

**Stalking the Average Man:
Fulfilling Prophecy**
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Preamble:

The following events originally occurred within a non-linear teaching scheme designed to force me to reorganize my lessons before I could claim their content as my own knowledge. Presenting my results in a coherent chronology required that I also provide fly-on-wall notes, based on what my teacher must have known to administer a given lesson at a particular time.

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Phase One: The Seduction

Fore word

My name is John Roger Axelson... "Axe" to many people throughout my life, because it is more easily recalled and less strenuous to say. My parents were loving and tolerant, and I enjoyed a comfortable middle class upbringing devoid of undue trauma and tragedy, with a small caveat; we sometimes battled because I was a chronic under-achiever unless the event interested me, and school never did until I took a college broadcasting course.

Stints at preparatory jobs soon led me to working in the big leagues, as a soundman for network television news, increasingly on the road because I could travel without a nanny, and I worked well under pressure. When I was teamed up with cameramen of extraordinary abilities, I graduated into an elite realm of broadcast journalism. The rest, as they say, is history...

Three hours off the plane from working my first war, I was telling tales in the Cellar Blues Bar in an effort to come to terms with what I had seen; my mouth ran freely from fresh scents of death and obscene scenery for hours. As colleagues fell silent, and subdued barmaids quietly served us, I began borrowing from 'bang-bang' folklore to recreate the sense of danger and revulsion I had yet to realize now isolated me from their world. And always would.

But when a local beauty—a regular who had always been indifferent to my advances—finally saw me as a fascinating man the template for my post-traumatic behavior was set. I was thirty years old, smart, get-your-pants glib, and rolling in blood money.

Ironically, maybe inevitably, by my sixth sojourn into man's dark side I was enduring real incidents I had 'borrowed' from other crews, and talked about as if they were my experiences. I

also began having déjà vu events that influenced some of my decisions, without their underpinnings being evident to others. As a free spirit working in the staid business of television news it did not cross my mind that I had become too familiar with these irrational circumstances. To the contrary, I thought I was becoming uncommonly wise.

My twelfth trip into the lunacy became my last when British Immigration denied my visa renewal. This unexpected event caused me to fly to Vancouver, Canada, to see my best friend, Ed, and to check out the freelance market for soundmen. During this stay my polished tales of crappy ways to live and die enthralled his friend, Tom—an executive at a post-production company—who offered me contact numbers in the film and television industry. He also suggested that my experiences would make an excellent screenplay, an observation I saw as schmoozing from a shameless visionary seeding new business, but the idea stuck.

In the end, I stuffed my worldly possessions into three nylon sail bags and flew back to my hometown, Toronto, because I knew more people in the industry there. This reasoning turned out to be problematic because events had changed me, and not for the better. Sixteen months later, I was again considering moving to Vancouver when a regular call from possibly my only friend by this time reminded me that he'd put me up at no cost if I moved there. Shortly thereafter my professional world blew apart on the same day that I received word that I had been awarded a Screenwriters Development Grant, so I repacked my sail bags to start over in Vancouver as a writer.

I landed with a fifty percent advance toward expenses, and six months to complete my project; there was nothing standing in my way except my penchant to lead myself astray by following flashes of inspiration that had little to do with established elements of my plot. As a result, I lost valuable time trying to make these insights relevant to my climatic surprise, which as it turned out was on me: with only three weeks to go, elements of the flashes I had coaxed into my story merged to allude to a better climax than I had been crafting. I was not so concerned about getting the balance of the money, as I felt gutted by the fizzling ending that screwed up the potential references offered by the review committee. This meant I had to consign my first professional credit to silence, and start over.

Ed saw that I was troubled, by what he didn't ask, and on his dime invited me to join him, Tom, and two others at the Avalon Gentleman's Club to find a broader view of life than my own colon was then providing. Fortuitously, nearing the end of this evening Tom made a double entendre comment intended to have me speak about my version of the bang-bang, and I told him about an incident in a place I called Goodbye. Because it ultimately involved helicopters, this tale led me to explaining the problem I had with my screenplay. Tom dedicated brief seconds of thought to my problem before saying I should upgrade one of my helicopters, then offering me a business card on which he had scribbled a phone number, he said, "A friend needs help converting her book into a screenplay format. She's a looker," he said seriously.

