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HEART OF THE HEALER

By

MJ Politis, Ph.D., D.V.M.

Poems by R.G. Pellegrino, Ph.D., M.D.

mjpolitis@yahoo.com

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CHAPTER 1

On October 30, John Baldino received the Westchester County Doctor of the Year Award, a unanimous decision by fellow physicians, patients and even the nurses. He was cited for his solid service, innovative insights, and 110% reliability. On the morning of October 31, the Ever-ready Battery of Internal Medicine left only one explanation for his absence from the post he faithfully occupied for twenty-five years - "Gone Fishing".

Rumors flew around the office. The most popular was that "Gone Fishing" was Doctor John's version of buying that sports car, growing a grotty green goatee, or having that fling with a twenty-two year old who would make him feel like a young man for two glorious weeks, until she dumped him for another rich old fart, or a kid who understood that love and loyalty don't mix when you're under thirty. But the "when's" of the sabbatical from responsibility were delineated. "I have fifteen fish to settle scores with," the very unmarried Doctor John left as a confidential note to Gloria, his devoted secretary, to whom he trusted more inner facts and perspectives than his closest medical colleagues. It was for her ears only, which meant that by the fifth day, she would have shared it with her closest five friends. But, to Gloria's credit, she had five friends who really knew her. No one knew the real John Baldino, including himself. Introductions had to be made, assessments made on the life experiment, and decisions implemented as to the next step.

Baldino left enough back-up physician numbers and patient notes so that his services would not be missed. But as for his own whereabouts, NO one knew the whys or wheres of "Gone Fishing." The major mystery lay behind the fact that he had not taken a real vacation since the three-day weekend in celebration of completing his residency. The most reliable rumor around the hospital cafeteria table was that it had to do with that book he was writing for the last twenty years in his head, based on memoirs and notes that he spoke of, but showed nobody. Another was that he wasn't feeling so good and just needed a rest. That latter hypothesis would be consistent with the visit he took, under an assumed name, to the Alternative Medicine newby neuro specialist across town, who found something in his head that might need to be removed, treated, or untwisted. The CAT scans and MRIs from 'John Doe' lay on John's desk for weeks, as the headaches gave way to auditory hallucinations. At least, so it seemed to the nurses, who noted the scholarly, gentlemanly introvert who kept having arguments with people 'around the corner', who were never quite there when they took an objective look for themselves. Of course, the hospital records never showed John having gotten the CAT scan and MRI as ordered, and the psychiatrists never included Alive as an acceptable part of the bell-shaped curve of normality. Or maybe it was just one of those mid-life things.

He had always avoided the "places of change", allowing superspy brother Vincent and his legendary missionary-soldier parents to be overseas in the places in need of food, water, or a few weeks away from bombs and bullets. John was the family scholar, cursed and gifted with an IQ that demanded a career in research, and a heart that required that he "above all things, do no harm." It was a boring job, living a comfortable Ivy League academic medical life in Upscale Westchester Country, but someone had to do it.

Though born a fire sign, living in a land-locked town, John always had an affinity for the ocean. It was the place where solid ground ended and the infinity of space beyond your control began. It was where you could look over the horizon and feel what was beyond it. In Rockaway, you could "see" the other side of the ocean. But way out in Montauk, North and South shore met in a sliver of land that met the sea on Nature's terms. Bay and ocean were the same here, equally big, and equally eager to give you answers that you needed, even though they might hurt you before they healed you.

Off season house rentals on the Point were always a bargain. After Labor Day, all the tourists were back in Manhattan, even on the weekends. Rates were dirt cheap and shop owners actually talked to you about people rather than their inflated summer prices. But still, behind their eyes, lingered the thought - "The quiet is peaceful, but what if those loud-mouthed, snooty tourists don't come back next season?" It was a fear they kept inside themselves.

Fifth generation-Montaukian Kathy Brennan didn't know what John was or what he did. All she saw was the American Express Card gold card, a healthy credit limit, and the expatriate look in John's eyes when he brought his bags in from the car.

She noted a computer and reams of paper, which would become print or shredded evidence of frustration, and litter. "Are you a writer, Mister Baldino?" she inquired, with cordiality afforded a first-timer.

"I used to be," John replied. "When I was a kid, I wrote lots of poetry."

"This is a great place to be a kid again," Kathy offered Baldino. He didn't look like a boozier, doper, or those guys who would kill themselves with a revolver. Or if he did, he wouldn't mess up the rug. "What do you write?" she asked, with a summery smile and an Irish lilt to her fluid tongue.

"I'll know that when I've written it," he replied, holding in the rest of his answer behind secretive, bloodshot eyes and a tight lip.

He was an Ivy Leaguer from the Big City, Kathy noted. Calm, cool, never letting you see him sweat. But behind the renter's smile seemed to be the challenge of discovery, not the gloat of arrogance. Any words written would be well-earned, she postulated. Mister Baldino carried himself more like whatever professional title he held, rather than just a "mister." And as for what that professional title was, and his reason for renting her most wretched bungalow for inflated prices on the coldest, rainiest October on record - the Point was a place where privacy was protected. He was a high paying client who wanted to be left alone, and such people were the bread and butter of the "Pointers" who had protected Montauk from being "Hamptonized" for over a hundred years.

With the door closed to the world, and the window open to the bold Atlantic surf, John set up the computer, poured himself a Light beer, and opened up the "notebook." It had been twenty years or more. It smelled like a mummy's tomb, the blue-cloth binder flicking up musty dust that took at least five minutes to settle. But the words were intact and the print was very, very clear. The first page read "Poems: 1978-1982." Under it - a penciled inscription, "Don't dream it, be it." He remembered the Rocky Horror Picture Show that inspired the quote. Maybe it was real, maybe it wasn't. But the first poem was about more than a cult flick. It read:

*It sliced me and I bled. It's dangerous to bleed.
You become septic with hope and despair.
So you choose to recede into your white cell.
And it gobbles up all the pain.
Most of the time.
The man was completely paralyzed but finely tuned.
I walked into his room, kicked the tires, checked under the hood.*

*Yep, we keep 'em humming around here.
Suddenly, a presence. A sneak attack.*

*A frightened man appeared in his eyes,
screaming in anger,
fists pounding,
demanding to be released.*

*Jolted by the sudden personification of this inanimate being,
I froze.
I was wounded.
For a moment, we switched roles. Powerless.
Angry, frustrated and guilty. I ran away.
It's dangerous to bleed.*

John re-understood the meaning from this 30 year old case. But the story had to be told as it happened, from the view of the person who opened his life up to it all - God damn and bless him. From his pen and the painful memories would come the real story, straight from the source-point patient's mouth. John spoke in poems, but his patients spoke in stories, and it was time that those stories, entrusted to him for all these years, were written down. He gave a silent prayer to the Creator he hoped still existed, and the God he yearned was still kind. Perhaps the good Doctor's hand would be the right channel for that first patient's voice to finally be put into print. That writing assignment was thirty years overdue. He had been putting it off for so long, and now, as he felt his own life ending, very soon, and the headaches getting worse every day, for reasons no one he knew could diagnose, it was time.

My name is John A.K.A. Smith. Middle initials handed down to me by Daddy and Granddad, not the most famous, but certainly the most successful two-bit outlaws and bootleggers in Northwest Arkansas. No one forgot me when I was the best bowler in Arkadelphia, bringin' our team to a solid second place in every competition we entered - state wide. But they seem to have forgotten me in this place that's supposed to be about making people feel better, or at least TRYIN' to keep them alive. Why are all them whitecoated four-eyed bookworms ignorin' me?

I can still think with my head, laugh with my belly and itch with everythin' else. God, it itches. Maybe my body will hurt a little more today, and someone will notice. I can't move my hands or feet, and accordin' to the mirror in front of me, even my eyes. But I still itch. No one asks me if I hurt or itch.

These are medical experts here, best in the country, so Old Doc Henry told me when he got me into this place. Suppose no medical expert asks if a livin' corpse hurts, itches, or feels.

They talk about my case. "Central Pontine Myelosis" they call it. "Loss of motor function of voluntary muscles, retention of all sensory sensations," I read on the chart once, when they were dumb enough to stick it in my face. Near as I understand it, I got too much salt, ammonia or some other kind of toxic shit crushin' the bottom of my brain box. They got a Latin or Greek name for the place in my brain that don't work no more, the part that makes me kick when I've been hit, stand when I been knocked down, and reach out when I been

touched. Old Doc Henry always said that listenin' and feelin' was an art, so I must be a hell of an artist. I listen to and feel everythin' now. Can't move nothin'.

I can feel the touch of the nurse with the D cup breasts cleanin' me up. And the coldness in her own empty life as she looks at me, Patient Smith - Central Pontine Myelosis. Wonder if she knows how dead she is inside. Wonder if she cares.

I remember feelin' the hands of my wife, kids, and discretionary womanfriend when they came and said goodbye to me, not knowing how alive I was inside this body. That was a long time ago, or maybe it wasn't. Time feels so long here, and everything lasts an eternity.

Like now, I feel the intern poking me, looking for reflexes with his hammer, shoving needles into me like they don't hurt. "Don't prod me like I'm a Missouri mule or a defective piece of beef hangin' on the slaughterhouse hook. I'm a man, human, and alive as you are. Only problem - I'm locked in!!!" I feel like tellin' him that, but this one won't listen neither. Gotta be SOMEONE who I'm stickin' around here fer. Someone to pass whatever torch I still got inside me to. Near as I can understand it, the part of my brain that makes me able to do anythin' except breathe, sweat and, sometimes, cry, is shut down.

I hear the only cure for this is on the other side of the grave, when, and if. But if I can make just one doctor find the part of him that's human, the part of him that's ME. Maybe THIS next one has an open heart and a thinkin' brain. Maybe this smelly kid, who don't fit his lab coat or student ID tag, will hear me. "John Baldino," it says on his name card from Bronx Community College. Maybe he works for the Mob in New Jersey and he can bribe the Pope into ending this disease, or 'life', I'm livin, once and fer all. No one else will, and he looks like he don't fit in here. Makes two of us. But no matter how hard I scream, he's gotta listen. His ears don't look that big, all that hair coverin' them as he does the once-over with his tired eyes that . . .

I think he saw somethin'. Maybe he DOES see a life behind the lump of flesh. He's looking at me, and not listenin' ta them. "Yeah, kid I'm talkin' to you," I scream with whatever part of my brain can still talk. "Ya wanna know a secret? Ya wanna get yer soul set on fire? Ya wanna just let me think that I'm not totally alone, just fer a day, a minute, a second or two?"

Hey! - this WOP Hippie wannabe doc DOES see me. He's TRYIN' to talk with me, in the language of Silence. Maybe I should help him out by initiatin' the conversation. "Hey, how ya doin'? My name's John, same as yers."

I think he heard that. He's squintin' his eyes. Wood's burnin' behind them beady-brown eyes, which are gettin' bigger. "Hey, I ain't a ghost, or maybe I am. But I'm more alive than any of them assholes and morons who you have to call doctor, professor or, when ya screw up, 'Sir'.

He's backin' off. He wants to warm himself by the fire, but not become it. Bein' Alive is hard enough on ME, wonder what it will be like on HIM. What will it be like fer this young buck to feel so much, then be let go into a world where he can do so little? Maybe I should go back into my cave so . . .

Hey, he's coming out into the Light, asking me the Question. He's crossed that line, and I can't let him go back to what he used to be. "What do you want to give to me?" the Hippie WAP-doc is askin'. I smile with MY eyes, looking into his soul. "Life!" I scream out with joy, and sorrow. "Life!" Yours to feel, and preserve."

I'll probably go to hell fer overloadin' this kid's soul-tank with an octane that'll bust his engine. But it's a better place than where I am now. And hard as his life's gonna be, he'll be spared the kind of dyin' that's already killed most of the world already. The opposite of good ain't evil, it's lifelessness. And at least I stole one more convert from the Devil - God help me.

Three beers and five gallons of sweat had been spent on this first "fish". Who knew how much time was left now? John's head started to hurt again. It was an "amygdaloid" headache, or was it hippocampal? The limbic system of the central nervous system, as it was called, was a hazy collection of areas of the brain where naïve researchers thought they could assign clear functions. You 'thought' with the cerebral cortex. You 'felt' with the amygdala. You 'remembered' with your hippocampus. But what do you do when thinking, feeling and remembering all give you a pounding headache, rather than an invigorating life?

Manipulation of the acupuncture first aid points relieved the throbbing, but not the pain. Something happened. A presence seemed to come into the room, an uninvited friend. Friends were better than enemies, but uninvited ones were all John needed now

"I'm going outside now!" Doctor John announced to the fresh air, now stagnant with memories. He pushed his overgrown, straggly grey hair behind his aching ears, grabbed his fishing pole, and walked out to the beach. A small jetty of rocks led to a lookout hermitage point. From it, maybe he could catch a bass for supper. Or maybe it would be the fish catching the man this time. Only he, God, and Kurt Vonigat (as he remembered the spelling) would know for sure.

The incoming surf on the Beach, void of human footprints, reminded John of songs from better times. Rod on reel, he surrendered himself to the rhythm of the waves under his feet, and the song trying to crawl out of the basement of his deepest memories. He hated "My Girl". But the music was so catching, its beat carrying the first and second heart sound with a silent third beat that was always there, but under the range of hearing with the stethoscope. "Bom, bom, bom, Bom.... I got sunshine ... On a cloudy day. And when it's cold outside, I got the month of -"

"-May I?" a voice kindly interrupted. The authentic fisherman in JC Penny discount polyester had the face of a seasoned master. He was as authentic as you'd get at the Point; squid-smelling overalls, barnacle-scraped boots, and a smile that said "hello" in the warmest of tones. "You gotta have the right

kind of lure and bait to catch fish out here. Try some of mine. And the bass here prefer to be sung out of the water with Beethoven or Blues. With all your years of schooling, I'm surprised you didn't know that, Doctor Baldino."

"What else do I know, John A.K.A. Smith?" John asked the visitor, recognizing his face, eyes and Soul. "You were diagnosed with Central Pontine Myelosis - in 1978. That's untreatable."

John couldn't believe his ears. He had heard voices from the past, but seeing them? This was very new to his emerging 'condition', and twice as terrifying, even if the visual manifestation of the voices was not trying to scare him. Or maybe they were, in their own way.

"Except by angelic intervention," the fisherman related with a smile. "My name really WAS Smith. But my first name was Harry. My friends call me Bud."

"You can't be . . ." John moved his hand over to the fisherman. His tack was real, but he wasn't.

"I'm alive in spirit, Doctor Baldino. My body died after the accidental morphine dose."

"Not by my hand!"

"The nurses you talked to were moved by your - transformation. One of them, you know . . ."

"Who was she, Bud?"

"Patient-executioner confidentiality, John. After all these years of schooling, you should know that." He smiled, knowing so much, saying so little.

A multitude of emotions stirred up in John, all of them clamoring for control of his shaking body. But before any could take charge - the pain in the head, from the temporal lobe this time, just over the earlobes. From the hippocampus, maybe, the remembering part of the brain. Or, maybe, higher up in the multifunctional 'association' areas of the cerebral cortex, which were never mapped, or clearly identified, in any textbook.

"You should get that looked after, John."

"It's a headache. Migraines, 'Bud'."

"Doctor's make the worst patients, John."

"And are YOU my doctor?"

"One of them."

"It's nothing organic!" John insisted. "And it's inoperable, according to the books."

"If you say so, Doctor Baldino." Smith cast out again. A school of bass moved into the mini-cove around the rocks. "Ya wrote all those medical textbooks, books that helped cure everyone else. Worked yerself ragged ta save people from demon death and a whole bunch of diseases that Nature dumped on them, or they dumped on themselves. Now it's time to concentrate on your fishing."

The school of bass moved in, one of the fish edging closer to John's hook, nudging it with its snout, nibbling away at the loose pieces of bait floating away from it when –

“Hey, I got him!” Baldino screamed with exhilaration. “I never caught a fish before.”

“Reel him in easy, John. Slow and steady!”

“I got him! He's mine!” Baldino gripped his rod, the battle between helplessness and hope in his clenched fist. “I got him!!!”

“Easy does it, Doc. Bring him in steady and slow.”

John pulled hard, firm, and with the enthusiasm of a young buck on his first bronc. The fish decided to buck him, with a defiant swish of the tail that nearly tore the rod from his hand.

“Ride 'em, cowboy!” Smith exclaimed. “Pull him in! You got him. You got him.”

John rose to the occasion, feeling for the pull, tugging at the push, his hands thinking with the fisherman's instinct of knowing when to let the fish have its head, and when to pull that head in a direction that YOU wanted him to wind up in. Something like a surgeon knowing what to do with his fingers more than with his head, but . . . a lot deeper, and connected to a more fundamental intelligence.

The catch was a thirty-pounder, at least. Baldino felt like the kid he was just before he decided to become a doctor. Dirty, smelly, non-sterile, and irresponsible as any crab in the ocean.

“Hey, Bud! You know how to cook these? I have beer in the fridge and there's a game on tonight. It IS Monday, right?”

“If you want it to be,” Smith offered.

“What do you mean? Am I, dead, too?” John postulated, then felt.

Smith offered his hand to John - an appendage that was seen but could not be felt. “What the . . .?”

“Relax, Doc. You are still alive.”

“The headaches. . .?”

“The HOW of being alive is easy. The WHY is the most important part. You have another fourteen fish to catch. This one, you throw back.”

At his new mentor's fatherly nod, John tossed the fish back into the sea. It swam away, unfettered by the catch, the hook wounds on its mouth mystically cured.

“What now, Bud?” John readied himself for an answer to questions he had feared to formulate for so many years.

“You write about me, you, and what we've learned from each other. In a language that people who don't live on the Point can understand. I can put it more ethnic fer ya, but fer now, clear is better than colorful.”

“And tomorrow?”

Bud smiled, adopted the Arkansas drawl of his previous earth-bound life, and walked off the jetty.
“The Sun will come
out . . . Tomorrow . . . Wipe away the heartaches and the
sorrows . . .”

Never did Annie-gone-Country sound more off key, and on target.

CHAPTER 2

A good night's sleep, and a bad early morning dream about a Scrooge Christmas at the Yale Club, gave John a new perspective. It all had to be a set up. The college nerds ruled the hospital computers, and the high school Geeks had nothing to do all day except find ways to warp cyberspace into real space. Patient 'Bud' Smith, the Arkansas cowboy-gone fisherman, had to be a hologram projected from one of the other fog-covered bungalows lining the isolating cliffs, overlooking the Wagnerian Eastern Long Island shore. Either that, or someone left an unforgettable impression of the 60s in the punch bowl at the award's dinner. John had friends and enemies who were capable of that, and more. Maybe the headaches were also induced by someone with an ax to grind, but the voices in his head told him "no", in two languages, in echoing harmony.

Caretaker Kathy stopped by to check the electrical meter. "I just want to see that you don't pay for more than what you use, Mister Baldino," she said by way of explanation. "We don't cheat people here like the landlords on your Jersey shore."

"I'm not from Jersey," John offered, while preparing coffee for one.

"You sounded like you came from New Jersey." She helped herself to one of the complimentary cookies she brought over as part of the courtesy kit.

"I just SMELL like I'm from Secaucus," he offered back. "I took a long walk at low tide this morning."

She noted the drug bottles and syringes just-removed from the suitcase, the vials of medications cryptically labelled. "What kind of doctor ARE you, Mister Baldino?"

"A doctor who promoted himself to being a Mister while I'm on vacation." Baldino spiced the coffee with a few drops of 150 proof Irish cream, and sugar from a bag with no name. "A neurologist who's trying to understand the brain that beats inside the chest." He offered his guest a cup.

"Thank you," Kathy replied, the answers provided raising only more questions. She knew enough to let things alone. These weren't the eyes of a con man, drug dealer, or malpractice victim who lost his licence to the courts. There was "pilgrim" inside those portholes, not refugee. There was also much "alone" there, and not a healthy kind of lonely, either. And in a certain light, this drifter's receding hairline, wrinkles, and grey mustache with matching white beard made him look very Sean Connery, a catch at any age or condition. His taste in music wasn't bad, either. No down and out boozier would have Irish whiskey, Brazilian roast, and Beethoven for breakfast.

"So, you like classical music?" she asked. "I do, too. It beats anything else that's on the air this time of day. All that talk in the morning, it really bothers me, do you know what I mean?" she blathered out. "The last thing ANYone wants in the morning is to hear someone else talk and talk, about this, that, and everything else. That's why I'm still here. The quiet is so peaceful. No talk, babble, running on and on . . ."

While Kathy showed off her feminine charms and sarcastic wit, John listened, in the active way that he knew his patients needed. It was a no-charge house call that would wind down after ten "ah-huhs" and four changes of topic. Of more immediate concern was the next poem that needed to be told as story, after the visit ended and he could be alone with his thoughts, dreams, and nightmares.

CASE HISTORY: This is a 37 year old female who presents with a 2x3 cm mass in the upper left quadrant of her left breast. Her biopsy shows invasive carcinoma.

*Haphazard events
Converge with pinpoint accuracy.
To crystallize
Onto the crossroads of your life.
Suddenly it was there.
Holding you hostage.
Forcing you to observe
The slow strangulation of your aspirations.
Growing from multiple sites.
It becomes confluent
Across the path ahead.
Choking off options.
An arrogant invasion
Of your hopes,
Your dreams.
It becomes you.
It dies when you die.
Where did it come from?
Why won't it go away?
Soon there is nowhere to go.
Save backwards.
To familiar surroundings.
Hiding among dreams
That have already been realized.
Looking ahead to the past:
And hoping it can't find you there.*

Jack Baldino, M.D., grew up Italian Catholic, but he never was religious. Something ran the universe, but it had to be smarter than God, and kinder than the Residents who thought themselves his Master, and the Attendings who fashioned themselves High Priests. That was how it was for a first year intern, told on one hand to think for himself, and on the other that the boss is always right.

Doctor John's teachers had always known all the answers before. They could put right mathematical equations, wiggle out of and master any political quandary posed to them, and always make the room agree with point "A", even when the data said "B". But this time, the game was not about getting the 95, 80, or squeak-by 65 percent on the exam. The exam was life, and its players were real. No answer key for this one that will give ANYone a passing grade.

“If you don’t believe in God on my service, that’s okay,” Chief Attending Rabinowitz, a Jews-for-Jesus convert, commented on the first day of the Neoplasia Rotation. “But I require that you believe in the devil. And his name is ‘Cancer’. We have ten drugs to stop him, and a hundred combinations. But he has a hundred and one tricks. And he does not play by the rules.”

John Baldino had his healer’s heart opened by the ‘locked in’ Central Pontine Myelinosis patient in the Neurology ward. But neurology was a fluke specialty, representing no more than 5% of the total population in this or any other hospital. In biological studies, 5% is the level of statistical significance. If an event occurs, by chance, less than 5% of the time, it’s okay. Nature has its accidents, tragic as they are.

But the thirty-seven year old patient who initially presented with a 2x3 cm mass in the upper left quadrant of her left breast was in 100% pain, the kind that hit 100% of the people on the ward..

John was assigned her case by accident. This was a side-rotation, an elective side-step on his way to a career in cell biology. Why bother treating people one at a time, when you can develop drugs that can cure millions? There had to be a good reason why cancer cells divided and invaded tissue around them, no matter what the host environment said. There had to be a logical reason why cancer cells disobey all the biological rules, acting like they are possessed with a mandate of chaos, and on a mission to invade anything - anywhere - anytime.

