want to wait for another year before doing that.”

“You don't have to drop out and move to the Coast if you want to make a significant change in your life, William,” said Apache. “If you really want to change your life then you must first change your beliefs. And once your world view has changed you will most likely discover that there are really only three steps left to fulfilling your destiny.”

“And what are they?” I asked.

Apache turned around, smiled at me, and said, “Create your own myth. Live your own myth. Believe your own myth. But don't let me fool you into thinking that it is easy. The steps are simple, but at times you may find them quite difficult, especially that last one, believe your own myth. At least, that's the one that I found to be almost insurmountable at times. But you will have to test that out for yourself. You see, William,” she went on, “unless your observer takes control of your avatar, your body is going to continue to go through this life on autopilot. And like most people, you can easily slip into the role of a biological robot, not a free person in charge of his own life. It is our observer, our higher self, who creates our lives, if we let it. The trick is to find a balance point between that detached observer in us and all these emotional costumes our egos wear. Once you find that sweet point of balance, you can at last begin to live lucidly. And while a lucid life is as difficult to achieve as is a lucid dream, ultimately it is the only proper way for us humans to live.”

“Is that what you guys are doing, teaching people to live lucidly?” I asked.

“What we are attempting to do, William,” replied Al, “at least what Apache and I are trying to do, is to help inspire people to begin building a civilization that is actually civilized. And to do so, we believe, requires the rekindling of a psychedelic society, much along the lines set out by the bard McKenna many years ago. Some very difficult times lie ahead for all of us in the next few years. And I'm talking not only about the psychedelic community, our entire human family is about to be reborn in the light of a new consciousness for a new millennium, and it is our role, the role of the world-wide family of psychonauts to serve as the mycelia that holds the field of human dreams together during the great shift that has already begun. It is our role to provide the stability, and the sane voices for calm, that are going to make the difference between a peaceful transition and the potential nightmare of social chaos. Like our dear fungi friends, for the most part we will remain invisible, living just under the surface of things. But without the stability that we provide to the great collective unconscious, our entire species runs the risk of going mad.”

“Our work, which has now also become your work,” Apache very pointedly said, “is more vital than what any banker or politician can do right now. We are the future of our species, William. You are the future of our species. And you may want to give that some deep consideration before you make an irrevocable decision that may not actually be in your own best interests.”

They had given me much to think about, and for the most part not much else was said as we completed our drive to Los Angeles. When we were only a few blocks from Rindy's place, Apache suddenly

remembered that we had all turned our cell phones off in an attempt to keep the world at bay while we enjoyed our drive down the coast.

“Oh my goodness,” exclaimed Apache. “Something's up. There are over twenty messages on my phone.”

Just then, we turned the corner, and much to our surprise discovered that there were cars parked on both sides of the street for almost a block. And the long driveway that ran along one side of the house was packed with cars as well.

We parked at the end of the street, and as we made our way through the throng of people that had spilled out of the house, onto the big front porch, and had filled the front yard, it was obvious that everyone was trying to not make eye contact with the three of us. All of my alarm bells were going off, and the sense of impending doom I had been living with for the past several weeks returned in full force.

As we approached the front door, I heard Shadow giving instructions to someone, and I gave a little sigh of relief, knowing that at least Fig was safely back in the country. As long as she was by my side, I knew that no matter what had happened, things would eventually be fine.

Like I had learned to do over the course of the summer, the first thing I did when I walked in the front door was to take a quick look at the hat rack to see who was there. A wave of relief swept over me when the first hat I saw was Ralua's old Scout Girl beret sitting right on top where it always was when she was home. But the next thing I noticed was that there was only one hat missing, Fig's. Just then, I heard Deirdre

The Genesis Generation

scream in a voice as tragic as any I've ever heard,
"NO! NO! NO! She can't be dead."

And then, for the first time in my life, I fainted.

Chapter 15

Mountaintop Farewell

I won't keep you in suspense. Fig was just out running an errand for Shadow. It was Ralua who was dead. I'll explain about her hat later.

It happened the day she was to fly back to the States from Lisbon. The night before she was to leave, she stayed in a small hotel up in the mountains just outside of town. Early the next morning she asked a friend if she could borrow his car to run down the mountain for something or other. But shortly after she left, as she came around a sharp curve, a small dog ran out onto the road with a little boy chasing after it. Her only choices were to hit the puppy, hit the little boy, or turn hard to her right and take the car off the road and down the cliff-side. I don't know what more to say. It was an accident. A needless accident.

Of course, all of the previously planned medicine work for that weekend was canceled. Everyone was already walking around with their emotions on edge. The last thing we needed was to amplify our feelings just then with some powerful medicine. No, this was a time for sober reflection.

Over the course of the weekend, hundreds of people stopped by the house, most of them just wanting to hear or to tell a story about how Ralua had come to their rescue at some critical point in their journey. It was truly amazing how many lives Ralua had touched, both directly and indirectly. Finally, it became clear to me what Old Joe meant when he called her the heartbeat of the Tribe, and how little of that part of her life I got to know. I guess that's what caused me the most sadness, the fact that I knew next

to nothing about the woman she had become over the years when we weren't in touch.

While it would have been easier for everyone to attend a memorial celebration for Ralua over the weekend, Monday was the first day for which we could obtain a permit to hold a large gathering on the mountaintop that she so loved. Being a weekday, we didn't expect many people to show up, but much to everyone's surprise there was a huge turn-out. Apparently I wasn't the only one who was afraid that not many people would be able to make it, and so almost everyone who knew Ralua, and was within driving distance, made it up to the top of our mother-mountain, where we could look down on the entire Los Angeles basin below. When it was clear, like it was that night, the city that lay below us twinkled like a bowl full of stars.

* * *

November 22, 2004 — On a mountaintop overlooking Los Angeles

*Remember that you are at an exceptional hour
in a unique epoch,
that you have this great happiness,
the invaluable privilege of being present
at the birth of a new world.*

The Mother

“Can you believe how many people showed up this afternoon and tonight?” I asked of no one in particular.

About a dozen of us were sitting on some old railroad ties that were arranged in a circle around a big fire pit. Fig and I had just joined the rest of the clan after spending a few quiet moments in the clearing a little higher up, where we looked down on the sleeping city below. It was after midnight now, and only a few of us had stayed behind in order to do the final clean-up in the morning.

What had earlier been an unusually hot day for autumn, now carried a chill in its night air. The transformation had been very subtle. It began when a few clouds started rolling in, covering the sun for longer and longer periods. But once the sun set, it seemed as if someone had thrown a big switch, and the cold winds of winter began to announce their arrival.