"Maybe later," I said to not seem unappreciative, but I had a lot to do—his suggestion was a perfect solution.

"That works," he replied, sliding the card between my fingers. "Jeanette is expecting to hear from you tonight... shit!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch as if it had bit him. Dropping cash on the table, he left to meet his girlfriend. Soon thereafter we all went our own way.

Fueled by unnecessary nightcaps and thoughts of lacy undergarments, I made the call.

My name is Jeanette Morrow: I was standing beside my father on a Chicago street when I became mesmerized by the lights circling the marquee, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Without warning, I was propelled into a realm surrounded by countless points of light brilliantly pulsating with a life of their own. Then a cushioned rocking motion enveloped me in a sea of blackness, but it was light. I felt warm, but there was no heat or cold to compare sensations.

I was struck with an incredible calm and an illuminating clarity of mind so profound that fear became an outdated emotion. I felt as if I was cradled in the hand of something immense, yet benevolent and protective, when a deep voice began to speak to me.

He said his name was Kha-li, that it was of ancient Egyptian origin meaning All That Is, and that He was the messenger of the Universal Source. He spoke about the rise and fall of many cultures, of the future, and of the purposes of humanity in the twenty-first century. He said we were in an end-of-the-world-cycle of events, which was not a physical condition because life would and must go on; His emanations had always been clandestinely present in our world to keep Universal knowledge alive for the time when specifically skilled emissaries would facilitate our transition back to sanity. Now was this time. Some of these men and women were of the Original Family of Man—projections from sources whose beginnings pre-dated the formation of our Universe. Others were of Earth; having evolved over countless millennia, they were chosen by man to participate in this intercession into our ways. In part, this is how mankind recognizes their prophets returned.

Regardless of their source, all emissaries arrive among mankind in the traditional way. Some will be made aware of their purpose at a young age, communicating directly with their Source. Others will live lives designed to fulfill purposes that only direct experience can prepare them for, before they are apprised of their individual tasks. Kha-li said I was such a person, that I was entering a crucial phase in my life and things would not be pleasant, but He would never let me go. When it was time, He would again formally contact me to explain the true nature of my journey, and its purpose. I was eight years old.

Thirty years passed before Kha-li returned.

When my shock had sufficiently settled, He told me that throughout time an ancient entity I could call Saa-ra (saw-raw) had been his messenger; he had served her purposes while she had prepared the way for him. Saa-ra was my life-force; I was a direct emanation whose physical journey had been designed to experience the inequities of the sexes before I could reunite with her to facilitate the training of others. I was to be Kha-li's messenger on the physical plane, and it was time to apprise other emissaries of their purpose. He explained this process:

For countless years mystics of various backgrounds had kept alive, and refined a teaching scheme known in our time as *Stalking*. In this instance, the term does not refer to the aberrant persecution of another's welfare; the literal opposite is the case as the stalker's goal is to free their apprentice from apparently reasonable behaviors that will cause harm down the road. Without exception, this is an excruciating process that comes with no guarantee of success. Typically the failure rate is high because there is no compromise in the teachings, and no candidate is allowed access to knowledge of true power lest they have acquired the disciplines to handle it. Otherwise, the teacher would be creating a tyrant. In the case of Kha-li's emissaries, there is always another to take up the task.

Forerunners of the coming changes, most of which were unaware of their true missions and influences, had written about the nature of reality as conscious energy, of intentions as actions, and the relationship between free will and responsibility. I was to begin my studies with these written works while Saa-ra expanded upon them with practical applications. In addition, I was to write about my experiences with the Universe, and when it was time speak of my quest to a potential

messenger of my own. His purpose included sampling the stalking processes that the emissaries had to master, for in this way only could he legitimately describe, to all who might listen, the mechanisms by which emissaries came to their knowledge and powers. Kha-li said the world would not recognize their prophets returned without these preparations orchestrated by Spirit, facilitated by emanations, and delivered by an average man who had experienced the end-of-times events until he became them.

I immersed myself in these writings, and Saa-ra's lessons, while creating my own journal and providing for two teenagers.