Research was the real answer. It was just a matter of time, money, and getting some smart doctors like himself into the lab and out of scat rotations. Smart docs did that. Only mediocre ones treated patients one at a time. One by one is so random, so ineffective. But so much about the case of the thirty-seven year old female with a 2x3 cm mass in her left breast was not random.

In the first week of the rotation, why did she look like a model he dated when he was seventeen, then yearned for ever since? Why did she age a decade every day, as the mass came of age, evolving into a demon that wanted it all? It took what it wanted. The left breast, the left lymph node, the lung, the liver, the stomach, then, the brain. The chemo and radiation therapy did the rest. After twenty-one days, she looked old, ghostlike. The bald, wrinkled, emaciated, feeble ghost looked nothing like the picture of herself on the wall, taken on a photoshoot with her husband and best girlfriend two months earlier. A goddess would have sold her virginity three times over to have looked and felt so good, young and alive.

“I can take the picture down,” John thought to himself, and almost did. The 37 year old female with the 2x3 metastasized mass looked at them with mixed emotions. Something in her eyes said that she would return to those times. But would it be in that body? A body that reeked of burning flesh, mutilated by the first surgery, waiting for the next one? She was only 1/4 woman now, on the way to being some this, some something else, but what would that

be? Would she return to those pictures in her mind before the devil cancer took over her brain? Was it time to will herself to die? Could he help? John had read that if a patient was willing to die, intervention by those morphine drip “accidents” often was not necessary.

Maybe Doctor John and the 37 year old woman with the 2x3 cm metastazising mass could conspire together, to reach death before the vultures took her life. She was married to this cancer demon now, and it was ‘till death do us part’.

But, for now, the 37 year old patient with the 2x3 mass stared at the picture of herself, Veronica, and Lance on the yacht. Anger, hurt, or some other pain in her eyes? Would finding comfort in the past get her there?

The picture was crooked. The least he could do was straighten it. He had to commit to something. Hide the photo, bring it to a better light, or look at it with her. The dead are remembered, the dying are ignored. This once-beautiful wretch was not worthy of being ignored. Or, maybe, such was the case with the other, ordinary people in the ward who didn’t remind John of friends, relations, or superstars.

“A bad decision is worse than no decision,” John remembered from another Horowitz lecture, as he took the woman’s pulse, temperature and respiration. All were going down as she reached out to the picture.

John found his hands straightening out the photo, then getting a shudder in his bones.

“Thank you,” he could make out through her mouth, aching of sores but unable to say words because of muscle degeneration.

Harmonizing that sensation, a death rattle.

He looked down at her chart, noting a line he had never spoken. “You are welcome, Jasmine,” a name that meant beautiful one in his ancestral tongue, and hers.

A nod of the head, and a grasp of the hand; later, it was over. Why did this 37 year old patient decide to grab his hand for comfort and a launch pad to the other side? Why did Jasmine reserve this moment for him? And why did she seem young in her eyes again, at the price of her own life? And why did all the common faces around her look so human, familiar, beautiful, and connected?

Montauk was one of the only places on the East Coast where you could watch the sun sink over the Western horizon without the interference of a hotel, boardwalk, or the Jersey coastline. No wonder so many Eastern surfers did their California dreaming here. The picture came complete with aquatic props, perfectly-shaped waves delivered Hawaiian style from the South Atlantic.

Watching the waves seemed more interesting to John than watching the fishing line, after finishing writing about 'Fish Number 2.' Feasting his old, tired eyes on a mermaid riding them was even more appealing. The surfer girl was young, blonde, shapely, alone, and Southern. Every ride taken on the glass curl was celebrated with a rebel yelp that reeked of complete harmony. No Beach Boys or Backstreet Boys song could do her justice. The conversation started with a few smiles, then a hearty "how y'all doin'," as she waited for the next swell outside the breaker line. The tide delivered that line ten feet from John.

"Y'all catch anythin'?" she asked.

"Enough to keep me going," he replied, referring to her smile. He was too old to explain, and she was too young to need to understand, but maybe she did.

"What's yer sign?" she asked.

"Aries."

"You fish like a fire sign."

"And you surf like a water sign," he said, by way of compliment. In the South, it would be considered good manners. In the North, it was a prelude for date rape. Somewhere in the middle, it might mean one of those two minute friendships that keeps you going for twenty years, or the time of exiting the life opera, whichever comes first.

"What's yer name?" she asked.

"John... What's yours'?"

"Jaseminka."

John dropped his jaw, shocked. Jaseminka stroked the water, found a slot in the wave, and found her place in the slot, the zone that put her in synch with the universe.

As she paddled back, John saw the resemblance and the stages of life. Then, the scar on her chest where the 2 by 3 cm mass first started on patient Jasmine twenty-five years ago. But the scar on twenty-five year old surfette Jaseminka shone like a diamond! The source of the cancer was now the source of her life! A light which seemed brighter than the sun, moon, and stars.

John put it all together in his mind. But before the pieces could be put into slots in a tired filing system, she smiled.

"How y'all doing, John?" she said, again, meaning so much more. There was nothing but calm ocean "outside", and the sun froze in the sky, just at the point where the colors in the crisp, fall sky seemed brightest.

“What’s it like, where you are?” John asked.

“The ‘zone’?”

“Wherever.”

“It’s peaceful, harmonic, fun and connected, ya know? Body and mind live in different places, and the same one, all at the same time.” Maybe it was metaphoric, ditzed-out surf speak for ‘it’s a great day’, or maybe it was a literal description of the world Beyond, or Within.

“But can you get the New York Giants on Monday night? And do they keep losing against Washington and Dallas in the fourth quarter?”

“Huh?”

“Can you get pregnant if you don’t use protection?”

“We can ride the next wave together and we can find out,” she said, playfully.

“I can’t swim, Jaseminka.”

“I can’t either, John.” She extended her hand. Outside, a perfect wave materialized. The wall was solid, extending as far as the eye could see. It was the kind of wave one or two people could ride forever.

John’s mouth watered. But reality still hit.

“There’s no room on that board for me to ride on, Jaseminka.”

“Then we could ride on each other. It’s about letting go, John. Trust the open. It’s only scary until you jump in. Sometimes it costs you more to stay on shore than to risk drowning.”

It was the “NOT changing costs you” gospel John had delivered to so many patients, who then turned their lives around.

“John. Come on in - the water’s fine.” Jaseminka’s voice melted John’s fear. He took off his boots, overalls, and even left his wallet on the rocks.

“Geronimo!!!” he yelled, as he jumped into the water like a paratrooper aimed at nothing but complete victory, in a Holy War against ignorance, evil, and stagnation. “Shiiit!!!” he screamed, as the cold water hit his lungs and froze his arms.

But Jaseminka delivered more than her promise. The lifeboat offered was delivered - a surfboard freshly waxed and ready for boarding. Its sender was thirty feet away, about to grab onto the curl of the perfect wave, holding on to a piece of driftwood.

“Take it, John,” she said. “Y’all have a neat ride, now!”

Jaseminka found the slot in the wave, surrendering the driftwood to the ocean.

John watched. The mermaid he saved from the depths of hell had indeed become one with the ocean, in a magical melding of body, mind and spirit. No sight on either side of the Ozian rainbow was more beautiful. The orchestra inside his head added its two cents, offering up the Solti version of Wagner's Gotterdammerung finale. Just as the silence of the last note faded out, the next wave came in. "The Flight of the Valkyrie" moved John from oceanic survivor on a Hobie surfboard liferaft to a surfer, standing tall and proud in the slot of the last wave of the day.

By the time John reached shore, it was dark, and nearly a mile from his "watchpost." It seemed strange to see a tourist singing out Wagner all the way to shore. But the locals at the tavern took it in stride. Kathy was impressed and frightened. She didn't know that her Sean Connery-doctor man was also a surfer man. Neither did John.

CHAPTER 3

One question popped into John's head when he picked up the razor-sharp blade in the privacy of his bathroom, while contemplating a major change he never thought possible. "Have I had this beard so long that blood vessels grew into it?"

The only known photo of John Baldino with a naked face was on the admission application to medical school. The position of doctor, then scholar-healer, demanded a priest-like demeanor, and an arm's distance from the public he served. Maybe it was Jaseminka's smile, maybe the long ride on the perfect wave, maybe the reflection on the not-so-perfect model life. But it was time for a change.

When the fog in the mirror cleared, John hardly recognized himself. Neither did Kathy, when she barged in, under the banner of seeking medical advice on a stray cat.

"You look . . . different," she commented, not knowing what to think about the man, who went from looking like Moses, in the Ten Commandments, to something closer to Robert Redford, in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

"It got hot yesterday," he said, by way of excuse. "I was going to shave my head, but bald is beautiful if you're under thirty. It's a fact of life if you're over forty."

"Not if you think young," Kathy offered. "Young thoughts grow hair. That's scientific fact."

John contemplated the idea as he treated himself to a look in the mirror. It was worth a try. The trick about the "change game," after all, was knowing what to throw away and what to keep,

"Are you going to write AGAIN today?" Kathy asked. "You look like you need a rest."

"No. Just a different kind of fish."

Kathy was a woman of the earth, not used to seeing her men soar off to the stars without a forwarding address. Such trips made men lonely, and women alone. "My brother caught a tuna yesterday. After my divorce last year, I learned how to make great tuna casserole. Bet you haven't tasted tuna casserole without mushroom soup and cornflakes."

"No, I haven't."

"Good," she quickly shot in. "Seven o'clock, at my place'?"

"Eight."

She gave John the address, the script extremely feminine and inviting. It was another house call. But who would be the patient, and who would be the healer, was up for grabs. But before the play of healing lonely souls came the work of unwinding the ghosts of old debts. And the printed words in the poem brought back a 20 year-old memory.

"The advent of the respirator has enabled us to save the lives of many people who would have otherwise succumbed to an acute respiratory event."

Tubed and SWAN'ed. Buffed to a fine sheen. Your management is efficient.

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CONTROL YOUR OWN BODY. WE ARE IN CONTROL. WE CAN TUNE YOU UP UNTIL YOU ARE HUMMING LIKE A FINE MACHINE, OR WE CAN REDUCE YOU TO A PILE OF MEAT. WE ARE IN CONTROL, BABY, SO SHUT UP AND ... RELAX.

*Brief flashes of lucidity.
Punctuated by
Pentobarb comas
And periods of panic,
Terror,
And sweet confusion.
All blending into a pile
Of vomit, sweat and feces.
Anger.
Pain, frustration.
With no conventional means
Of expression.
You slip away again,
Quieted by the now familiar tones
Of morning rounds.
Mesmerized
By the rhythm of the daily recitation
Of the numbers,
That now quantify
Your existence.
The advent of a respirator ... that now qualifies your existence.*

Young John's eye caught the glimmer of the morning sunrise. A wise businessman always arose at such a time, or earlier. There was something synchronous about it. Symmetrically coherent. Nothing else for Bob "Powerhouse" Kleinman was more coherent than symmetry. For Bob Kleinman, the plan was simple. When you're eighteen, you make your five-year plan. You pick the best college. Work your way into the best business school, and combine cutting edge technology with any job you can find, or create. You work hard, keep your record clean, and drive your nose into the grindstone.

When you're twenty -three, you devise a ten-year plan, assessing where you are and where your company is going. If IBM moves where you want to be, it can't help but be that you wind up one of the VPs in charge of expansion operations. It all works, you get married, have the first of your two children, and prepare for the second. You work hard, keep your record legal, and create the grindstone that you push.

When you're thirty-three, you initiate a long range life plan. You get into your car, go to the young achiever's award dinner, pass by the school you went to. Wave at the doorman at the

building you own, and ram into a rusted flagpole after hitting a sheet of black ice. You break your neck, losing every function in your body, except the ability to move your eyes and say the numbers.

Sunrise was the only time of day “Powerhouse” looked forward to. It ended the night. Night time was always the worse time in the hospital. It seemed that 3 a.m. was the hardest. Gurneys would pass by his door, and he’d pretend that they were cafeteria dinners, sent back for the second, third, fourth, fifth, or tenth time that night, by an indignant patient down the hall suffering from Obsessive Kvetching Disorder.

The last act of the opera was not so bad - every show has its final curtain. But good drama was about solid structure. A chaotic last night, that was the thing he feared most.

Powerhouse insisted on wearing his watch. It reminded him of the numbers, and where he was.

Alcoholics died confused, and he would not count himself in that number. No matter how much sweat he woke up in, no matter how feces-laden his buttocks were. No matter how much vomit came out of his mouth from the food fed to him by someone else’s hand, he would not die confused. It was all about the numbers.

Easy enough for Robert Kleinman III to project the computer market and follow the stock trends.

Resident Baldino had put in a 24 hour shift, and he was stuck for another eight, with no sleep. A salami sandwich still smelled on his breath, accompanied by sweat that would make a seasoned locker room attendant head for the nearest open window. He asked the usual questions. “How are you doing, Mister Kleinman? How did you sleep? Can I get you anything?” Powerhouse gave the usual responses. “Fine. Good. Nothing new this morning. Did the chaplain stop by when I had that nightmare last night, or was I awake at the time?”

There were also the unasked questions. “Why me? Will I ever do ANYthing for myself again? Will I ever be USEFUL to the world, to my family, to anyone?” But he knew from business, don’t ask a tough question unless you’re prepared for a hard answer.

“What time is it?” Bob asked, as he felt the warm sun shine over his face.

“Six-ten,” Baldino replied.

“And the date?”

“September fifth.”

“Nine-five, seventy-nine. And your name?”

“John Baldino.”

“Four letters in John, seven in Baldino. Four and seven makes eleven, on nine-five, which makes a hundred and six. And when were you born?”

“Seven-ten fifty-four.”

“Added to a hundred and six, makes a hundred twenty three, and fifty four makes this a hundred and eighty-one day. What’s the Dow Jones at today?” “I don’t know . . . I, eh . . .” Doctor John fumbled through the Wall Street Journal, read to Bob by whatever nurse he could cajole, offering stock tips.

“Yesterday, up 345 points. That’s down two hundred from yesterday, which makes it a thousand more today, sitting at 370?” Bob asked, fighting the onslaught of confusion that kicked in with the morning meds and the fluctuating ammonia levels in his blood.

Bob looked toward the young doctor, hoping for some response. The look in the intern’s eyes said that he lost track of the numbers today, maybe his mind. But with just a little bit of help, with someone else to say the numbers for him. With someone else to sing the song of competency, he could find his way back home.

Would this doctor do his job? Would he have the courage to say the truth? Would this dullard, with clodhopper feet and a sense of economics that ended with his student loan payment, know the song?

“The Dow is at 403 today, Mister Kleinman,” the young physician finally said, with something resembling a rhythm. “Yesterday it was at 380. A twenty-three point jump.”

“As I predicted!” Powerhouse recalled. “And if it continues it will be 403 and twenty three tomorrow, 429, then 452, 483, 506 on Friday?”

“Today is already Thursday, Mister Kleinman.”

Kleinman’s face dropped.

“But the market is always unpredictable,” Baldino added, just in the nick of time.

“Maybe you can help me with my portfolio tomorrow.”

“Yes. I’d like that,” Powerhouse replied, feeling the oats of his career nick-name.

“Leave the numbers with one of my secretaries, the Nurse with the great tush I get to look at every time she leans over, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Not many days were that eventful for Bob Kleinman, but there were enough where the numbers got him through to make it worth the effort.

“Well motivated patients always get better,” Bob remembered, from a motivational seminar he attended before the accident. “Believing it might make it happen. Not believing it certainly won’t. I have to play the odds,” he thought to himself, as he felt the fingers in his hand count out another sequence of numbers coming out of a radio contest.

“The answer to the question ‘Why is the universe?’ isn’t forty-two. It’s forty two plus two,” he shouted out. Someone called it in, someone won the prize. But he silently celebrated, with enough hope to get through the next day, till the next night.

John Baldino, M.D., Ph.D., was “doctored out” after writing about Bob “Powerhouse” Kleinman. Not even the ocean could sustain him. King Neptune delivered him nothing - no fish, no visions, not even a golden oldie within the rhythm of the surf. It all felt so “normal,” even the sunset. But on the shore, his mind’s eye read in the sand “fish tonight,” in Italian, which he interestingly remembered. Maybe it was the way seaweed folded against clammy sand, but it beat seeing nothing at all

John called Kathy and told her there was a medical emergency he had to tend to. A baby delivery in the Hamptons with complications, in an old maternity patient. There was enough medicaleze in the excuse to buy him time until morning. But there was still another fish to catch, to either digest or let go, before going to sleep.

The drive to East Hampton took fifteen minutes. A torrent of rain, with near hurricane strength winds, washed out the bridges and any chance to stand firm on any pier. Ordering the “fish of the day” at Nikos’ Diner was as close as John would get to the Italian prophecy, promise, and threat delivered by the seaweed telegram.

The bass was a bit undercooked, but well covered by special sauce that hid a multitude of culinary sins and unsanitary odors. The regular customers paid with paper and got their change in coin. The perky blonde waitress verbalized every penny, dime and dollar exchanged. Maybe she could only count numbers with her mouth. Or maybe it was just to show boss Nikos that she was not stupid, vulnerable, or available. Still, it reminded John about “the numbers man,” Kleinman, who knew that being a number one guy was about being on the job one hundred and ten percent of the time.

Sensing the angels, or demons, reading his mind, John thought, "Where is Kleinman now?" Was Powerhouse a CEO of the new computer company? A math whiz at MIT? Or maybe Kleinman had reincarnated as this waitress who could spout additions, subtractions, and percentages faster than any pocket calculator, and three times as colorful.

The waitress smiled John's way just as the elder Baldino flashed on this new game of metaphysiological science. No words, no explanation, no judgements. Then, another twist, in two dimensions.

Someone turned off the baseball game and flicked on CNN. Just in time for Science and Economics - a new installment. The intros were lamely delivered by an accentless commentator, who sounded like he was from nowhere. The computer graphics were kinetic enough to draw a young audience, but not creative enough to sustain an older one. The close shot of the featured guest, however, looked very familiar.

"The stock market is an animal whose behavior is predictable if you look at the numbers. Rises and falls are always proportional to each other, with a reproducible wavelength frequency for each stock, kind of stock, and country . . . Let's follow the numbers for IBM, for instance. . .

Bob Kleinman never looked better. John checked the T.V. screen, his glasses, and his clammy feet, to see if there was still ground under them. "This IS video, right?"

"Yeah," the waitress said to the clueless tourist, who seemed more crazy than drunk.

"And this kind of video was not around until 1980. Right?"

"I guess so."

"I saw Bob Kleinman as a patient in 1976."

"So that means this was shot in-". The tube flashed on the year. 1998. Then the date -

"April first," John read. "I knew it was a trick. Bob Kleinman was a quad, paralyzed from the neck down.

"But not from the neck up," the waitress asserted. "And how can he be paralyzed? He has his own TV show . . ."

"Shot in close up, from the chest up," John noted from the shots. "Did you know that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was in a wheelchair for his last two terms in office?"

"The guy who charged up San Juan Hill?"

"The guy who convinced the country that 'we have no fear except fear itself,' after he convinced himself of that."

"Bob Kleinman is a gimp?"

"Not anymore," John said. The television screen revealed a man who spoke volumes of truth with his mouth, and even his hands. Kleinman had not only mastered the numbers, but the music. Information, wit

and humor melted together, into something that awakened minds and spirits. “I guess the bullshit we distribute is true,” John continued. “All well motivated patients - and people - DO get better.”

John took down Kleinman’s “power prediction.” He earmarked a check and its profits for the Fairfield spinal cord research foundation, and the retirement emergency funds for old comics.

CHAPTER 4

Kathy looked ten years younger with her new hairdo and dye job, and that hot red number that lay in the back of the closet for way too many years. John noticed, but he didn't say a word. Not one compliment, not one insult, not one raised eyebrow. Something was very wrong.

"So," Kathy asked John, as he prepared the morning coffee with a smile that seemed all too satisfied. "What was her name?"

"Huh?" John replied, dumbfounded.

"Okay."

"Huh?"

"The baby you delivered last night, Doctor Baldino?"

"What was HIS name?"

John's eyes turned downward. He was never a good liar, in or out of court. It was why he had to be a great doctor, in and out of the operating room. Still, bluffing was a necessary skill - a tool required in a game of deceit, started by a cave man way back when, who decided that it would be easier to cheat his way to the front of the chow line than to earn it.

"You look different today, Kathy," John said. "A great kind of different."

She folded her arms and asked the question she feared the answer to. "Are you married, Doctor Baldino?"

"Yes," he replied. "To my patients."

Kathy had a few workaholic "almosts" who wound up being more promise than persistence. Besides, as a "you are what you are, not what you do," woman, she never understood 'work' as a valid mistress or wife. There had to be something else. "Are you gay? Not that there's anything wrong with that."

"Seinfeld lives," Baldino added, remembering the immortal episode from that show about nothing, that filled so many unfulfilled lives with something.

"And are those ghosts you write about alive, too, John?"

Reading one's eyes, mind, or bank balance was just the way women do war with men. But spying on the stories and poems was another matter. "MISS Brennon. What I write is for ME."

"And the ghosts?" she shot back, driven by concern for her new beloved's soul. "I've seen artists who spend more time on the other side of reality, John. They don't come back, and they hurt in ways that no one can treat. Happy here beats enlightened anywhere else, John."

Kathy hugged John, conveying with her body what her words could never say. She was terrified of the demons AND angels who would visit him. The headaches seemed to be getting worse, and the way he looked at the ceiling and the sky told her that the voices inside his head were getting louder now.

“I think I love you, John,” she admitted. “Is that okay with you?”

John answered with a firm and tender grip of his hand. The trumpets inside his head had called him back to battle. But, for just a moment, he could afford to enjoy the comforts of being a real man rather than a metaphysical warrior - MAYBE.

The real issue, however, lay on the next weather-beaten, sweat-soaked page of the blue binder.

*I don't believe in absolutes.
I have seen the cripple
Defend the crutch
Against the bed,
And I have seen the tortured
Defend the pain
Against death.
And I know that the spark for life
Can be rooted in a constant fear
That things will get worse.
I don't want to believe in war-torn countries,
Disillusioned children, lonely deaths.
I have seen a baby die in its mother's arms,
And felt the sadness
Of permanent loss,
And I know that the spark for life
Can be rooted in the belief
That things cannot get worse.
I am tired of adhering
To the self-serving dictums
Of title-laden skeletons
Of their former selves.
I have seen the ravages
Of arbitrary authority
On the young mind,
And I know that the spark for life
Can be rooted in the hatred
Of those who erected your personal prisons.
I want to believe in the fluidity of fantasy
In the power of the human mind
To create beauty,
From the raw materials of reality.
I have to believe.
The alternative*

*Is just too hard to accept.
I don't believe in absolutes ...
I have to believe.
The alternative is too hard to accept.*

“Multiple sclerosis is a disease that stops you from walking,” former NFL fullback Jack Newcastle told 23 year old John, when he was doing his physical rehab rotation. “The glass was full to the top when I won the Superbowl. It was half full when they told me I had MS. Guess it’s half empty now, right, Doctor?”

“Research is getting very close,” Doctor Baldino replied. “And well motivated patients have a better chance of getting better than people who accept things as they are.”

But Newcastle held firm. “Look, doctor. The score is MS twenty-five, me two field goals. And it’s the end of the fourth quarter.”

“You’re under thirty,” Baldino countered. “If you just hold on, keep up the rehab, do the exercises we’re recommending . . .”

“I’d rather have a better pair of crutches. Life in a wheelchair isn’t so bad. I’ll take up basketball.”