Stein was the first to answer me. "I wasn't surprised by the ones who live close by," he said. "But I have to admit that it blew me away when Darin and his island crew flew all the way down here just to spend a few hours with us."

"Yeah, they were great," Deirdre said as she snuggled a little closer to Shadow. "And what about all those emails that were read? They were amazing."

"And I read only a handful of all that came in," said Tiger.

"Well, I'm sure glad that you read that one from Black Beauty and Hermit Girl," said Deirdre. "I had no idea that Ralua had such a following in Australia. I think Antarctica was the only continent that we didn't hear from tonight."

“And that one you read from those guys in the UK was a classic,” Fig said. “Do you remember the one I'm talking about?”

“Oh yeah,” answered Tiger. “You're talking about one that came from the Ninja, Kevin, and the guy they call their fiendish friend, the three musketeers. I've never met them myself, but I can remember Ralua talking about some of their adventures together, mainly because she was always laughing so hard by the time she came to end of a story.”

Just then, Old Joe came up from behind us and sat down next to Tiger. “Well, I got the boys to the airport with plenty of time to spare.”

“What boys are those, Joe?” asked Al.

“Minot and Jade,” said Joe. “They were two of the first people that Ralua began working with after she left Apache's protective care. They actually live on separate sides of the continent, but like most of you guys, they met Ralua at one of those Palenque events.”

“Did you take Miguel to the airport too?” asked Al.

“Nope, not me.”

Fig spoke up and said, “He rode with Mi Shi and Jaret. He'd been staying with one of them since he arrived. I tried to get him to stay with us at Rindy's place, but he couldn't handle the energy, he said. I guess being the last person to see Ralua alive, and then having to bring her stuff back, was more than he could take. Poor guy.”

Apache spoke up just then and said, “He's OK now, though. Al and I spent a lot of time with him

these past few days, and I think he's going to be able hold himself together without much help."

"So tell me again how it happened?" I asked. "I know you've all been talking about it nonstop, but I've been so out of it that it seems as if I'm just now waking up from a horrible dream."

"There really isn't much to tell," Apache said. "The car belonged to someone Ralua met in the hotel restaurant the night before. It sounds like the errand she felt she had to run was more or less invented by her just so she could take that little Porsche convertible for a drive. The last thing she did was to toss her beret to Miguel and tell him to hold on to it because she didn't want it to blow off on her drive down the mountain."

"So what happened to the hat?" I asked. "I kind of thought you would burn it in some kind of a ceremony or something like that."

"We thought about doing that," Apache smiled, "but we found something better to do with it."

"What's that?"

"After I spoke on the phone about it with her parents," Apache answered, "we gave it to Fig. Now what happens to it is up to her."

Fig was sitting to my right, and she took an arm out from under the blanket on her lap, wrapped it around my waist, looked up, and gave me a sweet smile. Then, the dam that had been holding back my emotions all day burst, and I collapsed into a heap of sobs, as Fig wrapped her blanket around us both.

I don't know how long we remained like that. To me, it seemed like several minutes had passed before

I finally managed to gasp, "A joy ride. She took a joy ride and died. How horribly senseless."

"Are you so sure of that?" came Apache's soothing voice. "You know, there is a strange beauty about a death done well, an artful death. From the human side, we see death as so final, a permanent separation of someone from ourselves. But death isn't that way for the spirit who is transforming at the same time that their human body is dying. For them, the primary focus of the experience isn't one of separation. Rather, it is of transformation.

"Ultimately, human death is nothing more than a refocusing of the point of our ever-present awareness on a new experience. Granted, the human ego-being to which it once provided the life force has ceased to be. The history of that personality is at an end, but not its life force. That essential element, our IS-ness, has simply changed its focus of awareness to a new point in the cosmos. And the easier and more beautiful one can make that transition experience, well, who knows, perhaps it is an important step in the evolution of our higher selves. So we shouldn't put down the art of transformation just because we are feeling abandoned. Ralua's death wasn't an accident, and it wasn't a suicide. It was simply a beautiful transformation, where she willingly gave up her own human existence in order to spare some other humans a little pain."

"Well I sure don't see anything beautiful about it," came my whispered reply.

"So how do you see your own death taking place?" asked Al.

Shocked, I answered, "I've never given it any thought, other than to hope that I don't die from some painful disease."

"If you don't think about your own death once in a while," said Al, "how can your life be anything more than a personal chaos? I think it is absolutely essential to give a little serious thought to what it might be like at the moment of our transition. That's one of the great lessons that our sacred medicines can teach us," Al went on. "My personal belief is that whatever state of mind we are in just before the moment of our death is the state of mind we will be in on the other side at the moment of our birth into the next stage of our eternal existence. Personally, I constantly work on my state of mind in the here and now. And I try to stay focused on keeping my spirit in the state I would like to maintain for lifetimes yet to come."

"And how do you find that state?" I asked. "I'm not sure I've ever felt so good that I'd want to be that way forever."

Al chuckled and said, "You will never arrive at the ideal spirit you want to be, because you are constantly evolving, constantly. That is why it is so important that you become aware that your spirit is eternal, that it will never come to an end. However, these spirit-selves of ours are not some idealized beings. They are simply what we really are, deep inside, at any particular moment in time. For every moment of our human lives our spirits are changing, growing, evolving. And when our physical bodies die, our spirits continue from where they were when the body failed."

Apache's soothing voice drifted in from across the flames. "What Al is saying, William, is that only you are capable of making changes in your spirit, or your higher self, your soul, or whatever you want to call the

core of your being. Like it or not, you are locked into this ultimate essence of you for all eternity. So why not make your existence pleasing and enjoyable from here on out? Why waste any more lifetimes on learning how to be happy? Why not just be happy now?"

I was having none of it. Ralua, my lifelong friend, was gone. Gone forever! I began to shiver, and when Fig tightened the blanket around us, another bout of weeping came over me. Thankfully, Shadow picked up the conversation and steered the talk in a different direction for a moment, giving me a little time to pull myself together yet again.

"I think that the most valuable thing I have learned from my use of our sacred medicines is that there is no reason at all to fear death, our own death that is. And I'm here to tell you that if you no longer fear death then you no longer fear anything else either."

Just then, Stein spoke up and said, "I miss Ralua too. For a while, she was my only friend out here. But as tempted as I am to think of her still being Ralua and hanging around here in spirit form, I'm not letting myself think that way. Instead, I keep repeating to myself the poem that she read to us after Howling Lotus died. Remember that? 'The Warrior's Lament.'"

"I kind of remember it," said Deirdre, "but not exactly. Can you say it for us now?"

"I can," said Stein, "but Sebastian does it better." And turning to his companion, he said, "Will you do us the honor?"