Acknowledging my efforts months later, Saa-ra said that although the Universe's teachings required considerable evolutionary energy, this guaranteed nothing: when I attempted to awaken my student to his potential purpose—he was on his way—I would see that only ruthless applications of the lessons, and selfless discipline on his part, would see him through. As it had been with me, he had no idea why he had lived the life he had chosen, the affects of which could make him the most difficult to teach of them all.

With this counsel delivered, Saa-ra said I was poised to dismantle the aberrant world-view my potential messenger had been conformed to embrace by experiencing mankind's default form of madness. I was attractive by any measure, intelligent, witty, and available. Along with surreptitiously offering him an intellectually redeeming challenge, I would be irresistible bait when I arrived in the disguise of a divorcee to probe his beliefs for personal points from which he would not run, until he could not run. Saa-ra would direct me every step of the way.

Chapter 1: The Fourth Estate

Early the next morning, I inserted a floppy disk into my Atari 64 computer and called up files from my book in progress: Jeanette had suggested that we exchange samples of our work, to see if we were creatively compatible, and as a courtesy act of trust by revealing ideas we had not copyrighted. Confidently pleased over the clever ease and causal humor we had shared in our first conversation, I read the best of my potential offerings without feeling I had to commit to showing it to her.

You Taught Me Well

Chapter 03 –The Good Guys: Part 1

"Axe!" LeBlanc barked as he wobbled into my eye line through the after work crowd at Julie's Mansion; Illona reached sideways from her overstuffed chair and casually grabbed his belt to steady him.

"Couple loose cartons and lots of pins," he said, expelling a lung and a half of steely grey smoke into an unsuspecting room. "No ball caps," he added, waving a fickle path with his index finger. "The fuckers'll steal'em on the way in."

He turned to leave; Illona released him into a lurch that Rob twisted into the pivot of an afterthought by swinging his arm to tap the side of his substantial nose. Rolling her eyes, Illona leaned forward to steady him as he sagely said, "Rio," meaning bring toilet paper, as if I would forget projectile shitting in one of the most beautiful places on earth.

"No sweat. I've still got some Canadian flag collar pins, as well," I said, re-establishing eye contact with the leggy woman who had been checking me out: early thirties, subtly painted, no ring on the killjoy finger. Even if..

"You're gonna know sweat," Rob muttered toward the carpet, apparently willing his feet to move through the tangle of boots and purses that had ensnared him: pausing for an intellectually

tedious drag on his cigarette, a solution made its way through the internal haze and he wiggled his toes. Locating his own shoes, he leaned toward the exit; Illona released him into God's hands a day sooner than was scheduled on The Nationals' assignment board.

"The flight to Rochester leaves at ten," I said to his back. "Meet you at customs at eight."

"Anything else he should know?" Percy, a pretentious technician who occasionally worked with him, said dryly: Rob had worked the bang-bang in Vietnam and half-a-dozen other countries that could have killed him just as dead, but with less prestige. I had only been married once so far.

Stopping short, LeBlanc swayed under the influence of combined poisons while the four women on the love seats next to ours snatched quick sips in preparation of another rutted pilgrimage into the remnants of his mind.

"When we hit the ground," Rob replied, turning to locate Percy, "Axe will say nothing he doesn't want every fuckin' one to know, and if the state plumber says shit runs uphill, he'll stand on his head to fart. He won't bitch about humping heavy shit through mined fields, because his second wife is getting nastier by the pound and dying quick is better than word by nagging fuckin' word. S'not simple learnin how to *act* like a dumb-fuck who can't find a shithouse without a producer booking the hole," he opined with a questioning glance at our table. An independent thought inserted itself, and he reached into his pocket to pull out a wad of crisp travel money. A twenty fluttered to the floor.

"I got everything except how snot is simple," Percy said, glancing toward the petite brunette sitting next to Legs.

Resolving that retrieving the bill was too risky, Rob jabbed a nicotine-stained finger toward Percy's smug face, forgot what he was going to say, and instead peeled a hundred dollar bill from the stack in his hand.

"R.J., buddy?" I said, tapping my wrist where a watch would have been if I gave a shit about time.

Rob set the bill beside the hundred he had already put there, and left to pack for a three-week road trip.