But though the words looked like they belonged in a United Way inspirational commercial, Newcastle’s eyes were not. Was it the pain? All those unfulfilled expectations about a fast recovery? The hopes of victory in the war against disease, shattered by loss of the first few battles?

For Bronx-born Baldino, this was more than he could handle. This was the Superbowl champ, who brought his team back with three TD scores in the last two minutes on more than one occasion, and against Washington and Dallas, the most hated teams in the NFL to ANY New Yorker. What happened to this hero? Why did the cheerleading not work this time?

Numbers worked for Powerhouse, the quadriplegic who was trying to make a comeback with the counting movement in his motionless fingers. It was worth a try for an athlete who still had partial use of his legs, nearly complete use of his arms.

“A paper I read yesterday showed that seeing yourself run, makes you walk, or maybe even run.”

“Believe it and it will happen,” Newcastle countered. “Most of the time it doesn’t happen.”

“But sometimes it does, like the game you played against San Francisco. You showed that guts beats glamour. It pulled me out of a slump at exam time, and got me into med school.”

“I told you, Doctor. I want to go home. Give me some painkillers and a wheelchair. I’ll be okay. Save the hope and glom for those who can use it. I’ve had my share of glory already.”

The words were noble, the sentiments morose. Newcastle had accepted it all, so easily.

“Can I have your autograph?” Baldino asked.

“On the consent form, to do what?”

“On a photograph for my cousin Nick. He wants to be in the NFL one day.”

“Never give up the dream,” Newcastle wrote. But it didn’t apply to him anymore. He had joined the subspecies of human called “patient.” He had stopped being a person, a health care consumer, a medical client. He had become merely “patient”; helpless, living passively while everyone else made things move. It was less painful that way. Better for everyone else, too, maybe.

The weather on the South Shore of the Point cleared, as did John’s perspective on the way the Dickinsonian *Ghosts of Patients Past* passion was supposed to play out. It was a matter of faith and smarts, just like biomedical science. Whenever you read a research article, you had to accept by faith that the studies were done, that the numbers represented data from real animals and/or patients, and that the editors did at least a peripheral statistical accounting, to catch investigators who chose to invent data that fitted perceived, rather than real, clinical fact. You read between the lines of the “other investigators reported’s”, “it has been suggested’s,” and “studies to further investigate these hypotheses are underway’s,” to ascertain the author’s ultimate agenda. Where was it written that ghosts or angels had the right to rule people? Maybe, as the Yaqui Indians claimed, the “beyond world” and the “real world” influenced each other.

The headaches had gotten worse during the last writing session. So did the hand tremors and loss of body sensation. Was it a prelude to tumor-induced paralysis, or an out-of-body experience heralding him to another mailing address?

The windless beach around the jetties still held no footprints, save that of John himself. But there was no shortage of garbage that had washed ashore the previous night. No Greek, Latin or Italian messages were written in seaweed Script or bailer-twine Bold. In front of John’s eyes appeared an indigent Beachcomber with a metal detector. His shining lance and PBS burlap bag left solid prints in the sand. His hobbled walk was distinctive, slow, but he was upright. The number twenty on the back of the red jersey was still readable, even though it had been faded by the sun, wind and rain.

“Jack Newcastle. Is that you?” John screamed out, from his watchpost beyond the breakers.

“Are you talking to me?” the Beachcomber inquired, apologetically.

“Yes! You medical miracle!” John ran off the jetty and on to the shore with the enthusiasm of a scientist-sailor who just discovered a new medical continent. “I KNEW the drug trial I put you in would work. You, me and drug AT305 beat MS. You’re walking here! You’re walking there! You beat it, Superbowl champ who beat demon death!!! Jack Newcastle, number twenty, is still number one!!!”

The Beachcomber froze. “I’m not him anymore! I’m not anybody anymore!”

John took a closer look. The PBS burlap bag wasn’t for collecting shells, it was to pick up garbage. The metal detector was for spare change. And the number “20” on the jersey was his prisoner number. The medico ID bracelets on his wrist matched, held together by a chain. Then, a loud beep. Newcastle picked up a cellular phone.

“I’m finished cleaning up this beach. Where do I go now,” he asked, in a voice that said “defeat” with every quivering word.

“Await instructions and remain stationary,” the reply.

“Let me see you walk!!!” John said, remembering the day when all the experts said that Newcastle’s days of standing on two feet were over. “Let me see you walk!!!”

“Yes, sir,” the reply, with downturned eyes.

The walk was gimpy, but symmetrical. Plantar placement and toe spread were all 95% of normal.

“Jump! Can I see you jump?!” John requested. “Like the time you vaulted over three lines of defenders into the end zone, against the Redskins! Make like I’m the line, and you’re the Heisman Trophy winner of the year!”

John rolled around in the sand, making like his hundred and seventy pound bod of flab was a three-hundred and fifty-pound ball of solid muscle. Newcastle accommodated every roll with an effortless jump, every tackle attempt with an evasive sidestep, executed with minimal effort.

Revved up for action against the invisible Washington line at the other end of the beach, John stuffed a washed up ventilator bag with sand and twirled it in his hand. “I always wanted to throw a pass to a winning end. Run out for a pass, Jack!”

“I was the quarterback, “ Newcastle commented.

“Right. And I’m the punter.” John backed up, kicking the customized ball up with a beautiful trajectory and a record hang time. It landed in Newcastle’s arms - a miracle that served to frighten the winner of three Superbowls.

“Run, Jack,” John said. “Run it in.”

“I don’t run anymore,” Newcastle related. He fondled the football in his hands, like a lover who had just been betrothed to another. Tears came down his eyes. “I don’t run anymore. All that ‘forward’ hurts too much.”

“You have your health, Jack,” John offered, keeping the distance required between men, instantly bridged by women. “If you have your health, you have everything.”

“Doctor Baldino. If you have your health, you have the POTENTIAL for everything.”

The concept needed some thinking.

“Doc,” Jack offered. “Who is more important? A guy who can make someone in a wheelchair laugh, or a guy who can make him walk again?”

“The guy who can make him laugh?” John asked.

“That’s a question, Doc. I asked for an answer.”

“Which is what?”

“If you give up your dreams, you die, right, Doc?”

“So the scriptwriter in ‘Flashdance’ wrote.”

“Ex-sports stars are supposed to go into coaching, broadcasting or acting, right, Doc?”

“Traditionally.”

“When you play football, you know the rules of the game. Ten yards equals a first down, a hundred yards from zero is a touchdown. How you get there depends on what your defense is doing and what your offense can pull off. Even when you call your own plays, things around you say if you throw, run, fake, or punt. It’s about being a soldier, not a thinker, Doc.”

“Your playing was brilliant.”

“It was instinct. I was obeying Nature’s orders. When I had to make my own orders outside the field . . .” The frozen stare of failure and damnation overtook the once-invisible gridiron marvel.

“Doc,” he continued. “Rats can swim, right?”

“If they have to, to save themselves from drowning.”

“And if you put a rat into a new maze, and set the game up so he fails each time he tries to get out or get the cheese, mighty mouse gets mousy, right?”

“The rodents become more passive, yes.”

“And if you dump that rat into a water tank, a foot away from a platform, it sinks to the bottom. The survival instinct is gone.”

“Yes.”

“Death by drowning isn’t so bad. Dying slowly with bad booze, bad women, bad T.V., bad drugs . . . Lots of bad makes dying slow. But you learn how to be helpless. I became the Heisman champ of helpless.”

“I can help you with your problem.”

“With ‘good’ drugs? I’m the wrong kind of person for ANY drug trial.” He reflected, bravely facing the inevitable. “I’m the kind of person who goes through life because he has to, not because he wants to. Which kind of person are you, Doc?”

“One who wants to help the rats who can’t save themselves from drowning?”

“That’s another question, Doc.”

John felt “found out” at the deepest level.

Newcastle got buzzed. “Proceed to next assignment,” the chain-gang supervisor ordered.

“Gotta go, Doc.”

Newcastle walked down the windless beach, but his feet left no prints in the sand this time. Could he be a prisoner in Purgatory, or a place far worse? Dare the bold Baldino look down at the sand himself to see if HE was leaving footprints on this beach? Twilight was a zone between day and night. How much this beach seemed like one of those transition areas between life and death, the two-AM “condition” in the hospital which could take someone either way. Lightheaded, Doctor Baldino looked straight ahead at the sunset, and the supper fish that jumped out of the ocean into his catch bucket.

CHAPTER 5

“Life is long periods of boredom punctuated by brief moments of terror,” was the thought John woke up to on fish #5 day. Maybe it was the description of the soldier’s perspective of war, from the Ken Burns documentary he had on in the wee hours of the AM. Maybe it was the wake-up radio playing “Desperado”, telling every rugged-individualist cowboy to “let somebody love you before it’s too late,” with music that accompanied lone range riding so perfectly. Or maybe it was because Kathy wasn’t around to fix a sink, check a meter, or even ask about a medical problem.

“Loneliness scares a young man, but it sustains an older one,” Baldino remembered from the Rolodex of Einstein quotes in his head he used in cerebral emergencies. But the poster of Uncle Albert wasn’t around to say, “Johnboy, how many times do I have to tell you? Life is supposed to hurt harder for people like us, because we’re supposed to be useful to people like them.”

It was the “us-them” thing again, and there was no Chief Resident, or Master Attending, to ask for advice, opinion or perspective. Again, another quote practitioner Baldino seldom used, but often considered, came to mind. “When there are no fathers, uncles, or grandpas left to tell you what to do, THAT is when you become a man. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance, AND the responsibility of an open slate that YOU write for YOURSELF.”

The quote was too long for Einstein. Too direct for Jefferson. Too poetic for the nickel and dime motivational speakers who needed followers to pay for their mistresses and/or twelve-step recovery program. But it seemed like a good idea. Maybe John wrote it, all by himself. That thought seemed most frightening of all.

The water for the morning coffee didn’t want to be boiled. Ten minutes under maximal heat, and still no bubble, steam or warmth from the cold steel pot. “The half second delay stretched out?” John considered as the ‘why’ explanation this time. In a “normal” brain, the unconscious sees reality at least a half second before the conscious mind does, setting the stage for what we perceive as “reality”. That was experimental fact. What if the half-second delay was expanded into ten minutes? “This water could already be boiling hot, but an abnormal brain might not see it yet. I’ve diagnosed tricks the unconscious mind plays on the conscious mind in patients, maybe that’s what’s happening to me. But why?”

Therein lay John’s pain and passion - ‘why’? Organic causes for the blackouts, hallucinations and loss of body sensation could mean free flyer miles on Astral Airways with Shirley McClain, et al., but surgery was clearly the medical indication. Areas lit up in John’s brain scans that were not textbook variety ANYthing. Or was this the prelude to Alzheimer’s Dementia? Was it karmic justice that a brain-doc come down with a disease that ate up, for real, his favorite organ first? Writing his memoirs while he could still remember them would be more than “artistic”. It would be vital if all of the work John had done, and all the work so many others put into him, was to survive.

Suddenly, the idea of just being “weird” in a White Rabbit sort of way didn’t seem so bad. The oldie station blasting out Grace Slick’s 1967 rendition of that call to astral arms seemed a comforting coincidence, or a convenient perception. Either way, there was only one way of the Enchanted Forest . . .

The print on the paper was blurred beyond recognition. But one name, buried within the poem, reminded John of the timeless story that had to be told, through his rapidly aging hand.

Bianca Pappadopolus, RN, was hot to trot, attractive, unmarried, and a nurse. And young John knew what it was like between cops and nurses. Those professionals, so close to death on the front lines, held so passionately to life, exchanging essences of fluids and self in the time it took civilized people to acquaint themselves at a bar, and with a lot more class.

But John Baldino was in training. No time for pleasures, no time for smiles, no time to enjoy any moment of life when any patient was being robbed of it. No time for soft whispers. warm embraces, gentle reaffirmations of life in the midst of all this death. Not even for a quickie-five minute recharge of perspective.

“I have to stay focused,” he told himself. “ Five minutes off duty could cost a patient five years of life. You could read a crucial research paper in five minutes, come up with five new ideas, or eat a real meal that will keep the body going for another five days.”

It seemed logical enough, and necessary. If you felt for everyone in a place like this, it would drive you mad. A certain level of mental anesthesia was required to be an effective doctor. Your job is to get people better, not “feel their pain”. Besides, “it puts you into a hole you can never crawl out of”, he recalled from a MASH rerun, delivered so humanly by the show he loved, and cursed, for getting him into this line of work.

But there was also something else. A young physician had to become an old man very fast if he was to become a good doctor. “Being a physician is a calling - like being a priest”, he recalled from Alvin Thomkins, a burnt-out GP working on his third wife, and paying alimony support by spending more time as a medical consultant for attorneys than a healer of bodies, minds, and spirits.

Yet Thomkins was right. The healer is on the side of life, or on top of the problem. When you call in a priest, it's to deal with exorcisms in the attic, suicidal depressions in jail, but never the normal business of every day life. “We're called in to keep the biological party down when the crowd gets too drunk or stoned,” he rewrote in his blue notepad. “Or they call us the next day, when they've lost the reason to live because they gave away their house, dog, or lover in a game of strip poker - so they were told.”

“I can sure use a party now,” John recalled to himself, as he looked out the window at a group kids not much younger than him, working on their third beer. Some would enjoy the carnal pleasures of the night sober. Some would get bombed to the gills. Some would lose their inhibitions by dancing between traffic instead of walking around it. The “peasants” who didn't get into med school seemed rather stupid on one level. But they were alive, brightly clad in every color in the rainbow except white. They even knew how to find something valuable in disco. Maybe they would need Doctor John's services the next day, maybe not.

Advancement from Intern to Resident had its perks. You could tell more people what to do, get a better-looking nametag, do more things without asking permission first, and get more professional respect from the nurses. But as for getting their friendship, or love . .

The graveyard shift on the seventh floor was quiet. It was a usual night of emergencies. A code that pulled a 49 year old baker out of fibrillation so that he could be told, again, that he wouldn't reach fifty unless he lost some weight and stopped smoking two packs a day. A lawyer with dysentery acquired during a victory celebration at Taco Tijuana, after he helped an American movie company win the right to continue employing Mexicans for ten cents an hour. A delirious painter from Soho, claiming internal trauma with her deceased husband, who got referred to psychiatry.

But there was the good stuff, too. Three new patients were admitted, and five went home - walking, this time. He noticed something on the radio - FM tunes and DJs, like in the days when radio was a creative enterprise and not just a showcase for recycled disco, copy-cat rock, or the new craze seeking to invade the minds of the most alive city in the world - country.

“What is that?” Baldino asked Nurse Pappadopolus.

“John Coltraine,” she replied, with a smile that felt warm, and hot.

The saxophone oozed something very “New York” to Baldino, the town he imagined in his head during the magic hour, that time of night when the suburban trains stopped, the bars closed, and all of the action was in more intimate surroundings. Then he felt something new - the sterile noise evolved into quiet, a very loud silence that deafened his ears. But it also awakened his senses.

“Pathology,” he said.

“What was that?” Bianca asked.

“That tune reminds me of the morgue at Pathology. Did you ever notice that people who cut up dead bodies always have great taste in music, and in a quiet way, are a lot more alive than . . . well, ya know.”

“You can't play the blues unless you pay the dues,” she continued in a half-mocking manner. A divorcee who hit the over thirty mark with more beauty than she ever had in her twenties, Bianca knew what she was talking about. “The older the wine, the sweeter the nectar, if you sip it slowly, “ she said with inviting eyes, penetrating into John's emotion-numbed soul.

True, it had been a long time since he had a solid eight hours of sleep. But was he dreaming? Was he feeling a rhythm here? Why were his questions answered one musical beat after he asked them with his mind? Was John Coltraine his wake up call to Life? And was Bianca Pappadopolus, RN, his guardian angel? What magic potion was making his body feel light as a feather, opening the gate to project himself anywhere he wanted to be. What was this energy that needed no power to be expressed? All inquires were answered with one silent smile.

This wasn't about sympathy love for someone who's dying, or playing the knight in shining armor for a young, vulnerable patient who needs someone to give her a reason to live.

"No," he told himself. Bianca has to be taken already. The prettiest girl in town always has a date on Saturday night. right? Or maybe it's all a set up - she's a guy. It wouldn't be the first time, and it would destroy my career before it even -"

"Do you want a bite?" Bianca interrupted, cutting up a thank you bribe fruitcake, left by the baker's wife in 24B.

"Yeah," Baldino replied, his eyes on Bianca's hands this time. A man is fooled by every emotion a woman expresses except lonely, and the queen of the prom had been without a date for a long time. No one asked, or closed on the deal, because everyone assumed she was spoken for. Or maybe her standards were too high, Maybe she was a woman who was more interested in the taste and age of the brandy than the alcohol content. She also had that look of transiency. She was heading somewhere else, someplace where dead spirits don't inhabit so many live bodies,

Coltraine led to BB King, fruitcake at the nurses station led to breakfast at Bianca's.

A week later, Bianca followed through with her plans to go to Africa, Nepal, and Fiji - alone. Doctor John remained behind. Someone had to be "responsible." But there was a part of Bianca in every nurse, patient, and bakery clerk he ever met from that night onward.

Sunset felt warm on the barnacle-coated watchpost, despite the chill of a Northeast wind, heralding one of those long, cold winters. By passion and prescription, John kept his line in the water. Fish for supper seemed appropriate. If it was too small, or not appropriate for his consumption, the lone gull flying above him would get it. He, or she, was bold to hang out on the jetty for the big score, refusing to accept fishing bait as snacks, because it could be used to catch something bigger. The bird didn't answer to Bianca's name, nor recognize mutually loved CCR or mutually hated disco tunes. So much for outguessing the Masters of Illusion or Instruction.

“We humans have a saying when we screw up a relationship or let it go,” John related to his avian companion. “There’s lots of fish in the sea, But there’s only one Bianca in anyone’s life.”

“Where is she now?” he thought to himself as he looked at the horizons, staring at what was beyond the horizon with his third eye. To the East lay Europe, the place of artist possibilities and so much human diversity. To the south, the Brazilian coast, or maybe the unspoiled wilderness of the Argentine. To the West, the wild open spaces of Montana, or maybe even the wilder closed ones of New York. To the North, Canada, a country big enough to rebuild the American dream, assuming it was cleared with the Mounties first.

“Goodbye, Ruby Tuesday,” John felt coming from the waves, “When you change with every new day, still I’m gonna miss you,” he added.

“I missed you, too,” said a familiar voice behind him.

Bianca never looked more radiant, and well travelled. Her backpack was cluttered with tags from every airport in the world, the dufflebag crammed with “I love” stickers from every part of the world. The most prominent one read “I love home,” a skull and crossbones over the “I” word.

“How’s it going. Doctor John?” she asked, as she combed the feathers out of the top of her head, revealing a gorgeous blonde mane that highlighted every color in the rainbow. “You were right about the bird thing, John. You’re right about a lot more things than you think you are.”

John moved in toward Bianca. He needed a hug, a kiss, a touch. But she pulled away –

“No. Some things you’re not right about. The rules say we can touch souls, not hands.”

“You’re . . . dead?”

“There was some political trouble, in a country you never heard of. A prick dictator no one will remember, a two-timing journalist who’s selling carwax and coke out of a van somewhere near Bakersfield now . . . you know the story.”

“No, don’t tell me!” Baldino protested. “And tell me how to find this journalist ‘friend’ of yours.”

“He’s dead, too.”

“The dictator.”

“Someone finally ate HIS liver.”

“Then let me come over to the other side. You look ALIVE there. The purpose of life is be Alive, right? Maybe by dying, I can become alive,”

“It doesn’t work that way, John, Trust me on that one,”

“Okay.” John contemplated. He looked into the ocean. “Fact one, I can’t swim. Fact two, this water is over my head and beyond the breakers that wash you ashore. Fact three, if I TEMPT death, then I’m alive. Maybe I’ll discover that I CAN swim.”

“John, don’t -”

“Hey, why not? DO it, don’t think it. That’s what you did, and that’s what I didn’t do,” John stripped off his boots, shirt and unzipped his trousers. A cold Atlantic wind gusted onto his skin, turning it into red goosebumps, but there was no turning back now.

“John, no -”

“No, John, YES!” He tossed his trousers and boxers off, numbing his mind as fast as he could with the emotion of ‘forward’. “Gotta give up something to get something! Geronimo!!!”

“John, NO!!!”

Kamikaze-pilot Baldino dived down the fifteen foot drop, then, just before his hands hit the water, a pull dragged him back onto the rocks. He felt everything this time; the cold, the flesh piercing barnacles, and the lonely.

He looked behind him. The hand that saved him seemed wrinkled, cold, and very ancient. The gaze up from the fingers to the shoulder and the face was even more terrifying.

“This is what the other side of the rainbow is really like,” Bianca said, from a mouth nearly void of teeth, her eyes sunken, her radiant young face well past ninety. The hot adventuress had become a great-grandmother, perhaps the mentor John needed right now,

“You got old, Bianca? Why, how?”

“Being alive ain’t ‘bout where you is at, but how alive you is where you is at.”

“An interesting blend of motivational Ebonics, but I still don’t get it.”

Bianca braced herself, The words had to carefully chosen, or it would be the ancient crypt for her and the Doc. “Inner space is in our head and heart. Outer space is out there. Inside is solid, outside is just . . . air.”

“My Taoism is a little rusty, too,”

“Look, grasshopper, moron, asshole!!! -”

“Now, I understand.”

“No, you don’t, Doctor Baldino.”

“Doing UNTO life, and doing UNTO others, before they do unto you, is how to be alive, Bianca. ‘Above all things do no harm’ works in general medicine, delicate surgeries, and most court cases, but it’s no way to live life.”

“You think cruel is cool, John?”

“Everyone else seems to.”

She hesitated, pondered the question, then committed to it. “WE don’t.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“The people who DID without thinking, or feeling first.” Bianca led John’s eye over the waters, the grasslands, and the dunes that provided homes and opportunities for a billion creatures, botanical and biological, “Rome wasn’t build in a day, despite the stories Jersey Italian construction guys throw around the bar about their ancestors, when they’re bidding on a mall job in Passaic.”

The twilight magic hour set in, the silence screaming volumes of symphonies into John’s ears.

“The world isn’t divided into idiots vs. assholes, or haves and have nots. Life isn’t about grabbing and stabbing, kissing ass or kicking ass. It’s about creation, maintenance, and destruction. Some people spend most of their lives building things; some people are real good at maintaining things; some people destroy things.”

“And what do you do, Bianca?”

“I leave things and people. Way too early. Life on the road is just as boring as it is at home, John. Like Zappa said, ‘you are what you is’.”

“And I’m a loyal lapdog?”

“Who saves lives. What people do with them . . .” She froze in mid thought.

John extended his hand out, relating unconsciously, with the language of the fingers, the message of compassion. Bianca’s ice cold flesh turned red hot with his touch. Her face instantly regained the illusion and reality of youth. Her smile radiated light brighter than the sun, moon, and stars. And out of those lips - words the Elder Baldino remembered from their last meeting,

“See you on the other side, Doctor John.”

The healing was instant, the transformation spectacular. The Patron Saint of beauty, brains and vitality became a dove, flying - straight up into the sky, melding with the setting sun into a light that blinded John’s optic portholes and radiated his own third eye,

At his feet lay another fish, a bass with a heart-shaped bite on its side. This dinner would be eaten by one, but shared by two.