Sebastian rose very solemnly, and standing close to the fire he began,

*I can hear my comrades calling.
I can hear them calling me from the other side
To the place where all great warriors go.
Do not mourn for me, for it is the end all great
warriors face.
Do not mourn for me, for I will never know."*

"Ho!" everyone said in unison, everyone but me.

For a while, the only sounds were from the crackling fire and the night noises of the high forest. Eventually, I said, "That sounds so cold to me. I guess it's my Catholic upbringing, but I still like to think in terms of going to heaven and being reunited with my family."

"And that is exactly where you are and what you are doing at this very moment," laughed Apache. "For a while, our old spirit-friend Ralua was also here in this little corner of heaven that we are sharing right now, and she paid us a short visit. Now she's off shedding her light on yet another part of the cosmos."

"If you say so," I lamely whimpered. "I know this sounds trite, but Ralua and I shared so much of our early lives together. She was like a sister to me. And now, the hole in my heart that her death has brought about is so much more painful because she was the last person I could exchange some of my most precious memories with. All of my relatives are gone now, and she was the only other person who was there with me on those amazing, peaceful summer days when I was a young boy. I can still remember the scent from our big lilac bushes that drifted in through the open kitchen windows. For several summers, it became a ritual every day at noon when Ralua and my aunt and I concocted our latest salad dressings to wow each other with. I know that it doesn't sound like much, but those summer days are among my most

precious memories, and now there is no one left who shared those experiences with me. Suddenly, the world feels so lonely to me.”

“It feels lonely only when you look backwards, William,” said Al. “But the fact is, the past doesn't exist, and neither does the future. All we have is the here and now, the eternal present. Hanging on to the past is like having an anchor on your soul.”

“I have some idea of how you feel, William,” said Apache. “Like you, I have now outlived the people who raised me. And for the last few years that they were alive, it was Ralua who was by my side. She was there with me when my grandmother died and again when my mother died. And it has always given me great comfort to be able to talk about them with Ralua. So, like you, I feel a deep sadness when I think back and want to relive some of the times we shared together. But those days, those experiences, are forever in the past, as is the human avatar we called Ralua. However, that does not have to mean that her spirit is gone as well. In fact, every time any of us has even the tiniest flicker of a thought about Ralua, then her spirit is still here, not her ego-personality, but her spiritual essence.”

After that, no one said anything for a long time, then Old Joe stood up and said, “Well, kids, I don't know about you, but this old body has got to get some sleep.”

Apparently we were all thinking the same thing, and so we slowly began to gather up our blankets and head to our tents, which we had pitched not far from the fire pit. Fig and I were sharing a small tent that was squeezed in between two larger ones. Apache and Al were on one side of us, with Tiger and Old Joe on the other side.

Tiger was the first one to reach her tent, and as she was unzipping the flap, Joe told her, "I'll be there in a minute, but first there's one more thing I wanna tell the kid."

"OK, but don't be surprised if I'm asleep by the time you finish," she said.

I had hoped to quietly slip into our tent and be alone with Fig, but Joe obviously had other plans for me. "Hey, kid, ya got a minute?" he asked.

"Yeah, but not a very long one, Joe. I'm just about at the end of my rope tonight," I answered without much enthusiasm.

"I'll only take a minute, kid," he answered. "But it's about what you said yesterday, when you told us that you'd decided to return to Dallas and follow the court's orders."

"Yeah," I said rather morosely, "I can't believe that I'm giving in rather than standing up against them and going underground like I think I should. But after talking it over with Fig, I have to agree with Apache and Al that I'm probably not very well suited for a life on the run. Of course," I brightened up a little, "the fact that Fig is moving to Dallas with me makes it a lot easier. But I'd still rather stay out here with you guys," I added.

"Sure you would, kid, but that's not a very good option for ya right now," said Joe. "But that's not the part I was talkin' about. What bothered me is that you also said that you were gonna try 'n forget about Ralua, put her completely out of your mind. Remember that?"

“Well, yeah, I guess I said something like that,” I replied, “and I still think that's the best way for me to get over her death.”

“Get a grip, kid,” said Joe rather forcefully. “If you try to block thoughts about Ralua from your mind you're gonna go nuts. Believe me, I tried it once myself. The fact of the matter is that you're never gonna get over her death. That event now is permanently etched in your mind. It's never gonna go away, kid. You just gotta get used to it.

“And let me tell ya about death, kid,” he went on. “It's all around us, everywhere and everyday. For the most part we try 'n keep thoughts about it at arm's length because it scares us. But it shouldn't. Wanna know why?”

“Sure.”

“Because it's a choice, that's why,” he answered, much to my surprise.

“A choice!” I exclaimed, now beginning to get angry once again. “Are you saying that Ralua chose to die, that my dad's heart attack was a choice, that my mother chose to die of cancer?”

“Calm down, kid,” Joe gently chided. “It's only a theory of mine. You don't have to get all worked up about it, just listen to what I'm sayin' for a minute, and then you can take it or leave it. But first ya gotta listen. See, kid, I've had a lot of experience with dyin'. Lost a lot of friends, even had a near-death experience of my own once. But it's the plants that've taught me the most about dyin'.”

“The plants?” I managed to squeak out.

“Yeah, our sacred plants. They're the ones who know the most about death. At least that's my take on it.”

“Which plants?” asked Fig.

“Mainly ayahuasca,” said Joe, “even though I only had a chance to try it a few times before my heart started actin' up. She sure taught me a lot.”

Before I could ask him what other plants had taught him something about death, he went on. “One night, when a bunch of us were workin' with the vine, I found myself strugglin' to stay awake.”

“Are you kidding?” laughed Fig. “I've never done ayahuasca myself, but from the stories I've heard it doesn't seem possible to even get to sleep on it, let alone have to fight off sleep.”

“Oh, you'd be surprised,” chuckled Joe. “Some day I'll have to tell ya the story about the night a whole bunch of us fell asleep during a circle. It was a real riot once the snorin' began.”

For a moment, Joe seemed lost in a pleasant memory, but he quickly snapped back and went on, “But you don't have to be on ayahuasca to have this experience. You can have it every night when you go to bed. In fact, you oughtta try it tonight.”

“I don't know what you have in mind, Joe,” interjected Fig, “but I already have plans for Will tonight, and they don't include any sleep experiments.”

“Aw, lighten up, kid,” said Joe, “this won't interrupt anything ya have in mind.”

“OK. Let's hear it,” I said, “but I'm really tired, Joe, and all I actually want to do is just go to sleep right now.”