CHAPTER 6

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and heaven hath no angel like one who refuses to take ‘no’ for an answer. Kathy needed time to cool down and put it all together. Her breakfast offering was simple - Jewish bagels, French pastry, and Irish corned beef. And that was just the top layer of the CARE package.

“I didn’t know what you liked, or needed,” she said from outside the door. “Can I come in?”

“Yes,” John said through a grateful smile. “Please.”

The kitchen table looked like the booty on the best Hallowe’en night of the decade. “Pop tarts, Oreos, Cheeze Doodles and Wagon Wheels! All my favorites,”

“A classy writer needs junk food to keep going, right?”

“In the hands, down the hatch!” John’s smile brought him back to days before writing, and before thinking. Days of . . . feeling.

“So does this mean your book is about chocolate, John?”

“Sex and chocolate go together.” It slipped out of the Doctor’s trained mind and loose lips, but maybe it was time to start letting more things slip out, and enjoy being ruled by the law - of gravity. “Does this mean that you want me to write romance novels, Kathy?”

“You called me by name, John.”

“So.”

“You never called me by my name.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You weren’t supposed to. It’s a male thing.”

“I didn’t mean to -”

“- Get caught up in your mission, whatever it is?”

John pulled back into himself. The life-long hypothesis he held since his boyhood was true. Every woman in the world DID conspire with every other woman in the world, and sometimes when they went to “the ladies room,” they got their orders as to what man they were assigned to help, subvert, or let go. The whole “free choice” thing for men was about whether the guy accepted the terms offered by the woman, and the women. As conspiracy theories went, it wasn’t so scary - not unless trans-sexuals got into the game.

“I’ll tell you a secret, John,” Kathy related. “Women love a man on a mission. The more dangerous it is, the more we want him.”

“Is that so you can tell the love child tall tales about his father?”

“Or her father.”

“My mistake, Kathy.”

“Your oversight, Doctor Baldino.”

The moment of interest turned into a window of opportunity. That “feeling” sank into John again, something he thought had been lost. But was it real? Could it work? What would be the consequences? Would exchanging body fluids and soft whispers be as great as sharing internal neurosis and colorful quirks?

John felt his body move in toward Kathy’s. A third person seemed to form between them, with a name, agenda, and an insatiable liking for chocolate AND sex. There was only one problem.

“Her name is ‘Jennifer’,” Kathy said as their bodies touched.

“Yeah, my wife. How did you know?”

“The inscription on the graduation ring on your wedding finger, for starters.”

“And you read my notes!”

“I stopped when I got to Jennifer’s poem.” She got up, put on her coat, and walked toward the door. “Are you divorced?”

“Separated.” John’s blank stare gave nothing out, but saw so much within. His face reeked of a thousand emotions, all conflicting, all needing verification and validation.

Kathy could only wait to see which one would win. All is fair in love and war, and no self-respecting Celtic-bred Brennon would give up to any ghost, angel or clandestine on-off-on again wife without a fight.

*Every so often,
You meet a woman
Who beckons you to come closer,
To go beyond the petty distractions
Of her present focus of attention.
To embark on a tortuous journey
Through her past,
Through her future,
You readily accept.
Excitedly exploring a new point of view
Riding a crest
Of sexual and psychological energy,
External events,*

*When viewed from here
Must first pass through a prism
Of your mutual construction,
Divided and conquered,
They enter your world
They enter your world
Not as threats
But as challenges,
A new opportunity to create a base
Of common experience.
In time,
You flood each other with each other.
Creating a new world from
Divergent sources.
A complex tapestry
Of experience and attitudes,
Constantly changing in pattern, color and texture,
But always there,*

Love, like and lust for a Resident are often three items you get in one woman, or it's a "take what you need" affair. Drinks, conversation, a movie, a walk home, a peck on the cheek, the invite in for coffee; so often it gave way to the another courting methodology for the Resident Physician, and most particularly, surgeon. These callings that working 36 hour shifts at least three times a week for up to five years. "I don't have a lot of time to waste. And neither do you, so do you want to -?"

A slap, rolling of eyes, or groan of disgust usually followed. But, it was a cost-effective way for most doctors, male and female, to get what they wanted and needed in a 120 plus hour work week, with wages of \$3.50 an hour, on a slow rotation.

There were also the accidents. Baldino remembered walking down the hall after a postmortem conference, reflecting on what a urinary analysis could really tell you about a patient with a baffling set of symptoms. "Fuck me," he said to himself in a self-effacing manner, embroiled with biological wonderment, eyes fixed on the paper in front of him.

"Okay," an Aquarian resident next to him countered, with an adventurous smile worthy of her sign.

But Jenny was different. She was an outsider, a lab tech who was more concerned with how people in the lab were getting along with each other than who would discover the cure for cancer first, and make the rest of the research institute feel like losers.

When John Baldino got into medical school, he knew that most of his married classmates would graduate divorced, or hitched to someone else. But having a trusted companion and confidant was essential for a training program designed to rob you of your self-worth, self-esteem and self, so you could be rebuilt according to a medically-useful prototype that worked so well, for so many generations.

Marriage during residency was a disaster, too. Mixing the two was like putting Hawaiian pineapple on Brooklyn pizza, a practice which was done in the Midwest. According to some Columbia University columnists, this led to brain disorders which included liking country music, and political “brainstorms” such as running Ed Koch for the Governor of Oklahoma, or Syracuse. Dumping Jenny for a career in medicine was too painful. Leading her on was unthinkable. Stats said that 90% of married residents get divorced, and 100% of married couples wished they could be even after the dream medical position was latched onto.

“So, what will you do about Jenny?” older brother Vincent asked John, at a family wedding, on a preciously held-onto day off that John wished could last forever. “You’re becoming a different person, and so is she. And you know that the first thing a woman talks about on the way home from a wedding isn’t sports scores.”

“I don’t know,” John answered, as he watched his soul mate gleefully dance across the floor with every man in the place, but still keeping her eyes on him.

“I can take her home for you,” Vinny offered.

“And take her for yourself, older brother? That wench is mine,” John replied in a boastful, assertive tone, exchanging gentle glances with the woman he promised himself to from the moment he saw her.

“It’s been on and off between you two for the last, what, eight years now,” Vincent pointed out, counting three extra fingers on his right hand that appeared after as many shots of special family punch. “You’re gonna have to change her, or you’re going to have to change YOU.”

“Or hire a third party.” John flashed on, “We’re both making a third person.”

“Way to go, Daddy.”

“No, an invisible third person.”

“A little tip, Brother John. You don’t make babies by thinking about it.”

“The person we share is very real.”

“What’s his name?”

“Harvey, okay, Vinny?” John shot back sarcastically.

“Hey I didn’t mean to . . .”

“You did. And I appreciate it. Good friends challenge each other. If I’m acting like an idiot or an asshole, she’ll let me know. She energizes me, She gives me a purpose for doing it all that’s in my heart, not just in my head. She’s color in a life that’s sterile white, or diseased black, or textbook black and white. She gives me the reason to tell jokes, to find the humor beyond the tragedy. She’s smart enough not to laugh at them, but she smiles when I say them. And, I think, we both laugh at the same things.”

“Me and my wife had an open marriage,” Vinny replied. “One night a week, each of us goes out and does what we want. No questions asked. Private evening time.”

“That one private evening turned into seven nights a week, Vinny.”

“Win some, lose some.” Vinny remembered the good things about his first marriage, the ongoing troubles of his next ‘cohabitation’, and how to spare his brother the pain he lived with every day. “ How are you going to make it work, ‘Doctor John’? You aren’t allowed a personal life now. But when you get out, you can buy one. Maybe you can become a Mormon and buy three wives for the price of one. I thought of trying that, but imagine three woman in the same house saying ‘I got a headache tonight’, in harmony, singing it around the piano. Fuck. I’m pissed.”

“I try to do something with Jenny when I get off from work.”

“Greek style, or missionary position?”

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“What’s Greek style?”

“If you don’t know, Brother John, you aren’t ready for it.”

“Vin, I’m talking about the ‘L’ word here. The sex is great.”

“I rest my . . . case.”

“But the love is even better. That hour when I come home that we spend together walking, watching the tube, playing Frisbee with her dog, eating a peanut butter sandwich. It beats sleeping, boinking, or anything else I know. The third person we created knows that. We live inside that entity in a place where time goes as slow, or as fast, as we want it to.”

“Are you sure you didn’t do drugs in the sixties, little brother?”

“Madness is best enjoyed straight,” John related with the beer in his hand. “So is love.”

With that, he trotted onto the floor with the stiff dog-tired appendages he called feet, and trusted Jenny to put the music back into them.

It had been so long since John last saw Jenny; decades as measured by the calendar, longer as felt by the human heart. Whether the time was measured in patients cured, dollars collected, or calendar books purchased, it was still a long time. He hoped that fish six would be caught with a lot less trouble than the first five.

Within twenty-five minutes of casting line, Fisherman John nabbed a mackerel, a flounder, and even a horseshoe crab that insisted on committing Hari Kari, on a lure bearing Charlie the Sunkist Tuna’s likeness, But though the net and bucket were full, the quota for the night was still “empty”.

“Whole lot a fish in the sea,” he thought to himself. “But maybe it’s about the fishing and not the catching. Moby Dick got caught only when the Ocean said so, not when Captain Ahab gave the order.”

It was not like he didn’t try to contact Jenny. John wrote letters to her every week, putting them into mailboxes wherever he went. He would tell her about the big things, the little things, and even the ‘love’ things. She insisted he never write to her about a problem without some kind of solution, and that the most tragic news had to be capped off by the wittiest punch line. No cliches, borrowed phrases or lazy writing, either. Heart, head and ingenuity had to be operating at maximal warp, or she would slap him hard and silly.

Jenny seldom wrote back, at least not in any form readable by the human eye. But she was out there, somewhere. She had to be.

John thought of giving voice to his thoughts. They brought back the dead and the living for the last five nights. But a meeting with Jenny by his life-and-death stand here at the Point would be too personal, and certainly watched. Some things were meant to be kept private, and some Christmas gifts meant to be unopened.

CHAPTER 7

Kathy Brennon seemed to be the best of all women. She knew when men had to do men business with men, so they could be the kind of men a woman would want. Her visit on the next day was by proxy - a basket delivered before dawn with chocolate, bologne, and buns. "Sex, intensity and substance, Doctor John. Your assignment for the day. Love, Kathy," the note said.

On the seventh day, God rested. But John knew that doctors had to be more human and more vigilant than God.

"A man identified as John Smith of Jonestown, New Jersey, walked into a bar in Manhattan this evening and opened fire on a holiday crowd. Six people were killed and ten injured before the assailant was shot dead by an off-duty officer. The motive for the killings is unknown."

"But he was such a lovely boy."

Our mind is cluttered with processed experience.

A vast forest of convoluted wisdom

And unintelligible logic.

*Continuously draining Irresistible urges,
attitudes*

And our own set of private demons.

Drowning in symptoms

With no apparent etiology.

We eventually learn to control the drainage.

Allowing to consciousness

Only what we consider appropriate

To our rigid self-image.

And dreading the day the cesspool breaks.

Young Baldino only read about psych residents who got to interview real criminals. But when he got the chart marked "John Smith II", it felt like a special treat - or was it a sacred mission? Defective brain chemistry makes people think defectively and do defective things, right? Why else would a man buy a gun, stake out a restaurant in the Village, then proceed to kill fifteen of his fellow human beings for no apparent reason? Maybe 'society' was to blame. Maybe he was one of the homeless many who were abused by the chosen few. Everyone except the Mayor and the Jersey mob bosses were one paycheck from "tight", two from broke, and three from living on the streets, right?

When Baldino first saw John Smith, he didn't look like a killer. His eyes were brown, ordinary, not showing a tinge of any emotion except the two most painful ones - loneliness and betrayal.

"It was the disease that killed those people, doctor, not me. Look at the chart," the cuffed and shackled murderer said to John as he read over the chart.

There was enough reason for it, medically. Schizophrenic with paranoid delusions, released after being held against his will from the Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy Emergency hospital. This was the place where if you asked any patient, "Have you ever been on Valium?" the comeback you'd get would be something like, "No, doctor, I ain't been on that planet." The forty by thirty-foot holding area was more noise than talk, a large box of bunk beds that would drive any sane man crazy, and any sound-minded woman to the other side of the rainbow.

"You want to ask me some questions, John?" Smith asked. His smile was irresistibly pleasant, despite the cuffs cutting into his wrists.

"Are those restraints really necessary?" Baldino asked the policemen.

"We have our orders, Doctor." the reply shot back in officialese by the patrolman.

"I want to talk to him, alone." Baldino found himself saying.

"He's under twenty-five hour a day observation," the Sergeant insisted.

"So OUR orderlies will WATCH him. The cuffs and shackles are strangling his circulation, to his legs AND his head, Sergeant. We can balance his medication. You can loosen the cuffs on his hands and take off those leg irons." Baldino's nose smelled something all too familiar in his line of work. "When was the last time you let him take a leak or a crap?"

"Two accidents ago, son."

"Is that supposed to be a joke, 'Dad'?"

"We have our orders, Doctor."

"Which I relieve you of."

The orderly injected Smith's arm. It quieted him down, panic dropping to apprehension. Shifting eyes that saw demons on the walls now were facing straight ahead, looking very - human But still, all that blue and brass kept Smith's mouth silent. Something real was inside all that pain, and it had to be coaxed to the surface, not pulled up.

“He needs to be evaluated, and I need to evaluate him, alone, GENTLEmen.” Baldino asserted. “Are YOU willing to accept responsibility for an interview or confession that won’t stand up in court’?”

The patrolmen felt insulted, the Sergeant checkmated. “We’ll be outside. If anything goes wrong, or smells fishy -”

“- We’ll call you,” Baldino said, his eyes connecting to Smith, or the person he really was behind this bizarre disease that defied classification. “That okay with you. John?”

Smith nodded a grateful and completely cooperative “yes”.

“He should be locked up,” the patrolman asserted.

“He already is locked up, in a prison inside his head,” Baldino said, as half of the chains were unlocked, revealing a human beneath the animal restraints. “Did you ever figure out what could happen to YOU if you ever lost it, and didn’t have anyone around to help you get it back? There but for a balanced brain chemistry, a sustaining diet, or maybe a parent who did more head-screwing-up harm than hitting, goes you or me.”

“We’ll be outside, SON,” the Sergeant repeated.

“Thanks, ‘Dad’.”

The door closed, leaving Baldino, Smith and a large black orderly who looked more like a farmer than a fighter.

“This is Andre. I’m John. You are . . .”

“Thirsty”, Smith answered. “Can I have a glass of water, please?”

Baldino nodded, the request granted forthwith.

“What year is this, John?”

“Nineteen seventy . . . five? Was I right?”

“Off by a year, but so am I when I write checks in January,” Baldino replied. “Where are you from?” he pressed.

“I ehh . . . ehhh . . .”

“Your accent says Long Island, not Jersey. South Shore, John.”

“Yeah, that’s right!” he flashed on. “You from there, too?”

“Yeah, John, I am. For a few years when I was growing up.”

“Let me guess, Doctor. Rockefeller Center, Valley Stream.”

“One more stop, John.”

“Island Park.”

“Long Beach, John.”

“I knew it!” Smith replied. “What did you do there when you were a kid?”

“Looked for women, did some Eastern surfin’ and California dreamin’.”

“Hey, me too, Doctor.”

“Hey, no kiddin’, John. What beach?”

“Wherever.”

“Me too, John.”

“So did you become a doctor to get good dope, or because your mother said that SOMEone in the family had to become a doctor?”

“It wasn’t anything I mentioned at the interview,” Baldino said ponderously

.

“Hey, Doctor, what’s your favorite show?”

“MASH”, Baldino reared up his back. “Why do you ask, JOHN?”

“Just curious. Don’t get defensive on me.”

“I wasn’t. Was I?”

“No,” Smith answered. “It’s just that it’s good to talk to someone who cares about what I really am under all this hardware.” A tear came to his eye. “Maybe you can figure out what makes this person they say I am go out and kill people. Get this monster out of me, Doctor, please.”

Smith broke down in tears. Realization, guilt, maybe something deeper?

Baldino pondered, again. Some people need to deal with grief alone, some want a shoulder to cry on. The instant radar told Baldino what he needed to know.

“Doctor, do you mind if I deal with this alone, just for a minute or two? I need to be alone, then we can talk. Okay?”

“Okay”, Baldino assured him. He nodded to Andre to watch Smith closely. The orderly knew very well what antipsychotic drugs and grief can do if either of them were given in combination. But it seemed totally there - simple compassion had accomplished what brute force and millions in trial lawyers could not. This was a day of victory for compassion and science. “Hawkeye Peirce would be proud of me today. Sidney Freedman, eat you couch out,” Baldino thought to himself, as his mouth unconsciously whistled out the theme from MASH in an almost audible volume.

Baldino treated himself to a Zagnet bar from the machine. A moment later, he splurged the last of his change to buy another one for the friend inside John Smith that no one, even Smith, had met yet.

Meanwhile, Smith helped himself to a snack of his own - the left pinky and right thumb of the Andre, extracted after he slit his jugular with a scalpel dumped into the sharps container.

Men things between men are direct, abrupt, and lack subtlety. By fish day seven, even John picked up on the expectations. He walked out to his post, baited the hook, threw his line beyond the breakers, and gave the command. “Talk to me, Smith patient # 2!” he screamed out.

“What do you want me to say?” The voice was smoother than expected, coming from below instead of above. John Smith #2 sat in a liferaft offshore. It was a well-provisioned craft, and he looked well-fed,

but there were no oars, motors, or sails on the vessel. His movements were clearly at the mercy of the ocean, and the fates that ruled it.

“You look different,” John commented, as he noted the knife wounds on his chest, the rope burns on his arm, and the bullet hole through his head,

“Death will do that to you,” Smith said flippantly, with a remorseful tone that seemed very real. “I paid my dues; you read the papers.”

“You were executed. Death came fast. That’s more than I can say about the law abiding patients I treated, some of whom came to me because of YOU! You got to die with your limbs, ears, and eyes intact.”

“Hey, I’m sorry!” Smith pleaded. “I paid with my life, and my afterlife!!! I’d invite you onto this boat, but there’s only room for one. I can eat filet mignon, smoke cigars rolled with C notes, and on a good day watch satellite skin flicks from South Africa and Japan, but it’s only ME here, They move me whenever they want, whenever I make a friend, or see someone who I...”

Words turned into tears. John extended his hand outward.

“Come on in, we’ll talk.”

“Confession first, Doc. That’s the rule.”

The ocean did the rest. The craft remained an arm’s length away from John, no matter what he tried to use to extend his reach. King Neptune, et al., made his presence known even more clearly by whipping up the waves, and summoning a school of grey sharks to surround Smith’s floating cell.

“Confession, then.” John sat back. Smith tossed him a sandwich - tuna on rye, apparently the catch of the day he was destined to dine on. The sandwich tasted good, better than good, And it was shared, the way a meal should be eaten. It was supplemented by a succulent orange and a cold beer.

“Only the best for the Doc who wanted to trust me,” Smith said. “I wanted to trust myself, too. I think they’re trying to teach me here that giving is better than receiving, but every time I give a guy I like a sandwich, they take away three of my own. What’s up with that, Doc?”

Baldino stopped eating. He noted that Smith’s body was more emaciated than slim. The mouth-watering food choked his mouth.

“No, Doc. It’s okay. There’s nothing you can give me except listening. That’s what I really want.”

“What’s your name?”

“What’s that, Doc?”

“A woman I know, just met, she reminded me that the best way to listen to people is to use their name. You’re not really John Smith. You gave up everything to the courts at the time of dying, except your name.”

“I wanted to protect my family. My brother was a sucker who worked in a factory for a corporate asshole, my sister raised three great sons as a single Mom - and none of them turned out queer. My mother still feeds the neighborhood kids better than she feeds herself.”

“Your execution was an event, Mister Smith.”

“It was the American way. I put in bids to every fast food company I knew. Which one would I choose for a last meal? I could go out as a deep-broiled Burger King, Wendy’s Apple Roast, or Kentucky Fried chicken. Big time royalties from the Fast Food Chain that was called in for my last meal!”

“And the proceeds to go to your family.”

“And others. Some whose lives I ruined by killing their relatives. Others who deserved a break today . . . at Smithdougals.” His stomach growled, his color went pale. It looked very familiar,

“You don’t look so good, Mister Smith.”

“You got any aspirin in there, Doctor John? Or maybe a Kevorkian vitamin tablet.”

“What can I do?”

“Put in a good word to the Warden up there for me. I hear you’re on good terms with Him,”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m talking about RIGHT NOW. I need to get you to a hospital.”

John fumbled through his fishing kit. The Powers that be converted his tack and lures into syringes and drugs. King Neptune had other ideas, summoning his sharks to display the strength of their incisors on a bass that came between boat and jetty. Gusting winds prevented any tossing of care packages, then began to drown out any caring words.

Smith’s confession continued, his body losing strength and color with every word. He indeed was real flesh and hurting bone. “Maybe my job was to be an asshole. But I didn’t want to be an asshole. It was just something that . . . that . . . someone somewhere wanted me to do. I didn’t want to be an asshole. I wanted to be something better, kinder, snore . . .”

“Hold on, I’m coming over!” John screamed. The bait, sandwich, and orange would divert the sharks. A bolus of beer in each might keep them drunk enough to give him time to get to the boat and row it into shore. “Hold on Mister Smith!!!”

“Save yourself, Doc. I’m beyond saving,” Smith said, with what Baldino knew all too well was the last breath in his body. Some last requests had to be obeyed to the letter, but this one had to be obeyed by the words between the lines.

Thinking that the sharks were indeed the lowest form of life in this revised marine ecology, he pierced his finger, coating the bait with his own blood. “Lunch!!!” he screamed assertively out to the beasts of prey, with a hearty toss of the offering on the West side of the jetty. “I’m coming!!!” he screamed, as he threw his body into the waters on the East side of the jagged rocks, an improvised oar on his back. Medical equipment was stored in a leak-proof plastic bag, conveniently provided by Whoever wanted this rescue to happen.

This time, John found the strength and ability to swim. No more helpless human, on the shore admiring the ocean. No more helpless rat, who would let himself sink to the bottom because there was no clear reason to live.

Smith's eyes opened. A reason to live returned to his eyes, Whatever new life he would have could be nothing less than magnificent and effective.

"Take the oar!!!"

Smith's shaking left hand grabbed the oar.

"The bag."

The prisoner's right hand pulled the medical bag in, with everything intact. Hopes for a physical recovery and a life after after-life indeed seemed real.

"Now, me!" Baldino yelled out, noting the sharks coming back for more goodies. The twenty-five second diversion was indeed well planned. A ten second swim. Five second offloading. With ten seconds to spare!

"I got ya, Doc," Smith said, as he pulled John into the boat, grabbing his belt behind him.

John felt relieved, and liberated - but not in the way he ever anticipated. While one hand pulled his waist over the side of the lifeboat, another snuck in behind him and lifted his wallet.

"I got ya, Doc," Smith said, with a snide grin. John's money and credit cards in his hands, his drugs amongst the abundant stash he already had on board. The ex-mass murderer's scars looked real, but the pleasure of cruelty was enough anesthetic for any physical or metaphysical pain.

"Fuck you!" John affirmed, with a defiance against cruelty AND death he had never yet put to voice.

"Fuck yourself," Smith volleyed back, in a tone viciously indifferent.

The last thing John remembered was his hand slipping out of a cold grip, his body falling into the ocean where big fish really did eat little fish, with no legal recourse of retribution.

The next thing he remembered was looking straight up to a brightly lit, clear sky, the shape of a very familiar angel silhouetted in the moonlight.

CHAPTER 8

Kathy stayed the night, and the morning. But John slept on the couch. Something instinctual told her to visit John the previous night by the beach he protected so vehemently. Something else told her to visit it by sea, rather than land. Non-Pointers always did stupid things on the off-season. She remembered stories about Einstein, mapper of astronomical universes, getting lost every time he took his sailboat offshore. Why John would take a sunset swim in shark-infested waters was beyond her. She could ask the questions, but not before he WANTED to share the answers. But there was one thing Kathy Brennon knew that John DID want.

“Eggs, bacon and a canoli, John. Where do you want them?” she asked the groggy-eyed sailor-healer, who stewed in a very restless sleep.

“I told him off!” John protested. “MY way this time!”

“Who did you tell off?” Kathy asked, in that ‘it’s for your own good that we’re putting you in this facility’ tone,

“Do you believe in God, Kathy Brennon?” John asked.

“Yes. I’m Roman Catholic.”

“Do you believe in angels?”

“I think so.”

“And Leprechauns?”

“I’m Irish. We’re not supposed to be pagans, but -”

“So, it IS possible.”

“Is what possible?”

“Faith as a scientific experiment in perception and interactive reality.”

“John, you need to see a doctor.”

“I do. Every time I look in the mirror.”

“I mean a real doctor.”

“What am I!!!?” He got up, anger converting overwhelming challenge to action. “Am I, Doctor John Baldino, chopped liver? Stale bologne? Chile cold peppers? Cooked bacon? Defective meat?”

Kathy retreated behind hurt and caring eyes.

“Come on, Kathy, Kathleen, Katey! I’m doing some self-diagnosis here. Stop me when I get excessively crude, vulgar or on target, here, okay?” John’s hand trembled. His mouth went silent, but his mind kept moving.

“John, you’re shaking!”

“I’m stuttering, here. We Italians talk with our hands. Get the hands right, and you get the mouth right, right?”

“Right,” she said. She moved in slowly, then administered the most powerful medicine within grasp - the touch of a gentle hand that didn’t grab, but wouldn’t let go, either.

“What are you doing?” Baldino asked, as he saw his trembling hand stop shaking, warmth and feeling returning to the extremities.

“It’s called grounding,” she related gently. Into the other hand she put a pen. “And this is for flying. See you on the other side.”

A peck on the cheek. A warm smile from the doorway. A phone number that he could call for personal pleasure or professional emergencies. Kathy indeed knew how to say hello and goodbye at the same time. It was a gift life bestowed on this woman of plain face, ordinarily overweight body, and warm eyes. Her sisters got the “gorgeous” genes, but now it was most apparent that she got the important ones.

John opened the binder to the next poem. Its title seemed ominously appropriate to his current dilemma. “You worry when life DOESN’T seem like a series of strange coincidences to a bizarre conclusion,” he thought. “You agonize when it does,” he pondered.

On Depression

Chief Complaint: “He just went on about the low incidence of varicose veins in the Ottoman Empire”.
His self image was so poor,
I hardly even saw him,
He sat there, cowering,
Selectively organizing his perceptions;
Coloring the filtrate grey.
A black hole of psychic energy,
Secure.
lonely.
We talked.
In strict sequence.
Empathy evoked,
Understanding attempted;
Services Offered.
He was lost,
Emerging from his delusions.
To feast upon the confirmation of his hopelessness.
He was satiated,
And now he rests.

John Baldino kept few of his boyhood friends, but some he couldn’t let go. Harry Steiner and John had gone through all the wars together. Dirt fights in the sandbox, water pistol duel-outs in the woods, outcooling contests in most anything else once the playground became a battlefield for the testing of egos, in games the clever kids changed the rules on whenever they were about to lose.

Give Harry an IQ test, and he’d outscore anyone in the school. But give a game where competition between people was part of the deal, and he’d come out fourth in any three man race.

Harry was always there for John Baldino, and most everyone else in trouble. On more than one occasion, Harry helped John fix the car he accidentally banged up when his parents were away for the weekend. When a roof needed fixing, or a relative was dying, Harry was there. When John accidentally made three dates for the same night, Harry offered to “babe” sit them, never taking advantage of even the most open advance offered.

But it was John who got into medical school, then the most prestigious, and grueling, internship in the City. It was Harry who wound up on welfare, after graduating summa cum lauda with a history and economics degree. The lesson he learned most was helplessness and obligatory self-sabotage that went with it.

It was in his genetics, ingrained into his brain chemistry, along with the inability to drop those extra thirty pounds, no matter how much he dieted, exercised, worried, or panicked. But maybe the letter that came in from Stanford University would change all that. Ask Harry to take a bullet for you, and he’d be in the line of fire before you can say Sargent York. But ask him to share in something happy on a good day, and it was exhausting work. On most days it was impossible.

It was on the West Side, the bench outside Gino’s Submarine shop overlooking New Jersey. A sunset worthy of any in Montana big sky country settled over the pastoral Jersey cliffs, against a sky that said “open”. The “dreaming post” reminded both Harry and John that the world did not end at Paramus, New Jersey.

“God, that’s a beautiful sunset,” twenty-seven year old John commented with youthful wonderment. “A work of art. All those colors, musically meshing with each other. And it’s free, for everyone, every day.”

“Did you know that if you wanted to defend Fort Lee, New Jersey, against attack, you could hold off an army of modern conventional weapons for a week with three WWII machine gun nests?” Harry commented, just as the colors became most brilliant and John was about to imbibe its full magnificence.

“Shhh,” John interjected. “Do you hear the birds?”

“Seagulls. The only reason why they’re here is the garbage in the river.”

“They fly like hawks, or eagles, Harry. They go anywhere they want with a swish of a wing. Fucking magnificent,”

“And you could put anti-aircraft guns in the caves. Even a French ten-cm mortar shell could take out anything Westmoreland had in the air in Vietnam, or what the Russians have in Afghanistan. Taking down those, that would be a challenge.”

“Would you die for me, Harry?” John interjected, with direct eyes and an extended heart.

“You want to defend New Jersey with me?” Harry asked, his mind stuck in the cycle that kept his mind and heart in separate universes, once again. “Washington held off against the British there for most of the War. The British held Manhattan, but Washington held the card. A cannon on top of the palisades could take out a British boat moving up OR down the Hudson. It’s position, and psychological intimidation.”

“Will you let me look at the sunset, Harry!”

“Like in the Alamo. Why did a hundred and eighty-four Texans last against ten thousand Mexicans? Position, as defenders, and intimidation. It was a matter of honor for Santa Anna to go around, but he was intimidated into fighting against a held position.”

“Harry!”

“Some historians think that the battle of the Alai-no was about defending gold, ammunition of Santa Anna’s favorite mistress, who the Texans captured.”

“Harry - the sunset!”

“What about it’?”

“It’s over, Harry.”

“Damn. I missed it again.”

“You also missed your birthday party yesterday.”

“Did I? I’m on this new medication. It makes me forget things.”

“Except things like how many people DIED at the Alamo.”

“History without wars is boring. Like Canadian history. No wars, just everyone negotiating and eventually agreeing with each other. But what do you expect from a country where

everyone goes to bed at 9:30, dancing is what you do to music when your feet DON'T move, and the national brew is lukewarm water?"

John laughed. "That's a good one, Harry."

"Did I say something funny'?"

"Yeah, you did. You made me laugh. That's good."

"What is 'laughing,' anyway? The physiology of the process is interesting. We don't see animals do it, but we still think we have to do it. I was reading an article in an old Journal of Internal Medicine yesterday and. . ."

John poured his orange drink onto Harry's thigh.

"What are you doing?" Harry protested, as he abruptly got up.

"Making you MOVE."

"Huh?"

"What's in the letter, Harry?"

Harry turned his eyes downward, caught in the act of facing the truth. "They want me at Stanford University," he said with understated accomplishment. "They want to give me a full scholarship, and a teaching position."

"California and Stanford. That's great!"

But there was that look in Harry's eye. The glass is always half-empty genius had found the loophole.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

"You remember the Groucho line, 'I wouldn't want to be in any club that would have me as a member?'"

"It was from Duck Soup, I think. Or Animal Crackers. Funny movies."

“But on another level -”

“Harry, you’re moving out of your parent’s basement and into a loft over a beach in California, where you can talk over as many sunsets as you want!”

“But what if I’m not smart enough for them? What if I get found out?”

“You’re the smartest guy I know in New York, Harry. And any idiot knows that any janitor in New York has more smarts than any professor in California.”

“Exactly.”

“Huh’?” John said.

“If I’m too SMART, they’ll keep me out of their club, and I’ll come out of there with bad references that will follow me the rest of my life, and I’ll never be able to publish my book.”

“You can PAY someone to type out your hieroglyph manuscript out there.”

“But what if I want to change it?”

“So you’ll change it.”

“And I’ll get it wrong. The first instinct is always the best one.”

“So don’t go to Stanford, keep your book - which I think is GREAT - in the drawer, stay in your parent’s apartment, never even think about dating women, and live a comfortable life of misery.”

“Are you trying to get me depressed, John?”

“What’s up with you, Harry? You’re your OWN worst enemy.”

“My therapist tells me it’s self-sabotage.”

“So what are you doing about it?”

“I’m changing therapists.”

“Why?”

“Because I deserve to fail. I’m obligated to lose.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a loser. I screwed up when I was younger, so I have to pay for it now that I’m old.”

“You’re only twenty-seven years old, Harry. You have so many opportunities to pull yourself out of the hole. You are so talented, compassionate, and good looking -”

“I tried the girlfriend thing, it didn’t work. The boyfriend thing won’t work either, no offense . . . That was supposed to be a joke.”

“It was, a good one, until it came out of your mouth.”

“Why are you bringing me down like this, John?”

“Because I don’t understand why you need to fail, and be miserable, Harry.” “This is New York; no one is happy, but we’re alive.”

“I saw that Neil Simon play, too, Harry. And even Neil Simon takes some responsibility for his problems. If he’s hungry, he eats. He doesn’t wait for someone to feed him, or say he’s worthy of taking some food.”

Harry pondered a moment. The nail had been hit, straight on the head. and had penetrated into his heart.

“There are two kinds of people in this world, John.”

John stopped dead in his vocal tracks. Harry rarely called ANYone by ANY name. It was too much emotional commitment.

“There are two kinds of people in this world, John. People who go through life because they have to, and people who go through life because they want to. Be grateful that you live because you WANT to, and not because you have to.”

The pathology was all clear to John now, after all these years of looking after the buddy who, perhaps, he was using as a practice patient all these years. The textbook facts jumped out of the page, smack between the eyes.

Harry was too depressed to commit suicide. Original guilt found its way into his soul, and could only be redeemed by a lifetime of misery. Only in the grave would the debts for past wrongs and miscalculations be paid. The question of whether they were real or imagined could be resolved by therapy. The self-sabotage demon could be overcome by overwork, at fast pace, in noble causes, around happy people.

Anticipating the unasked questions in John’s mind, Harry offered a solution. “If you have kids, make them grow up happy, not smart. Happy is about a ‘yes’ life. Smart is about ‘no’s’. But you know happy AND smart. Thanks for making my life bearable.”

“Who’s top dog, now, Harry?” John contemplated as he stood on the shore, line, bait and tackle box in hand. The fish were all outside the breakers, but so were the demons, and the surprises. The “deal” was clearly to catch a fish where the fish are. No fish, no forward movement. The natural sequella of such a syndrome was stagnation, lowered reticular activating system activity, decreased limbic function, lowered cerebral input and output, then a life of eating strained applesauce and baby food through a healthy set of teeth. Then again, a shell-shocked soldier who has no survival instinct left is the last one to send into battle against anybody. Such a warrior against the demons would make the “we surrender better than anyone else in the world” Italian Army under Mussolini look like the defenders of the Alamo.

John pulled out the last card under his sweat-Soaked sleeve. “Courage - what is the biological substrate of courage? What neurotransmitter makes us brave? What drug can make the meek bold?” The words were voiced, the answer clearly delivered from beyond the breakers.

“Gas!” Harry yelled from an outboard twelve-footer Cruiser. His eyes seemed brighter than ever, he had lost weight, and somehow he knew the formula of how to take loser cards and convert them into a winner deck. “You know where I can get some gas!?”

“A can of beans?” John offered back.

“I already tried that. But I need a bigger Frapper.”

“A what?”

“The Frapper. www.frapper.com. You eat beans, drop your pants, and fart into the gun from the Guys From Uranus.”

“The what?”

Harry rolled his eyes, then sang the tune around the biggest sensation to hit the Net and MTV since e mail. The lyrics to the flatulent gas trapper and igniter seemed familiar, as did the accompanying female voice that joined in.

“Harry. What are you doing with Heather Campbell, star of stage, screen, and sexual fantasies of every man with a Y chromosome?”

“The question is, what is she doing with ME!” The claim was bold, brave and boisterous. It was playfully framed by the woman of every man’s wet dreams waving to him.

“Hi, John.”

“That’s DOCTOR John,” Harry added.

“What, how . . . ?” John’s questions came out as stutters. The answers were far more rhythmic.

Harry had feared water more than women, but now he needed to embrace both. There was only one reason why a cabin-cruiser could defy the laws of physics and ride into shore in the curl of a wave like a surfboard - the math was rewritten in the skipper’s head. How appropriate that the steam for the movement came from the frappe,r and the hot air from the mouths of the duo singing its praises.

“One question I have to ask, Harry,” John asked. “Who sent you?”

“Me, John.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“How do you know that you’re here? You get one more question.”

“What turned it around? How did you become a Winner?”

“That one’s easy,” Harry related. “I stopped playing their game. Then they started to play my game.”

“That’s brilliant. Who told you that?”

“You did, John. It took me twenty years to listen.”

John knocked the boat, shook Harry’s shoulder, and lay his hand on the invited portions of Heather’s flesh. They were all real. So were the press clippings. Harry had made it in ways internal and external. He was the brains behind the beautiful people now, an accomplished producer, writer and educator by even Michael Eisner’s standards. He hadn’t been on Letterman, Leno, or even Charlie Rose, because there was no need to be there. The new king of historical fiction didn’t need to show off his crown to enjoy his kingdom.

“Why didn’t you call me?” John asked.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Harry countered.

“I was going to.”

“So was I.”

“Yeah, Harry. So much for leaving people off the ‘A-list’. Sorry.”

“No big deal.” The magic of friendship rediscovered was interrupted by a phone call on Harry’s cell.

“Hello, fellow human being who honors me with his or her life time!!!” After a hesitation, a thought, a few “ahuhs”, and an idea - “It’s for you, John. It’s your publisher.”

“I don’t have a publisher, Harry.”

“You do now.” With that, Harry gave John a thumbs up, Heather threw a kiss that she really meant, and the unmasked man roared off into the sunset with a resounding “Hiho, Frapper!”

John cracked a wide smile that untwisted two decades of worry wrinkles, and said “hello” to someone who would see to it that the poems, and the stories, and the people would reach the public the way JOHN saw fit to tell them. Indeed, the “what goes around comes around” rule DID work.

There was one key question that had to be asked, and answered. “What is the name of this book, Doctor Baldino?”

“Fishing,” John replied. He hung up, and took his post beyond the breakers to continue the conversation with the media moguls, and his deal with God.

CHAPTER 9

Good omens and bad jokes always came in beats of three. The mano-a-mano thing would be no exception. Kathy knew enough to stay away for #9 fish day. But her memory lingered, as did the yearning for her once a day medicinal T.I.D., in elevated doses which John knew were toxic, if taken too early.

“Come back home victorious over your shield or dead over it” was an old Greek credo. Ancestral family home Barre was not much more than a canoli’s throw across from Sparta. But something more Sicilian was applicable for the next skirmish down memory lane - “Kill your enemies, or embrace them as friends.”

Breakfast was simple. An issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, a chapter of Vonnegut, and a scan read of MacBeth for those immortal lines that everyone always misquoted with so much authority. Olympian rainclouds moved in from the West, making the Point seem more like the outmost post of Vancouver Island than Long Island. It seemed appropriate. The Pacific coast was a place where Eastern grunge seemed colorful, even cultural. California druggies were ‘cool’; Jersey substance abusers were dopers, boozers, and losers.

“Madness is best enjoyed straight”, John remembered. It was a compass for him in his youth. It became enlightened suggestion for so many kids who came into his examining room with those inner secrets not shared with parents, other kids, or even their own personal God. A ‘hip’ doctor was the most valuable commodity in any community, particularly the ultra-conservative ones. But the training process involved more than reading some psych text books, going to a few rock concerts, or watching a half hour of MTV before going to bed, instead of CNN. Even fish #9 knew that.

*Bourbon Street
The noise and congestion
Monopolizes your energy.
As you swim for air.
Your field of vision is invaded by formless distortions:
Recognized only by the
Quivering jaw of the hard self.
Slithering, slit splitters
Dribble onto the sidewalk.
Its gets underfoot.
As you peddle your perceptions
To the reds,
And the pot,
Of gold you expected to find
In the Mecca of jazz,
Losing its meaning.
And it translated by the pussy-peddlers.
And the whores,*

“If you remembered the sixties, you never experienced it.” John recalled when Judie Blue-eyes came on the ER radio. He remembered Crosby, Stills and Nash and had even been to Woodstock. So many naked people to look at, so much smiling, and so much dope.

Free and doped up never appealed to John. Friends said he was afraid of losing control, which maybe he was. Envious college classmates who didn’t get into med school lamentingly told him at the tenth reunion from St. Nicholas’ College that it was a waste of good dope to have another straight doctor.

“Madness is best enjoyed straight,” John shot back again and again, thinking himself more and more procedural each time. But was he talking straight in the head, mind, or body? The night Mick “the Mechanic” Fernandez came into the ER changed all that.

The executioner’s bullet went straight into the temples and out through the other side. But Fernandez was still alive!

“Hey, ain’t anyone gonna give me no service over here? I’m bleedin’ here. I’m bleedin’ here,” he bellowed, holding one hand to his head, the other to the stash in his pocket that he hoped was still there after he was picked up by the ambulance.

John rushed over, with every intern under him he could find, laying in calls to every attendant available. To go from zero to three hundred mph on a slow night was harder than keeping a steady speed of a hundred and twenty on a busy one.

“Call neuro, call surgery, notify the plastic’s people. Stat!” John yelled out.

“Get me a phone,” Fernandez calmly asked. “I got a shipment to look after, and a punk to have killed.”

The primary rule about head trauma was that if it looks bad, it’s probably worse. But this gunshot victim was no ordinary man. He seemed oblivious to the pain, ultracool, and, perhaps, high. It was hard to tell. Neurological exam showed normal vision, normal ocular reflexes, normal nystagmus. The only visual abnormality was the cautious, paranoid look in his eye, checking out all the exits, the people, sensing who is friend and who is foe, and hiding his face from the cops, no matter how much it was bleeding.

The bullet had missed the optic nerve, a usual scenario that happens to people who want to end their own lives, but wind up blind instead.

“What year is this?” Baldino asked.

“Nineteen seventy-nine, but you’re still dressing like it’s 1971,” Mick countered.

“What is your name?”

“Why do you gotta know that?” he asked.

“Okay, your first name, Sir.”

“Mick. I’m half Irish, and . . . Did you see a guy come in here with a knife wound from his ear down his chin?”

“Your friend, Mick?”

“Not after tonight.”

“How many fingers do I have?”

“Five, unless you had an accident in surgery,” he said, eyes on the incoming patients, the medicine cabinets, and the easily accessed drawer where wallets were stored.

“Hey, you sure you haven’t seen a guy with gold chains, a bleeding chin, a fag earring, and a Wildman Jack beard that he colors. . .” The faintness was too much.

“Am I supposed to feel woozy like this, doctor? And this headache.”

Fernandez fainted. His vitals showed no neurological damage, as did X-ray and a CT scans. The bullet had gone straight through, untraceable.

A janitor working out community service hours knew Fernandez, and recommended that he be given private and confidential accommodations.

“He’s really the biggest drug dealer on the West Side?” Baldino asked.

“The slickest. That’s even better than the biggest. He’s a class act,” Jose Sanchez commented with an admiring smile. “So my friends tell me,” Hernandez qualified with a straight face, as a cop walked by.

“I’m supposed to report accidents and bullets.”

“With what bullet’?” Sanchez noted. “It’s a miracle that he lived. Maybe God wants him to go out and do his work.”

“You think so?”

“Ask him. You pump some fluid into the veins of a guy who gets shot in the head, stitch up the wound and give him an aspirin, and he’s ready to go home. You did a miracle.”

“And I’m grateful,” Fernandez said, with a fresh set of bandages, on his feet, ready to go out and face the world.

“How did you get out of. . .”

“I walked,” Fernandez calmly said, as he lit a cigarette under the “No Smoking” sign.

“I don’t think you’re ready to be released.”

“Thanks to you, I am, Doctor John. I want to express my appreciation to you.”

“I get paid a salary, that’s okay.”

“To reject a gift is to insult the giver and the act of giving. I insist that you have this.”

“Thank you,” Baldino said, as he unwrapped the newspaper and twine, knowing that the blood on the ribbons belonged to the giver. A look at the contents revealed a gift no money could ever buy, not in Baldino’s world.

“Pure cocaine. Uncut, prime stuff. Only the best for the doctor who saved my life,” Fernandez said proudly.

“I don’t know what to say,” John said, embarrassingly at a loss for words. “I’m straight.”

“Then sell it to someone who ain’t. Or buy yourself a women with it, and let her show you where it can take you. Life in the clouds is for winners. Only losers spend their lives walking on the ground. You don’t look like a loser, Doc. The next time I get shot, I’ll ask for you.”

“Thanks,” John said, feeling warm with one part of his mind, and ice cold with another.

“No problem, Doctor John,” Fernandez said, as he gave himself yet another admiring look in the mirror. “I got some housecleaning to do.”

At eleven fourteen. Fernandez walked out of the ER door, his file having mysteriously disappeared. At eleven thirty five, John flushed his gift down the toilet, wishing the rats in the sewer a happy time. By midnight, five overdoses had come in, and two more gunshot victims, one blinded by a bullet through the temples, another with a hole in his brain.

The medical report came in a sealed envelope to the beachhouse, for patient 326-A. Better that John get the file for 326-B. There was a 10% chance of error in diagnostic technique. But if the 90% was right, surgery and/or drugs would be needed to put together what astrocytoma grade III was trying to pull apart. The papers promised 50% recovery in 25% of the cases where treatment was successful. But there had to be other papers, other investigators, other odds.

A bottle of Newfoundland screech washed into the lagoon between the rocks at the fishing post. The 130 proof elixir made so many musicians, sailors, and construction workers in St. John’s forget the worst part of their lives, and embellish the better parts. Sales at the West Side bars in Manhattan demonstrated, with statistical validity, that it worked 75% better on New Yorkers. “Sorry, Charlie,” John said to the sky, “Madness is best enjoyed straight.”

“And bullshit is best eaten with a silver spoon,” the comeback from the barefoot man in the white suit on the beach. The Cabana Santa danced his way onto the razor-sharp rocks on an invisible carpet that spread out before him, to a snappy Salsa beat that screamed both hip and happy. Mick Fernandez finished with a Latino-Celtic pirouette that would make Barishnikov look like a white Jewish stock broker learning to two-step. He offered John a tab of candy from his pocket. “First one’s free. The rest are even better.”

“So this is heavenly bliss?” John took the pill in his hand.