“Perfect!” he said. “Here's what ya do. Just as you're about to drift off, at just the last moment you're still awake, try to capture that feelin'. You know the one, that fine little balance point between sleeping and staying awake. Well, at that very moment when you're just about to drift off, if you want to, and if you will it, you can snap yourself awake and get out of bed. It's the very same at the moment of your death, at least that's what I think. And it actually happened to me one time. I remember layin' on that damn operatin' table and hearin' someone say, 'We've lost him.' I can still remember it as if it happened just yesterday. And what I did was to simply wake up. I willed myself to get back into this old body and finish what it is that I came here to do.”

“Well, that's a nice story, Joe, and I'm sure it happened to you that way,” said Fig, “but I don't see how that fits Ralua's death, or Will's parents' deaths, or a lot of other cases for that matter.”

“You will if you think about it for a while,” smiled Joe. And in a flash he was in his tent and zipping the front flap shut.

From behind me, a soft voice with a British accent said, “Sometimes Old Joe reminds me of a wise old monk who keeps things stirred up with his Zen koans.” It was Al, joining Fig and me just outside of our tent.

“Oh, hi, Al,” I said, somewhat startled and hoping that he didn't also feel like he had to give me a pep talk.

"I couldn't help hearing what Joe was saying about dying," said Al. "I'm not sure I agree with him exactly, but maybe he's just using some different words to say something you've heard a lot of us say over and over."

"What's that?" I asked.

"That we live in a universe that allows what we focus on," he answered. "It's really that simple, you know."

"Well, that sounds nice," I replied, "but I've never actually been able to figure out how to put that cute little saying into practice."

As if she were a hologram that magically appeared before us, Apache slid alongside Al and added, "I think what it means, William, is that we create our own reality by what we allow ourselves to believe to be true.

"Until a few months ago," Apache went on, "your only reality consisted of what burners call the default world, a world that is ruled by those great beasts called corporations. But now your reality has a new facet, and you are seeing things from a completely different perspective. However, if I were you I wouldn't stop now, because there are countless other aspects of life on this planet that also are important parts of our human group-mind, our collective unconscious. And it is up to you to continue peeling this fascinating onion until you uncover the pearl inside, the jewel of you. Whether you realize it or not, you still have an important role to play in this great drama, this Earth Game as Stein calls it. We all do."

Still feeling sorry for myself, I said, "Maybe so, but for the next year I'll be on the sidelines, working at

SiAmerica and wishing I was back out here on the front lines with all of you.”

Even Fig laughed at that one, but Apache spoke first, “Everywhere is the front lines, William. You and Fig and me and Al, and everyone else on this planet, whether they know it or not, are on the front lines of the biggest evolutionary jump in consciousness that we humans have ever experienced. It isn't just you, William, who is experiencing what Jung called metanoia. Whether we realize it or not, we are all undergoing a very fundamental restructuring of our minds right now. In fact, with all of the changes that are taking place in the world today, without an ongoing reevaluation of who we are and where we are going, there is the chance that we might all go mad. So my advice is to not resist these new thoughts that you are having, because in a way, right now everyone is going through a similar transformation. Whether you choose to be an active participant or not, you are about to be swept along with the rest of us as we experience the birth of the Genesis Generation.

“The good news is that you aren't alone. As Timothy Leary once said, 'The generation you belong to is one of the most important things in your life, because you're going to be swimming like a school of fish in this school of your own generation. And so you share an unspoken sense of reality throughout the world.' And this new reality that you are coming into, William, is the same new reality that millions of others are also just now beginning to experience. It's going to be a wild ride, but my guess is that you and Fig are going to come through it with flying colors.”

And with that, we all called it a night and crawled into our tents. Fig and I quickly got undressed and snuggled into a sleeping bag together. For a while, I

could hear muffled whispers coming from either side of us, but soon all was quiet. It wasn't long before I felt Fig's gentle breath on my chest as she relaxed into a deep sleep.

As tired as I was, though, I couldn't get to sleep. Whenever I shut my eyes, I would see Ralua, leaning back against the car door as we drove out of Dallas and saying, "Has your life been anywhere close to the life we dreamed of having back when we were kids? Where is that sense of excitement and adventure that we talked about?"

And then I had an "Ah ha!" moment, and I realized why I have been running away from my boyhood dreams for so long. Fear. That was my problem, I was afraid of losing what I thought of as my place in the world. I always wanted to fit in, to do what was considered acceptable by society at large. Instead of trying to create a life that I was pleased with, I spent most of my time and energy trying to please others. No wonder why I felt so adrift on these stormy seas of change. I had no direction of my own . . . until now.

Then a corny old saying popped into my mind, and it kept repeating itself over and over, 'Today is the first day of the rest of my life. Today is the first day of the rest of my life.' Eventually, my mind became still, and I joined Fig in her slumber.

* * *

November 23, 2004 — A new beginning

One's destination is never a place but rather

a new way of looking at things.

Henry Miller

Fig and I had to catch an afternoon plane to San Francisco, and so we got up early and were just packing our tent in the car that Fig had borrowed when Old Joe came back from his early morning walk in the woods.

“Look at this,” he said with a big grin on his face. He was holding both of his hands out in front of him, and draped over them he was very carefully carrying a two foot long piece of translucent snake skin. I'll bet this's the skin of that kingsnake I told Tiger about. I saw it down by the creek yesterday mornin', but she tried to tell me that they weren't found this high up. Now I can prove to her that I wasn't halucinatin'. Looks like that young guy was getting too big for his skin, just left it behind on the trail back there. Can I give you a hand packin' up,” he added.

“Thanks for the offer, Joe,” Fig said, “but we're almost done. All we have left to do now is to go help the rest of the guys clean up the area.”

“Ah, my timing is still impeccable,” he joked. “So when do you think I'll see you kids again?”

“It's hard to say,” I answered. “We begin our drive back to Dallas tomorrow, and then for the next year we won't be going anywhere, thanks to my legal troubles.”

“Well, I won't be seein' you there,” Joe laughed. “Never settin' foot back in that state again if I can help it. But I know a lot of great people there. So it won't all be bad for ya. I guess we'll haf ta wait until you get back to the coast until we meet again. Any idea when that'll be?”

“No, Fig and I've decided to not make any plans until the end of next year. So much is happening so fast right now that we don't want to get locked into anything until the time comes for us to leave Dallas. That's the only thing we're sure of. We are definitely not going to spend the rest of our lives in some big, noisy city.”

“I hear ya, kid. No big cities for Tiger 'n me either.”

For the next two hours, those of us who had spent the night on the mountain did what we learned at Burning Man and made sure that we left no trace that we had been there. Thankfully, there was no heaviness of spirit left over from the day before, when our focus had been on the past, on Ralua to be specific. But in the bright rays of sunshine and the crisp fall air that now filled the forest, life once again seemed very precious indeed.