“Try it and find out. Reality is what you make it.”

“You think so.”

“That, Doctor John, my main and only man, IS your problem. You THINK too much.”

“This ‘condition’ in my brain might take care of that situation.”

“Not unless you beat it first.”

“End it all?”

“Begin it, my friend. Starting with the right PERCEPTION.”

“And that will lead me to the right reality on the other side of the ‘door’?”

“Yer half way there already.”

“Or maybe I’m not.”

“Hey, who loves ya, baby? Mick Fernandez.” He hugged John with a camaraderie reserved only for the most trusted of thieves. “Try manipulating your own brain chemistry. Who knows, maybe you might figure out how to fix that head problem you got. No discoveries are made by people who are sane or straight.”

“How do you know I didn’t have you arrested, or shot, before you got to trial?”

“If you did, good for you! Life was getting too boring, anyway.” Fernandez felt a chill in the air. “Hey, who turned down the AC in this bar?” He snorted another vial of coke.

“I come to here to California to a place that’s got bad AC? No class.”

“This isn’t California, Mich. And it’s probably cold because-”

“-Shhhh,” Fernandez interrupted. “Those chicks behind us. They’re both hot to trot and real interested, my friend.”

“What chicks?”

“NO!!! Not again!!!” Fernandez stamped on the rocks, frustrated, his feet bleeding a river of blood. “She’s a guy. And a narc, too!!! Well, John, it wasn’t ME who porked her up in the attic. That’s on YOU!”

“I didn’t-”

“So now you steal my dope, too?!! After you flush what I give to you down the toilet!!!” Fernandez pulled out a gun. His firm grip said it would not return to the holster with a full chamber.

“Hey, don’t shoot!!!” John pleaded.

“Then YOU do it.” Fernandez gave John the gun.

John’s hand shook. He held the barrel up, looking into its barrel.

“Through the eyes, not on the side of the head. John.”

“Was that how it was for you?”

“The second time. Here, I’ll show you.” Fernandez took the gun, aimed it into his eye socket, cocked the trigger, and began his Morrisonian death soma. “This is the End . . . My only friend, the end.”

“No!!!” John screamed.

“Then you do it!”

Fernandez took John's trembling hand and put it on the pistola handle. The shaking stopped, intention of mind returning with abrupt determination.

"Hate, John. It's fun. Everything is fun when you manipulate your own brain chemistry. Even death." Fernandez smiled, and dropped another three Asian subway tokens. "Look, John. It's the American way. A red pill, a white pill, and a blue pill. It's a special recipe. First one's free."

"Goodbye, Mick," John said.

"Till later, John." Fernandez' laughter echoes everywhere, most particularly between the ears inside John's aching head. It sounded like something from a bad horror movie, the kind you find yourself watching and living in, even though you know you hate it and probably do.

Then, something happened. John's hands sweat, then something took them over. A grip, shake, and squeeze later, two bullets penetrated the ghost's head. It blew open into a cloud of red smoke, then a clown's head.

"Follow the yellow brick road, we are the beautiful people . . ." Fernandez chucked from his new persona, again and again, as he was blown back into the netherworld. But there was something in the image that the voice did not reveal. The clown's face became distorted, deformed, ugly, old, then reduced to the skeleton of death. Still, the skull was smiling.

Below John, blood soaked rocks, made so by his feet, now void of shoes. Within the red pool, pills with a single label - a happy taco to himself in younger and better times. "'The first one's free'" echoed the wind. "The next one is happier."

"And final," John added, by way of conclusion. The motto "where there's life there's hope" never seemed more important, and threatened.

CHAPTER 10

John scanned the books available on the Net and through the local book store delivery service. How appropriate that “Flowers for Algernon” was there, on discount, with one copy left. The first half of the 1960 novel about a retarded man, whose intelligence soared beyond genius because of a miracle operation, was inspiring and instructive. Regression back to his original state occupied the last third of the book. Unknowingly cast as the lead character, John Baldino was determined to rewrite the ending to suit his purposes.

Godlike powers come to man, but on the gods’ timetable, and for limited periods of time. The chance to open windows of consciousness for oneself and everyone else are transient, and occur most intensely in the third act of the three-act opera. Beethoven knew that. So did Hemingway. So did every kid diagnosed with terminal leukemia. So much living can happen in the last days, and sometimes those last days can be turned around into a whole lot of other days. Such was John’s hope when he wrote up his clinical and research notes into a medical manifesto - “How to recognize and trick Demon Death.” As a nonfiction book, with a catchy color scheme and well-designed illustration, it had to sell.

Kathy came by a half hour late, in a low cut black dress slit on the side, in stiletto heels. Her care package was larger than usual, her mind preoccupied.

“You look great, Kathy!” John noted enthusiastically, “Black really is your color.”

“It was my daughter’s, too.” She said. “She died this morning.”

No words could ease the pain. Kathy sought comfort in John’s arms. It was freely and wholeheartedly given.

“Do you want me to do anything?” John offered. “Take care of the funeral, tell the family , come with you to, ya know . . .”

“I know,” she said though the tears. “I’m crying now so I don’t cry in front of the rest of the family. Someone has to be the strong one. Do you mind?”

“Whatever I can do. Name it.”

Kathy answered with a life-grip that spoke volumes. Instantly, John felt her past, present, and future - all the things that mattered of it, anyway. She felt the same from him.

No other words were said, no requests made. Kathy wanted to take care of the matter privately. It was a mercy killing, from a biological perspective. Maria Katlan Brennon O’Leary had been institutionalized for her own well being’ knowing little except what her name was and that the sandbox was a big enough universe for any brain-damaged fourteen year old with an IQ of 60.

“Finish the book, John”, Kathy said. “Finish it, for all of us.”

“I’ll hold the fort down while you’re gone,” he said. “And open the gate wide open when you get back.”

Her life-grip said “thank you, offer graciously accepted.”

As Kathy’s car slid out the driveway and down the bumpy beach road, John pondered the thought most painful to him. “Grief is a personal commodity that can’t be shared, bartered or eliminated.” Poem 10 reminded him of that all too well.

On Bereavement

*It’s the mist...
Vague possibilities,
Intangible realities.
Clear recollections.
The pain Axes its way through my brain.
Relentlessly pounding,
Until I retreat
To the haven of my depression.
I watch it plunder my memory,
And it slips away,
There aren’t any winners,
Only just survivors,
I find myself tiring of this fight.
I am supplying the energy to both sides:
Even the enemy is unclear
In a Guerilla war.

This conflict will resolve.

The finality of his death contrasts with my interminable pain,
But the river
Will begin to flow.

As the mountain melts away.*

Carmen Fischer-Burger could never order a meal at a vegetarian restaurant with her hyphenated name, but to go by Fischer was to deny her husband the respect she felt he deserved. To go with Burger meant turning back the clock to the days when women were born to be barefoot, pregnant, and happy as a clam about the arrangement.

Doctor Fischer-Burger was the best cardiologist resident Manhattan had ever seen. She could hear a grade I murmur from across the room, and you could calibrate your slide rule by the predictions she would give on the thickness of a ventricular wall on ultrasound. To the neurologists, kidney guys and dermatologists, the heart was just a glorified water pump. But to Carmen, it was her life, such as that life was.

Thursday ended early, a twelve-hour day that lasted only fourteen this time. She got home in time to go to bed with her husband Jack, instead of merely going to sleep next to him.

“The sex was great”, she told Baldino the next day, over coffee in the cafeteria. “We introduced ourselves by name, profession, and neurosis, not the other way around, which was how we met.”

“Jack’s a solid guy in a not-so-solid world,” Baldino said, admiring the anatomy he, on more than one occasion, wanted to study a whole lot more closely. “And you have your malpractice insurance covered, too. He is a lawyer.”

“He used to be a lawyer,” she said solemnly, with an indifferent facade. “He finally made a career change this morning, into an honest way to steal a living.”

“A talk show radio host?”

“A corpse,” she said, with a blank stare in her eyes. “Angina. Ventricular defib and tertiary AV block that lead to cor pulmonale by the time he-”

John extended his hand out to her. He was horrible as a grief counselor with his patients, and even worse with his friends. But the touch of his hand was enough.

Carmen’s words turned to sobs, her stoic white face turning beet red. He felt her heartbeat against his body, shunning off the spectators who were peripherally concerned, curious, or some other useless combination of the two.

“It’s okay,” Baldino said to the residents whom she had not told, the nurses who suspected that there really WAS a thing going on between them, and the visitors wondering why a doctor should be the one who needed emotional support.

Thoughts raced through John’s mind, as he searched for the right words to say to Carmen. “He’s in a happier place now.” “You did your best to save him.” “You gave him two years he never would have had.” None of them could ease, or mend, the heart of a top-gun, workaholic cardiologist who lost her husband in the middle of his sleep, when she was right

next to him. It would be a long time before she would sleep soundly in a bed, alone or with someone who cared about her.

“It’s okay,” John found himself saying to Carmen, as she lost herself in his arms. “It’s gonna be okay,” he kept saying, hoping he could believe in the lie himself.

The lounge was a better place to “talk it out” or “let it out,” whichever Carmen preferred. Both drained John’s mental energy and muscles of compassion. But in times like this, Doctors were supposed to give patients what they wanted, and not what they needed.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight, John,” she sobbed out as her first intelligible request.

“Whatever you need, Carmen.” His reply, appended by a tight hug that seemed unbreakable, and inescapable.

Whatever would happen, or not happen, that night, a bond had been cemented. But the emotion was new. Grief this close felt too powerful, and someone had to stand up against it.

“He was a good man,” Carmen quivered out through her shaking lips.

“As solid as they come,” John added.

“I should have been there for him.”

“You were, you were.”

Then, a desperation grip. John felt his guts twisting in a knot, a tightness in his throat, and the chill of helplessness running down his arms and legs. Grief was contagious, but someone had to be the strong one.

“It’ll be okay, okay?” John kept saying, to stop the first tear from falling. Losing a patient to death was one thing. but a friend, or a friend of a friend, that was –

“Okay, it’ll be okay”,’ he muttered again, and again. Grief was a mountain that demanded surrender to it, or a stand against it. Try to go around, and it will haunt you forever. Some mountains are like that, but sometimes you aren’t strong enough to fight or surrender.

The rematch with demon death would happen again, soon enough.

John always wondered what happened to Carmen. She was a colleague and friend. Maybe if she had become a lover, they would have kept track of each other. But he was a brain specialist, she was a cardiologist. North America needed good neurologists who knew how to interpret CAT scans, and Russia needed heart surgeons who could put together valves and myocardial infarcts with sewing needles and dental floss. The last John heard from Carmen, it was from a town in Siberia, the kind that disappeared from the map after one of those meteorological “accidents”. One of those “accidents” which his brother Vincent avoided, reported, or worked 28 hours a day to prevent.

John recalled the family business, that never left the immediate family dinner table. Vincent had carried the torch from his father, “Big Nick” Baldino and his mother, converted ex-Nun Athena. The details of their clandestine, very international, activities were never told to John, though he did get the occasional request from Vincent, or his parents, to investigate a contagious neurological disease, or a viral lung disorder, that didn’t fit what was written in the textbooks. Usually those maladies started in ‘Places of Change’ overseas, the reports winding up in Atlanta, or D.C. John provided all medical information requested. Causes, prognosis and, on occasion, cures. But as for the ‘whys’, the harder he asked, the less he was answered. It became safer, and easier, to not ask anything at all. Just ‘providing medical answers for some friends of mine’ was enough. It had to be.

“Carmeeeennnn! ! !” the rapidly aging Doctor Baldino yelled out to the Eastern horizon, in his best “Rocky” voice, from the fishing post.

“She’s on call,” a voice said from behind him. Husband-Lawyer Jack had that “I know what you really want to do with my wife” look in his eye. Surprisingly, he was okay with John’s arrangement. He wore a Priest frock, more saintly than lawyerly, in keeping with a love that had no room for petty emotions like jealousy.

“Where’s Carmen, Jack?”

“On call. That’s all I can tell you.”

“So why are YOU here?”

“Because we have to have a talk. It’s important, John.”

“Did you come here to give me last rites, Jack?” Baldino chuckled to himself. “A lawyer-priest like you can get me right with the IRS and the Lord. You can’t die without being clear with both, right?”

“A confession, John.”

“You want me to confess my sins to you?”

“No, Doctor Baldino. I want to confess my transgressions to you.”

“Why?”

“You’ll find that out when you talk to Carmen, Doctor B.”

“What happened to her in Siberia?” John demanded.

“That’s classified.”

“Classified WHERE?” Something very ‘interactive’ was going on, at all levels. Lawyer-Jack continued.

“I’ll tell you what you need to know, Doctor Baldino, but it doesn’t go into the book.”

“Doctor-ghost confidentiality. Does that hold up in Heavenly Court?”

A fish grabbed John’s bait. Appropriately, it was a Judas Bass.

“A tasty catch, Doctor. I’ll supply the spice if you supply the campfire.”

The rest of the dialogue that never happened took place on the beach under the cloak of darkness, with eyes wide open.

CHAPTER 11

“Wanting is better than having,” John remembered when he woke up the next day. “It is illogical, but true,” rang the rest of the quote from the old Star Trek rerun, seen more inside his head than on the tube.

Women, like patients, were an all-or-none thing with John. When it rained, it poured. Everything reminded him of someone who offered softly flowing yin to his solid-rock yang. The golden yellow dunegrass made him yearn for bleach-blonde Kathy Brennan. White sands evoked the name “Bianca,” in shades that engendered color and definition to a black-and-white life. The rising sun was Jenny, ever-ready to give him a thumbs up when he deserved it, and a kick in the ass when he needed one. But there was some unfinished business with Carmen. Maybe it had to do with Jenny, ever present. Both of them could step into his life at any time, maybe at the same time. Perhaps they DID meet, and got along far better than expected. If so, love between women was far simpler and real than anything between genders.

John’s breakfast reading turned to a different kind of brain food. Spy novels, this time. The beachhouse was certainly loaded up with enough of an assortment. Ian Fleming to Robert Ludlum and everything in between, with enough Clancy-esque details, about weapons and government-backed conspiracies, to keep you going when the plot line went dull, or the characters seemed flat. But still, in the core of the testosterone-infested chaos lay a woman, waiting to be discovered for what she really was, or could become.

*I am tired of seeing myself
Through the reflection
In your eyes
Always edited
Scrapes from the grinder.
But it is hard to accept
The blunted hopes,
Dreams and self esteem
Which accompany separation.
This is not new.
As a child,
I was always obsessed
With the sadness of permanent loss.
Losing my hat in the sea.
Seeing the light extinguish
In the middle of a smile.
Nevertheless,
I try to break away;
Always ending up
Where I began.
My reflection becomes clear,
And I vanish.*

Neither Carmen Berger nor Carmen Fisher-Berger ever looked good in black, but she insisted on wearing it, seven days a week. “Jack - my late husband Jack - always liked me in black,” she’d tell friends who insisted that six months of deep grief was approaching self-pity, or some other disorder requiring a visit to the shrink.

Nothing was going on under the sheets between John Baldino and Carmen, but pillowtalk in low places was that they were an item that had happened, or was in the process of happening. Jennifer, John and Carmen were the only ones who knew what the truth was. The nights of cheering up after the wake turned into overnights, with the same things said again and again.

“‘Lawyer-Jack’ was a good man, Doctor John,” she confessed, and reflected upon.

“A great one,” young Baldino affirmed, to the extent that he thought Carmen wanted it affirmed.

“The only honest lawyer in town.”

“The country.”

“The world.”

Tonight’s out-of-hospital supper walk took them past an outdoor performance of Bach, professionally and joyously played by musicians in tattered jeans and tee shirts. The August moon was full, and astrological charts for John and Carmen both said, “Expect great changes today. A missed opportunity to correct past mistakes will be very costly.”

“Brandenburg Number Three,” Carmen commented, with deep remembrance of something she had kept secret from everyone, even Baldino. “If I didn’t get into medical school and become a brilliant doctor, I probably would have been a happy musician.”

“There’s still time, Carmen. A whole three hours a week, if you luck into a non-surgery residency and give up sleeping.”

The joke was understood, but not appreciated.

“My husband, Jack, wanted me to be a doctor. So did my father, my brothers, and even my mother.”

“Three outstanding Resident of the Year awards say you haven’t disappointed them.”

“But maybe I have,” she said somberly. “A doctor is supposed to be honest, right?”

“With the exception of the interview to get into medical school.”

“Which is where it started for me, John.” She smiled at the flute passage, moving her fingers ahead of the beat, humming along in harmony above and below the melody in perfect symmetry, with a sorrowful blend of emotions that was not in any musical score.

John pondered. Was this the part when Carmen would confess to cheating on an exam? Did she have a secret past as a drug-pusher, a psych patient, or a guy? Or maybe it dealt with the death of sainted, blue blood husband Jack, who insisted that she become a respected physician, rather than a lowly musician.

“When I was asked if I was applying to medical school because I wanted to doctor, or because I had to be a doctor, I lied,” Carmen said. “I told them I wanted to be a doctor. The truth was that JACK wanted me to be a doctor. I wanted to be a musician.” She grabbed hold of her straight brown mane, neatly tied in a ponytail. “A wild musician with wild, platinum, frizzy hair.”

She hummed along with the Bach, softly singing, in perfect harmony with sorrowful lips, what she wanted to play to the entire city with a violin, flute, or even a tuba.

“So just do it,” John said. “YOU are the boss of YOU, right?”

“I can’t,” Carmen replied, eyes to the ground. “I owe too much to too many people. They . . . he . . . gave me everything. The least I owe Jack is to be perfect.”

“Like he was, Carmen?”

The slap across John’s face caught him off balance. The footsteps of a trusted friend, walking away from him with an affirmative marching step, committed him to serve the truth, no matter who it hurt.

“Carmen, I’m -”

“Trying to get into my pants? Fuck you, Jack!”

“John. Carmen . . . My name is John, not Jack.”

“And you’re so perfect.”

“I didn’t marry Jenny because she’d elevate my position on Capital Hill.”

“Just the position of your third leg.”

“When I’m working, it’s because I love to work, not because I’m avoiding home, Carmen.”

“We had some problems, John.”

“Each of them with a different name. Linda, Judy, Wendy, Crystal with three Y’s, Krystal with a K, and . . .”

Carmen stopped dead in her tracks. Boiling anger gave way to cold realization, then a flood of tears.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. . .” John said, as he moved in to comfort her from the blow that had to be delivered by somebody.

“No. Jack . . . John,” she said. “I have to be alone tonight. And maybe tomorrow night, too.” She walked away, gazing at Herself, in the reflection of the mirror inside her OWN eyes, with a blank stare.

Carmen called in sick for the rest of the week. When John saw her after a busy weekend shift on Sunday night, it was at another outdoor performance - given by a flaming redhead with wild curly hair, healing the souls of the audience with a selection from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons - ”Spring.”

“Maybe it’s something in these fish I’ve been catching out here and eating every night,” John contemplated, as he dropped line into water in preparation for a deep dive into the Twilight Zone. It was a state of mind that paradoxically came at the time of day it was named for. How appropriate that the radio he brought out with him was broadcasting Mozart’s requiem - uncut and unrestrained. Or maybe even Mozart was a perceptual aberration. “There could be a computer cult out here doing hologram experiments on a Defense Department grant, or a load of potent hallucinogens could have been tossed ashore, by a boat pulled over by the Coast Guard for not having regulation headlights.” he pondered. But none of the “real world” explanations quite fit.

The “briefing” from Jack the night before was held in confidence. Perhaps it was fact, perhaps fiction. It all fit too well, somehow. Carmen alive. Somewhere, under an assumed name, working for an

underground international task-force of scientists, dedicated to saving the world from the destructive forces of technology. The fabled New USA (underground scientific alliance)? A husband who died at her side for no apparent reason, then returns from the dead to trust the secret with his wife's ex-almost-lover? A mild-mannered doctor afflicted with a bizarre brain disorder, who can turn the world around by turning his own life around and becoming Super-something? The symmetry of the story structure here would make Sid Fields, Michael Crichton and Sam Goldwyn ALL say, "Way too predictable." But, then again, those formula plotlines that had so much mass appeal had to come from somewhere.

"Carmen!!!" John screamed out to the four directions in a Rockiesche tone. "Where are you!!! What's this all about, Carmen?! !!"

At the "golden hour", the answer came from the radio. She called herself Natasha Fung, but the voice was neither Russian nor Chinese.

"Mozart's Requiem, conducted by Georg Soli, unmistakably real," she read.

"Carmen?!" John yelled into the static. He knew she would resurface somewhere.

"I don't know how we can top that, but we're still taking requests, here at WILL radio, music with commitment, 100% of the time, all the time . . . until the FCC catches up with us, and makes us join the Illuminate in their quest to kill brain cells with TOP FORTY COMMERCIAL HITS LIKE . . . no, we won't do that. But we want a caller, now. 1-800-123-REBEL. Music or talk, your call."

John knew that there was a good reason to have a cell on him, even when not on call. He dialed the number, waited out the three rings, and braced himself.

"WILL - Natasha Fung at your disservice," she said.

"This is . . . eh . . . eh . . ."

"Who do you want to be?"

"Jack?" John said. "Doctor Jack," he added.

John heard silent recognition at the other end, and listening ears from places he thought only possible in the darkest scenarios of his imagination. Carmen heard it, too. The overdue reconnection greeting card had to be written between the lines, and the notes.

"What do you want, Jack? Music of the mind or mouth?"

"Both. I've got a hundred and thirty two things to say."

The code still held. Beethoven's Opus 135, one of his last quartets, was the only Beethoven John knew by category listing, maybe because it was always Carmen's easiest way to decategorize her life.

No one listened to talk radio with requested background music, particularly Opus 135. That was the hope, at least.

"So, 'Jack'. How's it going?"

“I’m having these headaches. My brain hurts.”

“Easy treatment. Chop it off. It works for the gang on Capital Hill.”

“Do you think there are ETs trying to take over the world, and our heads? “

“Of course. They have a biker jamboree every Labor Day at Fort Dietrick, Maryland.”

The next words had to be carefully placed. “Patient 137-A doesn’t think so. Hippos and temps are screaming from the right and the left. The last time I saw him, he was stuck at the Astros game in the third inning.”

John felt tense silence from the other end. But the die was cast. No holding back, now

“Could the GERMan be killing the doctor, maybe by accident?” John asked.

The silence felt even more dangerous, tense, and distant. “Natasha, are you there?” he pleaded, faking a Slavic accent

“Of course, my fellow no-goodnick. Everything will be okay, Boris. We will find Moose and Squirrel and get back rocket fuel.”

“How?”

“‘Night, Mother’, you have seen the movie, darlink?”

“Yeah.”

“Then read the book. Secret code for rocket fuel will be inside.”

This communication with the officially dead and realistically VERY living would be retrofitted. The novel about an American double agent, who posed as a Nazi propagandist in WWII, was on John’s ‘B’ reading list, and probably most everyone else’s. What better way for the United States to get information about the Nazis than to have an American ‘turncoat’ broadcast propaganda messages from Berlin, with codes that gave away military secrets about the German war machinery with every broadcast. There were only three people who knew his real identity. Historical speculation is that without the deception, the war would have been lost to the wrong side.

“Sometimes it’s a good thing moose and squirrel don’t read,” John said.

“It is cartoon, Darlink. You listen to Beethoven, you read book, and you call me when you find Mooseberry bush and secret rocket formula. And write it down this time, Darlink. ALL of it.”

Carmen hung up, but the Beethoven remained. So did a night of ranting about many weird topics, with frames of reference that made sense only to John, Jack, and Vonnegut. Again, the ‘maybe’s’ posed more questions than answers. Was John’s brain problem due to a germ warfare agent released by accident or calculated purpose? Was the “New USA” for real? And, if so, could they represent a new form of employment one day when he was ready for them, and the evil they opposed? Or maybe it was just hallucinogenic mushrooms and carcinogenic chemicals in the fish and drinking water. The solution was still in the memoirs.

CHAPTER 12

The medical clues led nowhere. Cryptic notes from the author of “Night, Mother,” and Carmen, provided interesting hypotheses on the parallels between biological cancers and political ones, but none related directly to patient 137-A, or B. Searching the Net for biomedical articles, on ‘Fish number 12’ day, John found recycled old guard dogma and fresh New-Age bullshit. The wood in the crucifix left by Kathy was more help in self-diagnosis and treatment, but so was the feeling. John couldn’t prove to the less than 0.05 level that her hopes and prayers would come up with the miracle cure he needed, but it seemed more valid statistically, or otherwise, than any other approach taken to date. Of course, he had to do his part. Finish the book!

Eating was the last thing John wanted to do on the morning of fish #12. It wasn’t the aftertaste of fish #11. A special kind of knot settled into his stomach, and it wouldn’t let go. The more he procrastinated from opening up the folder on poem #12, the tighter the demon, or angel, twisted his guts,

“This story isn’t ready to be written!!!” he screamed to the ghosts looming around him. “If you want the story written - YOU write it. Leave me alone!!!”

Then - suddenly, the twist in the gut was gone. So was the pounding in the head. Also gone, the weightless sensation that detached mind and body, Everything felt “normal”, very painless.

It felt good to be normal again. Happy came next, then content. Then . . . shame.

“The express train can’t stop here,” John pondered. Then, a flash-”You ghosts can give me my old life back if I step back from this new one. Is that how this game is played?”

The answer came by telephone - The message said that the lab results sent out on patient 137-A might have been a mistake. Computer error was blamed for the problem. Confidentiality was requested.

“No!” John vowed. “I don’t cheat death by running away from life. Poem 11 will be read, and written about, even if it costs me a computer error that could save my life. The person it’s dedicated to means too much to me.”

Eleven was never John’s lucky number, but in the duel with death, raw courage was a far more needed commodity than good fortune.

This poem is addressed to whoever or whatever the reader chooses to blame for the cruelty that often accompanies life, and death.

*I kept telling myself
That I wouldn’t have to curse,
Or rant and rave
While writing this piece.
That I could quietly,
And firmly,
Express my anger*

*At the untimely death
Of a friend.
But I cannot.
YOU are a cruel bastard.
Why is this suffering allowed to continue?
I don't say this out of irreverence,
But out of disbelief.
Are you afraid to let us know?
I don't know why I expect an answer.
I am not sure what the hell You are,
Or even if You exist at all.
I suspect not.
But I prefer to animate
You... ...for the moment.
It provides me a focus for the venting of my hopes' desires,
frustration and anger.
I will allow you to exist in my world, for now,
But as you well know,
With life comes the spectre of its loss,
And you can bet your ass,
I will soon
Rip it from your grasp,
Slowly.*

December 20th, 1979, brought the first real snow of the year, turning the grey sidewalks of Manhattan into virgin white lanes that could sustain any Dickens fantasy or Norman Rockwell aspiration. Streets that held moved honking cars and frustrated drivers turned into ski trails, where no one was in any hurry to get anywhere, except inside themselves or close to strangers who were now friends. The elements ruled, enforcing their will on workaholics, and bus drivers who insisted on getting their cargo from A to B according to the predesignated schedules. Such was the fate of Bus 25, carrying as many passengers, most of them children, as it slid into a brick wall, at full speed, on the entrance to the 59th street Bridge.

Baldino was snowed in already, and soon found out that the encouraging words given to him at his medical school graduation were true - "You know more than you think you do." Also, "Sometimes you have to leave your books at home and bring your common sense with you to work." With the hospital operating at 1/5 staff capacity, it was an early Christmas present. The weekly "see one, do one, then teach one" sequence of medical education had manifested itself for John five times that night. After the shift was finally over, Ball-Buster Brady, chief of Emergency and, that night, Surgery and Cardio, patted a weary Baldino on his tired back and said, in a voice as gruff as they came, "I see you forgot your tie, Doctor Baldino?"

"Huh?" John's reply out of bloodshot eyes,

“You better wear one,” Brady said, giving him a gift-wrapped box from Berdorf Goodman. “A real doctor wears a tie, and Doctor John, you did some really great doctoring in there. YOU were personally responsible for saving twenty-four lives tonight.”

“Yeah,” John mumbled out, neck deep in depression.

“And you made a noble effort on the last case.”

“Which IS my last case, Doctor.”

“We can’t win them all, Baldino. Sometimes you have to let them go.”

“Why?” Baldino challenged.

“Because,” Brady somberly related, “sometimes it’s God’s will. Doctors are not God, despite the fact that we have to make our patients think that we are sometimes.”

Brady’s wisdom was based in experience.

No one survived as an ultra right wing redneck in a left to center City, with a wardrobe and crew cut straight out of the Eisenhower years, without knowing what he was talking about. But John still chose to spend the night in the morgue, with the one patient that didn’t make it.

He reviewed the facts in his head, again and again. BP hit 50, but dobutamine and Ringers brought it up to 65. Peritonitis occurred, secondary to twisting of the jujunem, but abdominal surgery and lavage took care of that. Pancreatic damage was moderate, spleen intact, papillary light reflexes indicating no uncal herneation or compression of the oculomotor area. But there was damage to something, somewhere, that started the death clock going. Disseminated intravascular coagulation was new to medicine, but old hat to human history. One clot builds up, kills the tissue around it, then breaks up and clogs up another tissue bed somewhere else, then breaks up, and so on, and so on. Mini strokes all over the body, with no way to stop them.

John picked up a bone. It belonged to a small child who died in the leukemia ward, an eight year old boy who lost a leg, an arm, and a lung to the cancer, before it mercifully took his life. He looked up to the sky. “I don’t mean to repeat a question asked by Sigmund Freud, but why? Why this child, who did nothing to harm anyone here, and who had the greatest respect and love for You?”

There was no shortage of cases more tragic and agonizing on the shelves. “And why him, her, him, her . . .” he protested with sincere inquiry, then unrestrained anger.

Then, patient 25, the DIC victim who died even after the doctors obeyed all the biological rules. “And why her?!!!! You know I’d care most about this case. Was it to teach me a lesson, that doctors have to care about all patients equally? Am I supposed to be noble enough to cry, or feel nothing equally for everyone? Why do You let your most noble creation suffer and die with so much agony, pain, and terror?”

He looked at patient twenty-five, took a deep breath, and uttered the words that would define the rest of his life, here and in the afterlife. “You tricked me, and got them. But no more. I will be more HUMAN than You are, so that I’ll humiliate you into doing the right thing, by people like this patient who you allowed to die tonight, and all the others in here who you put through hell. I’ll fight demon death, and the diseases You’ve created, any way I have to, even if I have to use the devil’s fire to do it. On the once bright eyes and gently soul of patient twenty-five, I swear this.”

He looked down at patient twenty-five, stroking her cheek. “Goodbye. I’ll see you on the other side of the rainbow, Jennifer, my wife, friend, and life.”

The water was calm, the breakers little more than ripples. The ocean allowed even a blind man to see his reflection in its surface. How appropriate, since this was the Twilight day John let the tear duct gates swing open, for the first time since that fateful December night nearly two decades ago.

John hoped that no one was watching, most particularly Jenny. She demanded very little, all things considered. Put the toilet seat down, take out the garbage when it starts to move by itself, don’t put on my underwear unless you call me in first to get a picture, and don’t cry for me. “It will keep me from doing what I’m supposed to do, and hold you back from doing what you’re supposed to do,” he remembered his wife, friend, and lover saying, in his mind’s ear.

To his amazement, there was an end to the tears. Grief did stop, at least this stage of it.

“Where are you?” he asked the sun, the wind, the sky, the animals, then the faded reflection in the water. “Are you in there, Jenny? I can’t see your face.”

“You will,” Jenny’s voice whispered behind him.

John whipped around. The invisible messenger made footprints in the sand, and was running away quickly

“Come here - Please, come back!”

John gave chase, but the harder he ran, the faster the spirit moved, whipping around in circles, evidenced only by the cloud of sand left in its wake. This time, his own footprints left only the faintest

impressions on the beach. East, West, North and South lost all direction. He felt himself to be a verb, the totality of his being converted into something that must be spirit, First it was ten percent spirit, then twenty, then thirty, then fifty, eighty, ninety, then - a loud thunder clap

Blinding gusts of sand clouded John's vision, a brisk Nor'easter wind howling in his deafened ears,

"Jenny!!!" he screamed. "I love you!!! I love you -"

Whether it was the magic, or the words, or their resonance, the transaction was complete. The skies became quiet, the wind calm. The footprint message left in sand was clear, direct, and most welcomed.

"I love you, too, John," it read. "I'll come back to you when you need me most," she whispered. "I have to go home to my other body now. Hot date tonight."

"With who?" John playfully asked.

"No one you know, John," She hesitated. "Not yet, at least," she added alluringly. "Or maybe you already do," she teased.

The subtext was clear enough. An open, joyous and sustainable reunion was in the works. The life path he had taken had been the right one and the correct one. Only two more poems, two more stories, and two more fish before the final destination and pay off. A win-win situation for everybody. No obstacle from heaven, hell, or anything in between could stop him now!!!

CHAPTER 13

Faith healing was something that always fascinated and scared John Baldino, Ph.D., M.D. As a man of medicine, he believed in being honest. As a man of science, he honored the validity of the proven fact. As a man of business, he had to know that perception can become reality, But scanning the “Faith for Health” web sites revealed, once again, how easy it is to sell water to a population of people who are definitely drowning.

The most amazing, and frightening, was “Soul Doctour Emanuel.” It was headed up by Rev. I.M. George DeJung., LLD., a Texan. He worked his way through three Canadian provinces, as a preacher who upped contributions above the thousand dollar mark by paying respected members of the community \$50 a shot for publicly pledging two grand apiece. Business arrangements he didn’t approve of were labelled the doing of the devil. Marriages had to be pre-approved by ‘Pastor’, or he’d let it be known that there was drug money, or a love child, associated with the arrangement, Every parishioner was required to donate 10% of their salary to the church, another 15 to secure a place in heaven. His lawyers were well paid, his car well polished, and his hair always slickly greased. His healing business, with accompanying instructional tapes, was not too shabby either,

There was no fixed rate for the “Lord’s intervention”. An open heart and open ear was enough. But by the time you bought the instructional tapes, inspirational songs, and attended the sure-fire seminars on how to “Sell Your Screenplay of Life to God through the RIGHT Agent,” the price matched the severity of the disease, ominously at a sliding scale that paralleled rates paid by HMOs. Indeed, a few companies had been cajoled into paying out on services by the DeJung Ministry as adjunct medical therapy.

It brought a chuckle to the morning, but it didn’t ease the pain in the belly, or the ache in the head, or the shakes in hands that once sewed nerves the size of spaghetti together without a microscope. Still, there was enough firmness of spirit to read chapter 13, in what Baldino hoped would be a “darkest before the dawn” novel, and life.

*It takes time
To come to grips with affections
That wax and wane;
Changing loyalties.
Fluctuating alliances.
Our lives are littered
With the twisted corpses
Of shattered dreams,
And vivid
Disillusions,
As you travel
Your emotional sine wave.
You find its amplitude is inversely proportional
To the diversification of
Your emotional investments.
Dealing with this,
Demands remarkable flexibility.
The ability to gather and polarize*

*The psychic energy
Carried by all events,
Good or bad,
and channel it to the end
Of your choosing;
Your only recourse in the face of a constant onslaught
Of random events
Beyond your control.
With an anticipatory rumble,
The tectonic plates
Of your mind
Begin to move;
Pulverizing existing mental constructs,
Free flowing imagination
Threatens to engulf rock hard preconception,
As opposing forces clash.
A testament to the malleability
Of your frame of reference.
And you emerge;
With a comfortable illusion
Of independence,
To tentatively survey
The new landscape/the old landscape,
On your time,
And on your terms.*

The definition of a friend to some was someone you trusted enough to argue with. To John, it was about not seeing the other guy for three years, then picking up exactly where you left off. Such was the relationship between Doctor John and Councillor Bill, a traveling companion he and Jenny befriended on a smooth four hour ferry ride from UK to the Continent, which lasted for twelve rock hours way back before any of them hit the big two-O. Every vacation taken by John since that time involved Bill, by choice or divine accident. Together, they had seen three continents, and parts of their own countries, that neither of them ever experienced before.

Ankara native Wild Bill Korioglu was indeed a young Turk who fit in anywhere. His father started off as a British engineer, then went through every profession possible for a European in Arabia, save drug dealer and oil tycoon. His Arab mother was a school teacher, with enough economic smarts to keep the family living in a way her husband had gotten them accustomed to. The young Koriglu had been to more places by his 21st birthday than soldiers twice his age. He could be Bill, William, Billy, Willy, or Will, depending on the mood of the room and the country. He was a born traveller, adventurer and, when the situation required, opportunist. But such were the necessities in a “you don’t ask for a life, you take one” world. His religion was whatever worked at the time, and whatever could make him a more compassionate and caring human being.

It was approaching the tenth anniversary of the meeting on the bars-decked boat, and the prearranged place was the driest city on the planet. By divine accident, the AMA trauma convention was held in Vegas. John called as soon as he got two free plane tickets from a grateful travel agent. Bill said he'd pay for the room, but that they'd have to split the hookers. John told him that he was a neurologist, not a surgeon. It was a lame start, but the conversation over the phone got better. Groucho and Chico Marx could have not had a better interchange of wit, rhythm, and grounding.

"It's been four years," John told himself, as he waited yet another hour in front of the Sands hotel in the blistering desert heat. "Or maybe I didn't recognize him," he pondered. "Everyone is wearing sunglasses here. Maybe he thought I was supposed to see him." Then, another thought. "Maybe he can't recognize me. I have gotten, by necessity, more respectable in my appearance. I go out less, work harder, and worry more about the consequences of . . ."

Just then, a slap on the back, a haunting wham from the past. "Hey, John. What's with the suit, there?"

"What's with the chains, Bill?" John replied, commenting on the jewelry around Bill's neck, gaudy and bright as the Elvis-imitation suit around it.

The "good to see yas" felt good to John, and very real. He needed an energy recharge, and this time it was Bill's turn to start up their mutually-shared cosmic battery. It was an inappropriate yearning with which to enter Wild Bill's car.

"It's a medical fact, and a personal warning," John commented, as he perused the Mercedes that said "neuvo-rich lawyer" with the interior, and "velvet Elvis" with the regressive country on the radio. "You are what you drive. Where did you rent this? Lobotomies Are Us?"

"The Lord's been good to me," Bill said, with a face that looked scary, not wild. "He can be good to you, too. Let me show you how."

The next thing John heard was a video tape, of an evangelist who definitely knew the financial bounty one can acquire on earth by securing gold for heaven. Bill looked like he had not only bought into the scam, but was collecting a healthy percentage himself.

"It's been a profitable year," Bill said. "As a doctor, you make, what?"

"Sixty cents an hour."

“No, really, what’s your yearly income?”

“Thirty-thousand, before taxes.”

“I can double that, John. I started out my law career doing pro bono work, too. But I graduated into something more sustaining. A family business.”

It all fit together now, so when in Sicily, West . . . “Okay, so you want me to owe you a favor?” John groaned out in his best Godfather Brando. What a set up, he thought. Playing mafia dons in Vegas. It beat playing rock stars in Spain, or a Jerry Lewis agent in France.

“There are some people I want you to meet’,’ Bill continued.

“You got it, boss,” John volleyed back in Hobokenese.

It felt good to be connected with someone from the past again. Maybe the loose company they were heading for had one woman a little like Carmen, and a lot like Jenny. The rustic cabin was as natural as the Vegas strip was supernatural. Authentic wood pine from the mountains, baked desert clay roof, and undoubtedly wild women inside. A woman inside walked to the door, a long, blonde mane on her that would be the envy of any horse, or woman, East or West of the Sierra Nevada range

“Who is she’?” John asked.

“The most beautiful woman in the world,” Bill said, as she opened the door and revealed features as attractive as any whore on the Show circuit, but clad in garb a lot more classy. One could only imagine what kind of body lay under the ankle-length white skirt and the bright blue peasant blouse.

“She turned my life around,” Bill continued, as he hugged her hello. “And her friend can turn yours around, too.”

John had not had carnal relief, or pleasure, since the night Jenny was taken by the Creator upon that dark, snowy December night. The lump in the throat, not yet resolved by the Fire in the belly, or the wisdom in the gut of the aspiring Healer, who could alleviate so many other people’s ills, but not his own. How appropriate that his birth should happen here in the sunlight, in the high desert, that had nothing but beauty as far as you could see in any direction. He owed Bill a very huge favor, until –

“My name is Briget, and I’ve seen the Lord. Can I tell you about Him?” a stoic-looking woman in thick glasses, and a black and white outfit straight out of the Cultists-for-Christ shop. “Have you read the book of Mormon?” She pressed on.

It was for real, and a very authentic family affair. Again and again, John heard, “the Lord can be your personal Savior”. “Once you heard OUR pastor speak, you’ll join his Church, too”. And, “God is good and always knows what’s best for us”, more times than he could stand. Relating how- God’s will works against Doctors and patients was useless. So was convincing Bill that his dream woman was really a gold digger in Evangelical clothing, out to steal his money, his professional contacts and, soon enough, whatever manhood he had left in him.

But something in John said that it was a lost cause, for the moment. An alcoholic would start being a person once he or she decided to stop drinking. Bill had to save himself this time. The glaze of brainless bliss in his eyes said that he was drugged on something. Still, it was worth a try.

“Maybe we could take a camping trip to the mountain,” he suggested to Bill, between songs and sips of punch that had to be spiked with something. “Or New York, or Bourbon Street, in New Orleans. Just you and me.”

A smile came to Bill’s face as he considered it. The radar was getting re-established. The drowning wild man could be saved from a sea of unending mediocrity and mindless servitude. Friendship could triumph, unless –

Whatever grey was in John’s hair was turning white, very fast, particularly on this, fish number . . . whatever . . . day. He had lost count. Counting days when you are face to face with Eternities, and your own mortal ends, was so . . . silly. He brought the radio out to the fishing post. Maybe Carmen would be on air, giving him secret codes in the new segment she had promised her AM AND FM viewers, “Barbie-on-Beethoven”. She would relate more secrets about world political situations, personal medical problems, and shared jokes between the lines, puns and digs. She would broadcast the opera that would lure the Fish of all fish into John’s lure - the one that would tell him, in words, how to regain his life and how to relive his past. But all that came over the static, on the only transmitting band, was Maryanne Faithful’s “Those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end, we’d sing and dance forever and a day.”

Maybe the music was imagined, maybe it was real, but it certainly was appropriate - no surprise. No surprise when the modern-day gypsy woman appeared from behind, her tattered skirt flowing in the wind, her ample bosoms saying “yes” to any question a lovestarved man would ask. She had been through the war, MANY times. But though she had lived on the streets, her eyes said “Princess” - or was it “queen”?

The hands seemed large, the neck a bit extended, and the face frighteningly familiar. “It’s me, John,” Wild Bill Koligolu said through ruby red lips.

“What the . . .?” John didn’t know what to think, or feel.

“It was about change, John.” ‘Billie’ sat down next to his old friend. It was the last hand for him, too, and there was nothing left to bluff with. “Nothing was working, absolutely nothing. So I did the ‘change for the sake of change’ thing. I had the money, bet an embittered, rich ex-girlfriend that I wouldn’t do it, then showed up on her doorstep one day in a Christian Dior gown she’d kill to fit into. The sex we had was very interesting.

“The check she gave me bounced. Then there were some of my ‘government’ funders. who -”
“- What . . . why . . . how?”

“They take a bicycle pump to your nipples and go “push”, grab your Adam’s apple and go ‘pull’, and hold on tight to the ‘p’ thing and go ‘snip.’ Real easy.”

“You look . . .”

“Hot?”

“Hungry.” John noted that Bill’s petite-sized waist was due to lack of food, not obsession with fashion.

“Getting kinky work was possible. Getting honest work was a lot harder. I tried to get my family jewels and cannon back, but they were already spoken for. When I tried to get new ones, the shock-mocumentary movie producer who funded my ‘reassignment’ converted into being a Mormon, and cut me off from EVERYone. for my own good. Or maybe there was more cash in making Mormon family flicks than real-life anything. “ Billie started to shiver. “I miss all the hair that keeps you warm, the ‘p’ thing that keeps you hot and the ‘I’ thing that -.”

John found his body edging away, his curious eye leading to a Pandora’s box of other feelings.

“Hey, John. Don’t worry! It’s not contagious.”

“What?”

“Change, for the sake of change, John. It’s just too much of the wrong kind of medicine. You have to know what to throw away and know what to keep. Kenny Roger’s sang that, think. A great voice. A cute ass, too.”

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“So, you have changed, Billie.”

“Huh?”

“You used to hate country.”

“Yeah. I did, John, but we were talking about CHANGE. Too much makes life hard, but lets you wear pastel colors you never thought you could get away with. To NOT change is deadly, too. Too much of nothing, John.”

“What, me?”

“I wasn’t talking about -”

“Hey, Bill. Billie. Will-he-or-won’t-she. NO one gives ME the ‘get a life speech’ without an argument!”

“It’s time to move on, John.”

“To dying?”

“A more global kind of living. I’ve been talking with Carmen.”

John froze in mid rage.

“What do YOU know about Carmen?”

“Do you think your whole life, and these last few weeks, have been just a co-incidence. John? You have a great history, and an even bigger destiny.”

“Where? Doing what?”

Bill hesitated, pondered the issue and the depth of the real secret, then said - “You can design a cold-cream that doesn’t dry out a she-male’s skin after a close shave. Or find a way to reverse time so we can ALL go back and put right what we were destined to screw up.”

“I still have some friends in reconstructive surgery and plastics.” “I bet they all wear rubbers.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Bill smiled, the human part of him piercing through any cover.

“Good bye, Bill.”

““Night, Mother.”

After Bill left, the static on the radio broke. Coming in, loud and clear, from another band, Jefferson AIRPLANE - “Life is Change. New worlds to gain. My life is to survive and be alive, for you.” The permeating silence afterward bore Carmen’s signature, and perhaps someone even more special.

CHAPTER 14

John woke up with ‘White Rabbit’ pounding through his aching head, and the devil’s own shakes in his fingers every time he tried to move. Even with mind ninety-percent absent from sensationless body, he could still make diagnosis. Intensional tremors with transient, mass-induced, increased CSF pressure encroaching upon the mid-parietal lobe - the part of the brain where the ultimate movie in the mind is given its final edit. The prognosis - final. Astrocytes were the most resilient cells in the nervous system, able to live in bloodless environments where the nerve cells that made you human croaked out, but they would stop growing when they hit another astrocyte. Astrocytes gone cancerous were party animals who didn’t obey any rules. Neither did the world outside the beach house, the morning of fish #14.

The hazy figure was clad in a basic black, with fair white skin. Her hair blew in the wind, the blonde straggly mane bolting out streaks of fire. The eyes looked familiar, but the face was shrouded in silvery dust. She seemed to be the most beautiful angel in heaven, or the most deceptive demoness from hell. But she was far more powerful than either, once she opened her mouth.