Out of nowhere, a line from a Henry Miller novel came to my mind, “Let the dead eat the dead.” In one way, it seemed cold to think of Ralua in those terms, but dwelling on her death wasn't doing me any good, that much I could see quite clearly. Then, as we were all standing by our cars, saying our final goodbyes, Shadow came up and told me something that spun my mind off in a completely different direction.

“Well, William, my boy, I hope you are ready for your next big adventure, because I have some information for you that I think you will find quite interesting.”

“What's that?” I eagerly asked.

“As I explained to you a few days ago,” Shadow began, “We now have Q-teams scattered all over the

place. For the most part, we're just watching what's going on and keeping our own virtual private networks well hidden. But with the threats to Net neutrality that seem to be coming from all directions, we've decided to install our own backup routers just in case. So if you are interested, I thought you might want to become a part of our Dallas hub."

"Are you kidding!" I gushed. "Why didn't you tell me before that you had a team in Dallas? Don't you trust me?"

Old Joe, who had been standing nearby, spoke up first and said, "Need to know, kid. Learned it in the Navy. You don't share information like that just for the hell of it. Ya gotta have a need to know before you're in the loop. Safer for everybody that way."

"Joe's right, William," said Shadow. "So don't get your feelings hurt."

"I'm not offended," I said, "just shocked. So how do I get in contact with them?"

"You already are," Shadow smiled. "In fact, it was the leader of our Dallas team who first brought you to my attention, and it was only a coincidence that Ralua had known you earlier. Now it was a happy coincidence to be sure, but a coincidence nonetheless."

"So who is he?"

"It's a she, actually, and she's one of your project leads at SiAmerica."

That could be only one person, I thought, the brightest star on my team, Frances. I had only two project leads, and the other one was a man. So it had to be Frances, and interestingly, she was also the only

person who worked for me that wasn't a SiAmerica employee. She worked for the contracting company that supplied us with temps.

Then it dawned on me. Of course! That was how Shadow was infiltrating so many companies, through contractors, those invaluable temporary workers who we hire for a particular project but then let go once that work has been completed. I hadn't thought of it before, but my guess was that Shadow was the proud owner of one or more high-tech contracting companies. That meant that there probably wasn't a single fortune 500 company that didn't have at least one of his moles working in their IT department.

"Are you saying that Frances Zelsholt is a spy?" I exclaimed.

"Whoa! Why the word spy?" returned Shadow. "That's a little heavy, don't you think?"

"Well, you know what I mean," I said.

"Then you should say what you mean," he chided, "because we're not spying on anyone. We're just watching, and waiting."

"Waiting for what?" asked Fig.

"We don't know," Shadow answered. "Maybe there's nothing to wait for. Maybe we won't lose control of the Net after all. But just in case the screwheads who think they are running things these days try to cut off our access, we're ready for them. And on top of that, we now have enough people in key positions that it's most likely going to be impossible for them to choke off our connectivity anyway."

"I'm finding it difficult," I said, "to get my head around the fact that it was Frances who told you about me."

"Oh, I didn't mean to leave you with that impression," said Shadow, "because it wasn't Frances who first set us on to you. It was one of her team members."

"And who might that be?" I asked, thinking that nothing could surprise me now.

That big grin I had now grown so fond of spread across Shadow's face as he said, "It's your friend Russ."

Chapter 16 - Freedom's Promise

JOURNAL ENTRY - Dallas, Texas

*But don't be satisfied with stories,
how things have gone with others.
Unfold your own myth,
without complicated explanation,
so everyone will understand the passage,
we have opened for you.*

Rumi

It is hard for me to believe that an entire year has already passed since Fig and I said goodbye to our friends on the West Coast. Until the moment when Shadow told me that Russ was involved with one of his Q-teams, I was dreading the fact that I had to return to my job at SiAmerica. However, knowing that both Russ and Frances were part of the Tribe lifted my spirits considerably. In fact, I could hardly wait to get back to Texas and meet with the two of them. Needless to say, we had a lot to talk about.

My initial meeting with SK, however, was filled with tension. For my part, I had become highly suspicious of his motives in seeming to help me out of the mess I was in and then not showing up at the most critical moment. Obviously, I harbored thoughts about his possible role in my getting busted in the first place.

For our part, Fig and I rented a small apartment and began our experiment in living together. I am happy to report that we have found ourselves to be so compatible (and need I say, in love) that we are now planning on getting married.

As I just mentioned, even before I returned to Dallas, I had grown suspicious of the events leading up to my getting arrested at the San Francisco airport. Had everything not fallen into place so quickly, like SK's decision to give me a six-month sabbatical and the use of the company's apartment, my suspicions might not have been roused. The first time we were alone outside of the office I asked Russ what he thought.

"Of course he set you up, I saw all of his confidential correspondence about it. That's how Shadow kept up with what was going on, but I couldn't tell you directly what I knew without blowing my cover," Russ said one evening after the first of what was to become a bi-weekly salon hosted by Frances. "I see everything that passes through our network, remember. But I did feel bad about not telling you at the time. Hopefully you understand. Shadow has given me the OK to fill you in on the details now, but you've got to be very circumspect with this information because it is far more sensitive than you could ever imagine."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like the fact that SK actually told the judge what sentence he wanted you to get, that's what. Didn't you find it highly coincidental that the length of your sentence almost exactly corresponds with the time you have to complete this new project you've been assigned to? It's time to wake up, William. You have no idea how tightly things in the military/industrial complex are wired together. There's a reason I keep telling you that we are working in the belly of the beast. SK has been pulling the strings as if you were a puppet. Of course, he didn't take into account the fact that you would hook up with the psychedelic

community out on the coast and break free of the prison that your mind had built for you.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I thought that all of the executives' communications were encrypted. Without a copy of their private key there's no way you can read their email.”

“Correct,” Russ replied, as he tried to hide a sheepish grin.

“So are you saying that you have copies of everyone's private encryption key?” I asked.

“Yup.”

“No way! How'd you do it?”

“Simple,” he replied, “we outsourced the key creation and distribution project to a trusted vendor, a very trusted vendor, one that was kind enough to pass along a copy of each key to me for safe keeping.”

“That's not normal protocol,” I exclaimed. “How did you convince them to do that?”

A big smile came to Russ' lips as he said, “Shadow. He's the principal owner of that very trusted vendor. You still have a lot to learn about the Q-teams.”

“I suppose that you also know why SK framed me,” I petulantly said.