“John,” she beckoned in an echoing voice. “Take this.”

A hand came out of an oversized sleeve, a pill in its palm. There was no label on the medication, but it pulsed to the beat of John’s pounding heart.

“Take it!” she insisted.

John stepped back, cautiously. The visitor took a bold stride forward.

“Take it, John!” she asserted again,

John stood his ground. The pill grew feet, then seemed to dance like a sadistic cockroach, daring him the take the plunge. He shook his head. “No! I dance to my OWN tune. This may be the last act of my life opera here, but I write the ending. You tell that to EVERYbody. EVERYBODY!!!!”

She looked down at the floor, gave a congratulatory “hmmm” to Baldino, then moved ahead one more stride. She lifted her head up, letting the sun shine on it.

“Take the pill, John, please,” she pleaded. “It’s now or never.”

John could hardly believe his eyes. The long-mourned love-of-his-life was more beautiful than ever. “Jenny. Is that you?”

“Take the pill, John. It’s our only hope,” she pleaded. She filled a glass from the faucet. The water turned to blood. The dancing cockroach pulled gack its legs, became a pill, then a bright source of hot, white light that burned into her flesh.

“Is that generic cyanide, Jenny?”

“It’s LIFE, John. And I’m the only hope you’ve got now.”

Her radiant smile seemed real. John pledged that he’d march into hell for Jenny, and maybe this was the test of that love. That commitment.

He reached out his trembling hand to her. She put the pill in his fist, and gently poured a gulp of water into his half-open mouth.

John waited to see what would happen, The moment of death was something he had only watched until this Fishing holiday. He had heard it said that you are most alive at the time of dying, or near dying. Life and death seemed so much alike, now. 'Finality' could not be very much different - but it was.

Her face called out his name, with love that went far deeper than tender or caring. "I'm here, John," Jenny called out, until she faded - into Carmen's body. It was little changed from a decade ago, with the exception of a few more wrinkles. Streaks of white amidst the red mane, and her scars were on the outside this time, slashes and burns made in very painful places by what were probably very vicious people.

John found himself with limbs that moved, instead of shaking. The headache in his head stopped, and the mailing address for his mind was once again his body Everything worked. He felt, medically, at least, 'normal.'

"Welcome back, John," Carmen said.

"Thank you, Carmen?" he declared, and asked.

She smiled. "It's great of you to see Jenny inside of me."

Does that mean that she's, ya know -"

"-A room-mate in my body?" Carmen pondered the matter. "I'm a scientist who had to learn about a whole lot of global reality. Maybe in para-global reality, it IS possible that Jenny could be -"

John silenced Carmen's discourse with a kiss, on the lips, and with full intensity of passion. And yearning.

"Yeahhh." Carmen concluded, overwhelmed by a strange presence in the room, and her long-empty heart. "Is there a third person here, between us?"

"I think so," John offered. "Its name is 'love', I think."

"Just as long as it's not named Kathy Brennon," Carmen added, bitterly.

"How did you know about Kathy?" John's back arched. "She's been keeping me alive, physically and otherwise, for the last two weeks!"

"With lots of her own recipes, right, Johnboy?" Carmen snooped around the kitchen, sniffing samples of food.

"Cooked with love, Carmen!"

"And phenybetaretalin, and other toxins that schmuck up your brain cells worse than any brand of whiskey, or hashish."

“She’s Irish. Salt is an exotic spice.”

“Which she makes into a killer casserole. To be eaten and digested, slowly.” Carmen put samples of food into a supply of specimen bags in her pocket. Her nose sniffed some more ingredients, their identity confirmed by a miniature spectrophotometer in her backpack. “It’s amazing what these new class of serotonin blockers will do to perception. I bet Kathy thought you’d be mad about her cooking. Falling crazy in love was apparently an unexpected byproduct.”

“What are you talking about, Carmen?”

“The classified secrets your parents told you when you were a child.” She peered up at the ceiling and stared through the walls at what she knew was around, somewhere. “You come from very elitist superspy stock -”

“ - Who moved to Yonkers when I was ten, and lived a quiet, uneventful, and some would say boring, life.”

“After going through so much terror, no wonder. But Vincent carried on the family tradition. You kept close contact with him.”

“We were brothers!” He pulled back, grief-stricken. “And still are.”

“And there is YOU. With all you know, have seen, and could do, you could be very useful to the right people, or . . .” She hesitated.

“Or who?”

“The wrong people!” she commented, as she found the wires, microphones, and cameras, all pointed at the desk where John wrote his memoirs.

John dropped his jaw. Carmen dropped her pants, in full view of the camera lenses.

“Chapter fourteen!” she screamed into the microphone. “The final frontier!” The heralding of the trumpets from her anal cavity was loud and boisterous. Never had John heard a lady fart so loudly, but, then again, Carmen had become something far more special than a lady. Her skills with a crowbar and hammer were enough evidence of that. Within five minutes, she had discovered enough hidden surveillance equipment to start ten “Spys-for-Spouses” franchises.

“How much did they get on camera, John? The ones pointing at your worktable,” she asked, her mind on things far more global than relationships or egos.

“Probably not much,” John said. “My handwriting sucks.”

Carmen flashed through on fast forward the tapes shot of the post on the jetty, noting every image with her lightning fast, photographic mind. All that was clearly visible - a tired, confused, but determined physician. Odd flashes of Harry and Newcastle appeared and, maybe, a few pillars of static to which John, as himself, was speaking very clearly.

“Maybe one of those pillars of static was my husband, Jack?” Carmen asked.

“What if I told you ‘yes’?”

“I’d let myself believe you, John” she fondly offered. “I hope he was at least an informative asshole. I wouldn’t have wanted all those years I spent loving him to have gone to waste.”

“Nothing was wasted this week, Carmen.” John took a deep breath, preparing once again for the worst. “And nothing was co-incidence, either. For instance, what about the neurological problems that made ME see a doctor, for the first time in my life?”

“Something in your food, at the Doctor of the Year Award. Someone wanted you out of the local profession, and out of the world picture.”

‘The lab reports and brain scans?’

“Lower level pranks orchestrated by upper level assholes. The real ‘patient 137A’ wore an ET-deflector hat under a wig when he got the CAT scan, and pumped up his blood with happy juice.”

‘Finding this place!!!’

“A real-estate trick.”

“Harry’s visit?”

“My idea, John.”

“Newcastle’s visit on the beach?”

“He cut a deal with the authorities, The ‘branches’ of government disservice that specialize in putting innocent people in jail’ and have special alliances with -”

“ - with who, Carmen?”

“I can’t tell you about ‘them’, John. Not unless you’re prepared to become one of us.”

“The people who go to the ‘places of change’ to make them ‘places of right?’”

“It’s a family tradition.”

“Which I followed!!!” John angrily shot back. “People’s lives change all the time when they’re patients, even in places that don’t change!!! Maybe some of them get better on their own, maybe some of them can be made better by ANY doctor!!! Keeping people alive so they can live lives of quiet desperation, or whatever else happens to them, is a dirty job, but SOMEone has to do it!!”

“I didn’t say you were a coward, John,” Carmen related, calmly. “People say MY life is heroic, but I have no clue about what courage is. Maybe it’s being scared all the time, but doing what you have to do anyway.”

“You have so much freedom in North America, and you do so little with it,” John related, and recalled. “My mother said that, and kept saying that. She seemed so much more quiet, and less alive, after her and my father were arrested in Greece. I was taken care of by my Aunt Tulla. I ate good, swam at the

beach, and even learned a few colorful curse words from the soldiers. But my parents were never the same after they got released, and we went home. They lived safe, then comfortable.”

A lump formed in John’s throat. “I’ve heard that in the interrogation room and torture cell, everybody talks. Is that true?”

“Yes,” Carmen replied, eyes downward, rationalized shame in her voice.

“So, talk!” John asserted. “How did YOU know I was sick?”

“Kept in touch,” she responded. “Through Vincent. before he ‘went fishing’ in the kind of pond no one comes out of alive.”

“And how did you know I was here?!” John grabbed Carmen by the collar. Viciousness worked against bravado every time. No more Doctor Nice Guy. “How did you know where I was, and how I was, THIS WEEK!!!”

“Kathy,” Carmen admitted through trembling lips. John Baldino in all-out rage was a sight no one had seen, and this volcano was not coming from any drug or hallucination. “Kathy Brennon let me know you were here . . .”

“And where’s Kathy, now?”

“Underground. With her daughter.” Tears came down Carmen’s face. “Her bosses don’t have a very kind retirement plan. But the execution was quick. A bullet through the head, that hit the optic nerve AND the brain. Maybe you made her love you, or made her love herself. I don’t know.”

“I don’t either,” John conceded, too weak to argue, too tired to ask any more questions, save one. “Where do I go from here, Carmen?”

“Poem 14.”

“Huh?”

“Vincent told me the story behind it.”

Carmen left her business card. “Alpha-Omega” it read, in red, white and blue font. The phone number - ASS-HOLE.

John smiled.

“Dial it and see. We’re looking for a few good men. I can sure use one kind one.”

“What’s the area code?”

“I don’t remember the Visionary’s name, but it was his hottest number, about a spunky and Spiritual society of scholars hiding from the world that sought to kill them.”

John recognized the reference, and the area code. “Fahrenheit 451”, the novel. The words were not spoken, as were the feelings. Some things had to remain special. But the task of recording what had to be recorded, for the Record, remained.

The page was blank. No poem, but this blank page was a reminder of poems NOT written. Passions held in, tragically non-expressed.

*Nothing to report.
Business as usual.
All is well . . . but . . .*

“New York Times, Wall Street Journal or ‘Sports Illustrated’, Sir?” the flight attendant asked twenty-nine-year old Doctor Baldino, on the way home from the Third International Conference on Cardiology, in Mexico City.

“I’m okay,” he replied, sitting back in his seat with a back issue of the New England Journal of Medicine. Two years ago, he read a newspaper every day - something that reported the world as the average person saw or experienced it. But in this final year of Residency, there was no need to be current on trivial things like Howard Stern finally moving from DC to NYC, economic upheavals and Social reforms in Poland, or what people were being killed in what war today, in countries well beyond the reach of Medicare. Life assigned you enough patients as it was. Maybe, after residency ended, life would assign him a life. The happy and the sad was something you kept between your ears.

“Headphones, Doctor Baldino?” the attendant asked.

“How did she know my name?” he asked himself. A quick look at his pocket said how. The conference name tag still held firm to his blazer pocket. No wonder all the Mexican locals looked at him like he was a tourist. No wonder he got through customs without a hitch. No wonder why all those ‘Sirs’ he was addressed by sounded so respectful, yet distant.

And as for his own view of the world, he had indeed become a true professional. Three years ago, the attendant’s eyes would be bright blue windows to a soul not yet connected to. But now, those ocular portholes were layers of epithelium attached to a three-layered neural processing retina. Seeing origins and insertions on muscle instead of “hot bod” was bad enough, but had it gotten to the point where even the eyes, and the brain behind it, were pieces of an assembly kit that had a range of acceptable variations, otherwise known as “within normal limits?”

Of course, it was part of the process, and in medical training it was about the process, not the product.

“Thanks,” Baldino said with a nod, as he took the headphones. Maybe the sound waves popularly called music could keep him awake so he could get to his reading, Or they could put him to sleep. There was much to do upon landing. Leaving work for five days always puts you three weeks behind in your patient load.

The Greig has lots of violins in it. Great for sleeping. But the moans of a woman well into her third trimester in the front row made deep dozing impossible.

“Is that woman alright?” John asked, from the half-wake/half-sleep state that got him through so many night vigils, where just watching a potential emergency seemed to prevent it from happening. “I’m a doctor.”

“We’ll be landing soon,” the attendant said, realizing that there might be a problem. “I’ll get you up in case we need you.”

He nodded, then dozed off for one of those deep ten minutes that could sustain him for a night. He had given up dreaming - it was too energy consuming. But nightmares still visited him from a very real place.

“Doctor Baldino,” the attendant said. She gently and discreetly nudged him. “We need you in the cabin.”

Guatemalan Indian villager Maria Espinoza spoke no English, and little coherent Spanish, but was fluent in the universal language of pain. Her passport was forged, her money counterfeit, but the baby trying to emerge from her womb was very real.

“She probably came on board to have her baby born on the American side. Legally, they’re US citizens that way.” She continued in a tongue that made her hot body seem very ugly. “They’ve been a problem for us on more than one occasion.”

“How soon can we land?” The more John looked, the worse it seemed. “She’s got dystocia.”

“Is that contagious?”

“No,” he shot back, through the side of his eyes. “It can happen even to an American mother whose babies decide they want to come out of the world head first, instead of feet first, like the textbook tells them to.”

“What can you do?” the attendant asked as the plane took a bump, felt by infant and mother, “There’s a blizzard below us, and the nearest emergency landing location is forty five minutes away.”

“This baby is going to be landing his or her feet on the ground a lot sooner,” John replied, trying to calm the mother with his eyes. This time, he had no trouble reading the medical history, or the pain behind it.

Maria had that “look” in her eyes, and all the vital signs confirmed it. The window of opportunity to save mother and child from the jaws of death was now or never. John retrieved the complimentary surgical supply samples picked up at the conference, grabbed what he needed from the sparsely-equipped emergency kits on board, and complemented it with whatever could be spared from the galley, and personal effects of the attendants. A private collection was discreetly taken from the passengers.

“Demons!!!”, the translator related, as Maria felt her blood pressure drop and saw the assorted instruments set out, many of which looked like knives used to massacre the children of other mothers in her village.

But there was a black aura in the room, too, obvious to Maria. “Demon want me and baby,” she said in her best Spanish.

“Not going to let the demons win this time!” John said, and asked to be translated.

“You, me, and your baby will beat the demons.”

Maria didn’t understand the words, but there was no doubt as to the feeling. She reached out to John, holding on to him for dear life. “I trust you. DO what you have to do,” she said with her eyes, then fainted.

John called upon all his resources for this one - textbook basics, common sense, experimental findings in the latest journals, and even called in a favor to the Almighty. “You can send me to hell when we land, but this kid is going to go to Harvard, Yale, or anywhere he wants to go,” he muttered to himself, with enough commitment to not care who was listening.

Dystocias with Maria’s anatomical and physiological complications were supposed to be a write-off. So many things could go wrong. The uterine artery could burst open, sending the mother into hypovolemic shock. Septic infection of the mother and baby if the membranes tore open and the placental artery got twisted in the wrong place, never mind the curvature of her uterus, which didn’t fit any anatomical descriptor.

Irreversible peritonitis, irreversible brain damage, irreversible consequences for every vital part of the body needed by mother and child. The inevitable did happen. A cry no one would forget echoed through the aircraft, all the way from the back cabin of First Class.

The Captain got on the intercom, “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said reverently “I’d like to welcome aboard a new passenger, a healthy baby boy.”

“Girl!” the Attendant screamed out.

Applause echoed through the cabin. As John did his final check, verifying to himself that indeed mother and child were well and going to be doing very fine, he allowed himself to feel accomplished. A doctor getting applause for his work instead of a paycheck, hug, or law suit? What a concept!

Maria reached out to John, pulled him into her, and gave him an appreciation fee he’d never forget. She said something that sounded even more profound.

“What did she say?” John asked, tears of joy running down his eyes, for the first time in a long, long time.

“She wants to know your mother’s name.”

“Mom,” he said.

“No. It’s a custom. She wants to name the baby after the woman who gave you life.”

“Jennifer. My late wife. Jennifer.” John said.

The message was related. The response back was hauntingly even more joyous. “She says that maybe this baby IS Jennifer, in a new incarnation.”

“Maybe it is,” John said, feeling human, and validated.

The story behind poem fourteen gave words to the feelings, It also meant a new beginning, Starting a new life by reliving your old one with a different viewpoint seemed logical, and even courageous. Diseases of the body, mind, and spirit were, one way or another, contagious, and even doctors can get sick. Carmen’s antidotes seemed to work, and the lab confirmed the mistake regarding patient 137A.

Carmen left strict orders regarding the schedule of medications. Once in the morning, once at night for three days would get John's brain back in the world of the living. But as Twilight approached, and the doctor-patient stood on the beach gazing at the second pill in his hand, one more visit to world beyond the living seemed tempting. There was one person who John never wrote a poem about, one person whom he hated and loved more than any other person on the planet.

"Vinny!!!" John cried out, "Where the hell are you, Vinny!!! You magnificent son of a -"

"- Behind you." Two voices rang out in tandem. One harmonized the other, creating a sound that said one word - "family."

"Mom. Dad!!!" John uttered in disbelief. "How did YOU get here?" The wrinkles in their faces were deep, the hair on their head white and thin, but the eyes were Alive; Alive in the way they had been in 1945, when the soldier-missionary couple joyfully set about the task of rebuilding Europe, Africa and Asia into a unified nation, more glorious than any that existed before the War.

"Sometimes faith works miracles," John's mother Athena said, in her native Greek.

"And sometimes determination does more," WWII veteran Nick Baldino said, with a joyfully clenched fist.

"Are we going to have that argument again, Nick?"

"No", Nick answered. "Because I know I'm right." He nudged John in the spirit of comradery. "The man always wins every argument, right, John?"

"Because the woman lets him THINKS he's won," Athena countered.

"How did you get here?" John asked again. Athena and Nick looked at each other. Each had a different answer, and agenda, voicing it in a quick-paced Italo-Greek tongue of their own that baffled oppressive dictators, rigid bureaucrats, and their two beloved sons.

"Come on," John interrupted. "Give me a break, here! Why did all of you come and visit me this week, and what do you want?"

"It's complicated." Athena explained, lovingly.

"Yeah," Nick added. "It's . . . complicated. Even God has to play by the rules."

"Nick, that's sacrilegious."

"Hey, God's man enough to respect someone who looks Him in the eye."

"Yes, Nick."

"And He's big enough to take a joke, too."

"Yes, Nick."

“And the only reason why good deeds work is because good guys like me, with small guns, MAKE bad guys, with bigger guns, see the wisdom of doing the right thing. God does miracles only after we schleps do courageous stuff first.”

“Yes, Nick.”

“And another thing: God doesn’t walk away from an argument.”

“Which you’ve already won.”

“Oh.” Nick hesitated. “I guess I did.”

With her husband in mid-contemplation the validity of his victory, Athena turned to John. “You can ask one more question, John.”

“And you have to answer it? Truthfully, with no riddle?”

“You fire off the question,” Nick affirmed. “We’ll volley back the answer.” “A no bullshit one.”

“Anything you want to know.” Athena said. “Except my real age.”

“Or how many women I had relations with before I met your mother.”

The hug between the geriatric kids said “love” anyway you defined the word. The question asked would be answered - and final.

“Where’s Vincent?” John asked. “And how is he?”

Athena and Nick looked at each other. They expected a question like, ‘What kind of music does God really listen to’, ‘Why is there disease?’, ‘Do angels get pregnant after they have unprotected sex’ or, ‘Is it really true that Jesus was black and a great dancer?’ But answering the primal question about Vincent required a dialogue with silent and solemn verbage.

“You said you’d answer me!” John protested. “Where’s Vincent, and how is he?”

Athena hesitated, then broke the silence, “He’s alive. In the land of the living.”

“And he needs your help, and companionship,” Nick added.

“In the ‘places of change’?” John inquired, assertively and with commitment to something far bigger than his old life.

Athena and Nick smiled at each other. John had become a man, for the second time in his life. Perhaps such a man was a super-man. For the business soon at hand, it had to be.

“Carmen will fill you in on the details. She’s a solid soldier,” Nick commented.

“And a great catch,” Athena added. “There’s a lot of Jenny in Carmen.”

“Yes,” John said fondly, “I know.”

An ox-horn blew off-shore. A Viking ship appeared, a gust of wind blowing it into shore. Its Valkyrie maiden crew beckoned Nick and Athena back on board,

Nick waved back, his soldierly stance saying “warrior”. The veteran of so many ‘wars for right’ was clearly in Valhalla, the place where honor and struggle always win Holy victories.

Athena rolled her eyes. “Your father made the transportation arrangement,,” she said to John. “Wait till he sees the Viking hunks I hired in the galley.”

The horn echoed another blast, as did the wind. Athena and Nick got on board, waved a fond farewell, and left John alone on the beach. As the ship disappeared into the sunset, a newspaper drifted across the beach. On the fifth page, conveniently accessible, news of a missionary-paramedical crusader who saved an isolated village of Nationalist Tibetans from massacre by the Chinese Army. The picture was that of Vincent, the smile shooting back at John. The current whereabouts of the “Bronx Zorro” - unknown. A call in to a special ASS-HOLE would be the connection.

CHAPTER 15

John took the train back to the City from Montauk. It was time to get back to work, though what that work would be, he didn't know. And who it would be with - another mystery. Probably Carmen, perhaps Harry, hopefully, brother Vinny, and if he was real good, his deceased, but by far not gone, superspy parents. The 'why' was clear as the deep blue sky, which still lingered over the cold, greying ocean. The where - "The Places of Change", their location ever changing, by definition. His most powerful qualifications?

"I can cross the life-death line, and know that Life exists on both sides of it," he confessed, in broken Italian, to a child sitting next to him, one that looked curiously like he himself did just prior to growing pubic hair. Remembering that he didn't speak Italian at that age, he figured the boy was equally ignorant of Baldino's fraternal ancestral tongue.

"Where you goink?" the boy asked in a Slavic diction, maybe Russian, probably Ukranian.

Baldino gave the answer most dreaded in his younger days, most welcomed now that he was reborn to a new destiny in his older age. "I don't know," he motioned with his shoulders, and a wide smile.

The boy eased his way to another seat, heeding his parents' warning not to talk to weird strangers, even in 'safe' places like Eastern Long Island. The twelve year old 'I'm on my own in New York while my parents are in Chicago' was obviously not a ghost with a profound message. "Not everyone is supposed to be," John pondered. He looked at the schedule, noting the arrival time of the train at Penn Station. Carmen instructed him to be there at eleven pm, in front of the LIRR ticket counter. Actually, it was a request, but one that couldn't be refused, or passed up. Was he to be one of the 'officially dead' scientists who were very much alive, trying to make it a safer, and more alive, world for human and animal kind? Was his presence requested with her in a second story walk up in the East Village, for a late dinner, and special breakfast? Or was he to go back to the clinic in suburban Westchester, publish his memoirs, and speak to the world about his present and future experiments in metaphysiology in his recently-written 'best seller', perhaps communicating more subtle and secretive messages between the lines and within the illustrations? But one question lingered. If he missed one connection going West, it would all fall down, and there was a critical issue that seemed small, but could screw up the works so royally.

John noted a 'B' on the train schedule, the explanation not quite clear. A Conductor walked by.

"Excuse me," the bewildered and blood-shot-eyed Baldino asked. "Does this 'B' mean I change at Babylon, or Jamaica, or what?"

The Conductor smiled, turned around, and smiled. "Ya just stay on board and keep on goin'."

The nametag said Jacowski, the uniform said Long Island Railroad, but the eyes said "Bud' Smith". So did the face.

John smiled. No need to have a dialogue with the first patient who opened his eyes to his medical destiny at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, and the first visitor on the jetties in Montauk to reveal the window to the realms beyond what the procedural human eye could see, and the camera could not record. No need for confirmations of the obvious. No need to know that even though John was tired beyond exhaustion, the only real rest was now in motion itself.

*When you can touch my body, then you will have become,
ya know, alive beyond the grave.*