“Have you ever taken a close look at SiAmerica's officers and board of directors?” he answered. “All but three of them come from wealthy families, old money, deep social ties. They share a bond that is akin to a Mafia blood oath in many ways. That's the kind of loyalty that a black ops corporation like this has to have at the top. But the question then arises, how do they bring in some fresh new blood. You see they

realize that they are socially so inbred that every once in a while it is wise to bring in a young, ambitious, non-aristocratic up-and-comer like yourself.”

“You said that there were three higher-ups who weren't born into the right families. How did they get there?” I asked.

“The same way that you are being groomed for a top spot. With your criminal record there isn't another high tech company in the world that will hire you to work in their R&D cryptography department. If you want to keep working in your current field of expertise then there is now only one company that will hire you, SiAmerica. Check out the backgrounds of the three outsiders at the top and you'll find two drug convictions and, interestingly, one bigamist. Their transgressions are just enough to keep them from jumping ship and working for a competitor, and yet their crimes are still minor enough to get swept under the corporate rug, so to speak. You are a prisoner here, Will. If you want to keep developing better and faster wireless encryption methods, then you are now condemned to work at SiAmerica. Unless, of course, you change your mind and decide to go underground. In fact, you may have to reevaluate that idea now that SK has you in his sights. He needs bright guys like you, and he's not going to let you get away easily.”

“Why would he think that I want to leave SiAmerica?”

“Oh, I don't know. Maybe it was back when you were in touch with a headhunter and told me about it in Katie's diner. Remember that?” said Russ. My heart sank. He was right. In a flash it all became clear to me.

I have to admit that this conversation caused me to do a considerable amount of soul-searching. If what

Russ said about not having any other employment options was right, then what? And while Shadow had done his best to convince me that the Q-teams weren't breaking any laws, this was my first evidence that such was not the case. Reading other people's email was definitely a crime, and that was a line that I didn't want to cross. I had already had my fill of dealing with the legal system. On the other hand, I had to admit that there was simply no way to keep an eye on things, as Shadow described what they were up to, without breaking numerous rules and regulations that the System requires in order to perpetuate itself.

So as the true nature of this Earth Game came into better focus for me, I no longer felt any compunctions about keeping a watchful eye on the affairs of the power elite, that superclass of individuals who set the tone for things these days. Not only would I never be allowed into their inner sanctums, I no longer even had the slightest desire to join their ranks. And so, like millions of other psychedelic souls around the world, my dual life became second nature.

For a while, everything seemed to revert to what I came to think of as the new normal. Fig got a job as a legal assistant, and we settled into a pattern of long hours at work followed by what felt like all too short nights. Weekends were ours for the most part, but the weeks and months soon blurred together into the same kind of mind-numbing routines that are carried out by millions of other wage slaves every day.

Then late in November, without any advance notice Shadow came to town and invited Fig, me, and Russ to a private dinner in his hotel suite. He had news, and it wasn't good.

"Do you remember Ralua's occasional trips to Europe," Shadow was saying.

“Yeah. She went to do the medicine work that Apache used to do over there,” I answered.

“Well, that's partly true,” said Shadow, “but she also had another mission. She was our go-between with a man named José who had come into possession of some old documents that, unbeknown to us, others thought were worth killing for. We now know that powerful men were after those documents, and eventually they found them in the possession of José. Ralua had the only other copy. She died in a car accident on her way to meet with José, who we think may have at last deciphered the documents. José died in a house fire that began at about the same time Ralua's car was careening over a cliff. Does that help?”

“Not a bit.”

“Well, that's the main story line. Now I'll tell you a little longer version, and then we can fill the rest in with your questions.

“So, José, who lived in Portugal, had these ancient documents that he was trying to translate. Al was doing some research to help him, and Ralua would carry their discoveries back and forth between them so that we could keep email exchanges to a minimum. I should add that José had a good reason for not wanting anyone to find out about his old documents.”

“Obviously, someone found out anyway,” said Russ, “because José and Ralua got killed over them.”

“Tell me again why I'm hearing the details about this guy José only now?” I asked.

“Unfortunately,” said Shadow, “Q and I didn't completely untangle this story until a few weeks ago. All we knew, or rather suspected until then was that it simply couldn't have been a coincidence that José died

in a mysterious fire on the same day as Ralua's car accident. It seemed certain to us that these two accidents had to be connected somehow. Obviously something was going on. So Q and I examined some of the backup drives that Russ makes of SiAmerica's executive email and compared them with some other email we've been watching. Decrypting and then analyzing them took some time. What we learned has stunned us both."

Shadow paused for several heartbeats and then said, "We are now positive that it was SK, acting on orders from a group calling themselves the Guardians, who orchestrated the teams on the ground in Portugal that murdered Ralua and José."

For a moment nobody said a word, even Russ was speechless. He obviously hadn't been in the loop on any of this before. That much was clear from the shocked and frightened look in his eyes.

"Wait a minute!" I cried. "Say that again about SK and . . . and who did you say? Guardians? Who the hell are they? What's this all about? I'm not believing this."

Russ then chimed in and said, "I can tell you all that we know about the Guardians so far."

Calmly, Shadow said, "That may be a good place to begin. Go ahead, Russ."

"For the last few years we've established a pattern of orders being sent to SiAmerica from somewhere in the D.C. area," Russ began. "We don't know who they are or if they're with the CIA, FBI, the Pentagon, or the Jesuits for that matter. Their encryption and routing techniques are as good as it gets. Our best guess is that at least part of that group has access to whatever resources the NSA has to offer. Judging from the origins of SiAmerica and their board

of directors, I'd say that the Guardians represent the interests of what is euphemistically called the Deep State, which means that they don't represent any single institution, but rather are a collective of the top movers and shakers in government, intelligence, and finance. The cream of the power elite, in other words. Is that about right, Shadow?"

"In essence, yes," Shadow answered. "But first, let me back up a little and tell you the story about José and how he came into possession of a batch of some old parchment pages covered with strange symbols. At first, Al's research led him to think that José may actually have gotten hold of a fake copy of *The Book of Thoth*. According to one legend, it held the key to the location of a fabulous treasure, the missing gold and jewels that had been entrusted to the Knights Templar by countless nobles. But José didn't agree with Al. In fact, he came to believe that his parchment pages were, instead, connected somehow to the Mysteries at Eleusis, perhaps they even held the recipe for the psychedelic drink that was the centerpiece of those rites.

"So the saddest part of this whole affair could turn out to be that Ralua and José were murdered in vain, assuming that José was right, and that the secret those pages held wasn't about material treasure after all. But first let me connect the dots from José to the killers.

"It isn't known how the bulk of what remained of Rudolph's occult library made it into the hands of the Hapsburgs, but its eventual destination was the Abbey of Sacromonte, high on a hill overlooking the beautiful city of Granada. For a time, the abbey was one of the primary centers of learning in Andalusia and served not only religious needs but functioned as a university as well. However, at some point during the seemingly

interminable Spanish Inquisition, the Roman Church condemned many of the books in the abbey's library and ordered them destroyed. Fortunately, some far-thinking men of their time sealed many of these old books in a secret room, which was not discovered until centuries later. During a much-needed renovation, a hammer blow accidentally opened an unplanned hole in a wall, revealing a treasure trove of lost books in a sealed inner room. It took a dedicated young archivist many years to read and catalog this important collection, which the Roman Church immediately laid claim to. Each month, a representative of the Pope would travel to Granada and go over the index and summaries of the most recent translations, sometimes carrying particular books back to Rome in his diplomatic pouch, much to the chagrin of the young archivist, I should add. One day, not long after the pope's emissary left with a summary of some books contained in an old crate, one that allegedly had its origins in 17th century Prague, three men arrived from America. Two of them appeared to be there simply as body guards for the gnome-like older man, who was obviously in charge. After the archivist showed them to the formerly hidden library room, the burly guards roughly escorted him out of the building and saw to it that he was immediately let go from his position as archivist and permanently banned from the abbey.

“A crew of day laborers was hired, and quite a number of precious books were taken out of the old crates that they were in and repacked into sturdy shipping containers that were to be shipped to a Jesuit priest in Washington, D.C. It was on the final day of this looting that the gnome-like man instructed one of the young workers to take all of the empty crates out to the fire pit near the old stables and burn them. Obviously, they wanted no evidence left of their crime. The task of getting rid of the old crates fell to a young

university student, our very own José, who had taken the job in order to earn enough money to buy books for the coming school term. One by one, he broke the crates into smaller sections and threw them on the fire. It was when he got to one of the last to be burned that, when he ripped it apart, he discovered that it had a false bottom containing an old leather pouch. In the pouch were a few parchment pages, covered with some very strange symbols, the like of which he had never seen before. His first thought was to run after the three men from America who were about to drive off and to give them the pouch. However, his better judgment, or rather his dire need for money, caused him to pause and reflect on the fact that he alone knew that these obviously ancient documents were in the chest. They may be nothing important, even worthless, he thought. But on the other hand, they may also fetch a tidy sum in the murky world of stolen antiquities. Had he then known about the legend attached to these strange pages, perhaps he would have reconsidered and chased after the Americans after all, instead of just standing there and watching their automobile pull out of sight.

“José was far from an ordinary young man. He knew that if he tried to sell those documents right away there was a good possibility that the men from Washington would learn about his theft, and he suspected that this would bode ill for him. Also, he realized that the more he could learn about what these documents were, and where they came from, that there was every chance he could get a higher price for them than if he simply sold them to the first underground antiquities dealer he could find. Besides, the scholarly challenge of translating them was right up his alley, seeing that he was in his final year of Ph.D. studies in the College of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Granada, where he

had been studying to become a UN translator before deciding to head in a more academic direction. With the press of his studies, coupled with two part time jobs, José for a while forgot about the old leather pouch that he had hidden in the back of his closet. After receiving his degree, he was offered a teaching position at a small private school in Lisbon, and it was there, once he was settled into his new life, that he at last began the long and difficult task of attempting to translate the curious symbols on the old pieces of parchment that he had saved from the fire.

"Months turned into years, and José became ever more focused on unraveling the mystery of the old parchment. It was as if these delicate pages were able to exert a physical hold on his mind, to the point where it was difficult to tell if unlocking the secret of these symbols was a passion or actually had become more of an obsession, but little did that matter to José. At times he even thought of himself as a knight of old on a quest. In any event, there no longer was any question of his selling these strange documents. José's teaching position paid enough to allow him to live comfortably and still have the free time he needed to work on what he came to think of as an alchemical mystery story.

"So now I'll cut to the chase," Shadow finally said. "Here's how José got connected with Ralua. One of José's best friends was Miguel, remember him?"

"Yeah, he's the one who brought Raula's hat and stuff back from Portugal after she died."

"Right," said Shadow. "Well, Miguel and I go back a long way, but I'll save those stories for later. So I know Miguel and trust him completely, and he tells me about José and what he was up to, that he had some old documents that might actually hold the recipe for

the psychedelic drink that was used at Eleusis. Naturally I was interested. So Miguel arranges for us to meet José in Hawaii. Do you remember us talking about the AllChemical Arts Conference? The one that took place just a few months before Terence McKenna died?"

"How can we forget it. You guys talked about it all the time," Fig and I said in unison.

"Well, it was at the AllChemical Arts Conference that I first met José and introduced him to Ralua," said Shadow. "That's when the plan was hatched where Al and José would do separate research on those old papers of his, and Ralua would carry reports back and forth between them, with me covering the expenses. We still aren't sure how the Guardians learned that José had the old documents that they were looking for. With their resources it wouldn't be hard for them to do some data mining and learn about Ralua and her connection to our little project. Now we know that on the day before they both died that José sent Ralua an email suggesting that he had finally cracked the code to the symbols on his old parchments. We also know that one of the jet-setters who was staying in the same hotel as Ralua loaned her his car for the drive down the mountain to meet with José the next day."

"Who was that person? Was he connected to Ralua's murder?" Fig asked.

"We can get into that later," said Shadow, "but first let me explain to Will and Fig exactly what they have gotten themselves into because of Will's associations with Ralua and SiAmerica. And the news is as bad as it can get. There really isn't any easy way to lead into this. I'll answer all of your questions after I first cut to the chase. Will, there has been an order transmitted to SK that not only is your contract not to

be renewed at the end of this year, when your probation period is over, but it is to be terminated with prejudice. They plan on killing you, Will!”

For the next several minutes everyone tried to talk at once until Shadow regained control of the discussion and explained that I was considered a weak link of some sort in their apparently age-old pursuit of the documents that José found. My double connection, with Ralua and my employment at SiAmerica somehow jeopardized whatever it was that they were up to. The fact that Fig and I were going on what we were calling a pre-wedding honeymoon to the Amazon worked right into their plans. According to what Shadow had discovered, Fig and I were to be eliminated in an accident of some kind while we were in the jungle.

“I can't believe this!” I heard myself saying. “This just can't be real!”

“It took Q and me a while to believe it ourselves. But we had an advantage, we already knew the history of SiAmerica. Not many people do,” said Shadow as he pulled a thick manila envelope out of his brief case and pushed it across the table toward Fig and me. “Take this home tonight and read it by morning. A courier will come to your apartment at 6:30 tomorrow morning to pick it up. Just knowing its contents is dangerous enough. Being in possession of these papers, even though they are just copies, would put you in even more danger. What you will discover, as you read the contents of this packet, is that SiAmerica is basically the current incarnation of the old Phoenix program that the CIA ran in Viet Nam. And its primary source of funding isn't the government contracts for building electronic surveillance equipment. Their main source of money comes from the government sponsored drug operations that have been taking

place since before World War II. SiAmerica is the command and control center for many of the off-the-books black ops that the Deep State requires to keep everyone in their place.”

“That can't be,” I said. “I've been working there for several years now. Don't you think that I would have noticed something like that?”

“So what do you think is going on during those training exercises that are held in our sub-basement?” Russ asked. “Do you really think that those are all exercises? My guess is that you haven't allowed yourself to think the worst about what our company is up to. You just do your job, innocent as it may be, and then you look the other way when your conscience warns you that something isn't right. Well, what isn't right is the fact that those aren't exercises that are being run in our basement. Those are real live ops, and people are getting killed. And that's only the tip of the SiAmerica iceberg.”

For the next several hours Russ and Shadow explained in more detail how SiAmerica was founded to bring together the active remnants of the Phoenix assassination program, the crews bringing opium out of the Golden Triangle, and the money boys who jumped from the Nguyen Hand Bank to BCCI until it folded. The CIA Director at the time SiAmerica was founded selected Dallas as the corporate headquarters location. Dallas was still home to some of the trusted key players who operated the communications center for him near Fair Park on that fateful day in November, when the coup took place that removed the New England elites from the center of power. To organize the remaining Phoenix assassins into a civilian force, the Guardians chose one of their most trusted men. In Viet Nam he was known as Tran Phu, and he was also the man that Khun Sa named as his biggest customer

for Golden Triangle heroin. Currently he holds one of the highest positions in government, as once did that former CIA director as well.

We agreed to meet again in a week, when Shadow would return with specific details about what would happen next. Ultimately, he told us, we had no choice but to disappear. He could help us in the underground, but there was no way he could protect us as long as these mysterious Guardians thought that we were still alive.

On our way out the door that night, Shadow delayed me as Fig and Russ started walking to the elevator. "Will, we are still at a loss to understand exactly who the Guardians are and what they are up to, but Q and I believe that the answer may lie in those cursed documents that José stumbled on. Besides me, only Q and Miguel know this, but Ralua scanned those parchment pages and stored the files on her laptop. Her computer wasn't with her when she died. She left it with Miguel, along with her hat. That laptop is at her parents' house right now. When you see them next month on your way to the Amazon be sure to take it with you. That way, even if the Guardians eventually learn about the scans, Ralua's parents can honestly say that you took it with you when you went to the Amazon. And so it will be assumed that those files are now submerged at the bottom of a river, which actually may be the best place for them now that I think about it."

Epilogue

Fig and Will left as planned on what SK believed to be a pre-wedding honeymoon. Their first stop was a short visit with Ralua's parents in Phoenix, where Will was able to retrieve Ralua's laptop computer. From there they joined Apache and Al for several weeks of intensive work with the vine in an Amazonian jungle retreat. They then continued their journey further into the Amazon, where, with Shadow's help, they disappeared into the underground, being reported as having drowned when a dugout canoe that they were riding in capsized. Eventually, after assuming new identities, they returned to the states where they now live incognito, perhaps you even know them under the new names that they are using.

In the evenings after work, Fig has begun to test her skill as an author of books for young adults, something that she has wanted to do ever since, as a foster child, she found refuge from a hard world in the soft embrace of books. Will appears to be enjoying himself in the evenings by writing computer code and otherwise being his geeky self. What he hasn't told anyone, not even Fig, is that he has taken up José's work and is attempting to crack the code in the copies of those old, mysterious documents that he found on Ralua's laptop. What he hadn't expected the first time that he booted up Ralua's computer, however, was the welcome message that greeted him.

Will,

If you are reading this, then my worst fears have been realized. As you will discover, the scans of José's documents are deeply encrypted. When we were in high school, one night after we had been skating at Lord's Park, I shouted the password at you . . . I'll bet

Epilogue

you remember :-).

Willie (I still like to think of you as Willie), there is no turning back, because now you know with certainty that there is nothing wrong with your thinking. You had things figured out right after all. No longer are you going to believe the lies the system is telling you. The day has arrived for you to take charge of your own destiny, and you don't need to consult anyone else about what that might be, because you already know, deep inside, who you are and why you have incarnated here on Earth at this incredible moment in time. It is time to stop running away from the truth of who you are and to stand up and be counted.

This is your day. This is your moment, and the Genesis Generation is counting on you.

With all of my love,

Ralua (Laura to you)

* * *

Myths and legends only spare the nonbelievers.

About the Author

In recent years, Lawrence “Lorenzo” Hagerty has spent his time writing, podcasting, blogging, producing a lecture series, speaking at events, and being a grandfather. His professional career is as diverse as they come: attorney, consultant to Fortune 500 companies, electrical engineer, hot air balloon pilot, Internet/Java promoter, motivational speaker, movie stuntman, multimedia software developer, Naval officer, and technical writer. Hagerty was president of Success, Inc., which provided sales training and network marketing courses to other companies, and he founded Dynasty Computer Corporation, which sold home computers even before IBM did.

Hagerty is perhaps best known as the congenial host of the Psychedelic Salon, a regular podcast series showcasing interviews, lectures, and assorted additional audio sources that feature some of the brightest, most creative individuals from the community of folks interested in psychoactives. He is also the founder of the Palenque Norte lecture series at Burning Man.

[SOURCE: The Character Vaults at Erowid]

About This Edition of *The Genesis Generation*

An unedited edition of *The Genesis Generation* was first published as an audio book in 2009 and as an eBook in 2010. The paperback edition was edited in 2014 by Minot Tillson, who was also Lorenzo's traveling companion to the Palenque Entheobotany Conference in 1999 that became a major turning point in Lorenzo's life.

This paperback edition varies from that of the earlier audio book and eBook editions primarily by the revision of the final chapter. Originally this book was intended to become the first in a quartet of stories about the psychedelic community. Since more than five years have passed since the release of the audio book, it is becoming evident that there may not be any subsequent books published in this series after all. Therefore the original final chapter was shortened and parts of the first chapter of the second planned book in the series have been included in this edition. Hopefully most of the loose ends in the first part of this tale are now neatly tied up, except, of course, for the mystery of José's documents. . . . Perhaps there will be another volume after all.

After receiving Minot's very detailed edit on paper, Lorenzo entered the changes and typeset this book himself. Therefore, should you notice any errors, they were most likely already noted by Minot and not properly entered by Lorenzo . . . for which he apologizes.