Percy dismissed him with a pitiful shake of his head, while twice glancing toward the brunette for confirmation that she hadn't caught on that it was his second wife who was gaining weight. She hadn't. At the same time, the busty brunette sitting closest to Doug leaned over unnecessarily far to ask what catastrophe had befallen Rochester, New York.

"They're working a story on cable TV programming," he said, blandly.

"Then they're going to El Salvador," Illona said, picking the twenty off the floor. With a wink my way, she took the extra hundred from the table and handing me the money said just loudly enough, 'If Legs doesn't do you come and see me for your last one."

"Whom and what was the mad fornicator about?" Legs interjected, pronouncing for-neh-kay-tor conscientiously.

"That depends; do you work for a credit card company?" I said

Percy mouthed "whom?" toward the brunette, who tapped her temple in the universal sign to indicate intellectual capacity.

Without hesitation, in crisp sentences Katerina placed her life in time and space before closing her monologue with what I interpreted as sultry syllables insinuating a satin sheet ride if I was forthcoming. Setting my crystal glass aside, I cleared my throat in preparation of explaining the paradox that was Robbie (R.J.) LeBlanc.

I first told Katie that R.J. was a senior network news cameraman who worked and drank like an obsessive-compulsive never quite getting it right, and that correspondents from Washington to

Hong Kong joked about his rare moments of lucidity with a confused respect for nature having compensated him with uncanny instincts, and a brilliant professional eye. I admitted that I hadn't paid attention to his gifts during a year of constant embarrassment, as world events tortuously constructed our personal history, because it took all of my physical energy to keep up with a man fifteen years my senior, and all of my intellect to decipher his transmissions to Earth.

No-one-calls-me-Katie asked me if "Axe" was my temperament.

I told Kathy that I was one of the few among humanity, Nordic countries aside, who could correctly pronounce Axelson when they first read it aloud. Spelling it was another wondrous event, even when transposed from one document to another. As Robbie had discovered after only one attempt, there are three syllables in my name, so I became Axe, it stuck, and I didn't mind.

"How did you come to recognize his genius?" Kathy-is-a-chatty-doll replied. "And Kate will do."

"I didn't realize his ramblings were veins of professional gold until an encounter in the London Press Club." I sipped my drink, and sat forward to explain that, as a part of the introduction ritual, a producer from France's O.R.T.F. asked me whom I worked with. Without thinking, I said "Leblanc" as if his name was De Gaulle. Overhearing me, an Australian television cameraman passing by with fists full of beer stutter-stepped, expertly tilted the mugs so that only foam breached the rims, and said, "Fuckin'-ell-didn't 'ee go missin' in Biafra? Bin sixteen years since the-bugger-an-me knocked some back."

"He's missing wherever he is," Cliff, the CBC bureau chief would have said with affection had Rob's expense reports never required his signature.

"Shoots crackin' stuff, though. You with 'im?" the cameraman said, motioning a pint my way.

"Ya-John," I said, mindlessly stretching my arm across the table.

"Tim," he said, placing a pint in my hand instead of setting it down. "Tell 'im the Aussie is at the Imperial."

"Will do, but he has a hard time remembering last Saturday."

"No worries mate. Nam," he said turning away.

I told Kate-will-do that no one forgets a combat assignment, and that abbreviating locations is not so much slang as it is an earned turn of phrase, and respected as such. To use it otherwise is at a minimum considered pretentious.

"No matter how hard they live afterwards?" she said, shaking her head.

"There may be some gaps," I said, failing to appreciate her insight.

I next told Kay that in the silence acknowledging the slaughter of illusions that followed the utterance of 'Nam', we overheard Tim say, "You'll never guess 'oose in town," to which a cohort immediately replied, "Must be LeBlanc if he took me fuckin' beer already."

"Recognition like that," I said, to the woman who was eyeballing me like a diabetic at a dessert buffet, "is the highest non-posthumous accolade you can get in this business. I paid attention to everything he said after that lunch."

"How did you learn to understand him?" Katerina-or-nothing said, chuckling.

I explained that R.J. established contexts through historical events and geographical references, like normal people would use Waterloo to reference a defeat. However, there were rarely more than three people on the continent who understood his waypoints—all of them colleagues who were familiar with particular assignments. Even then, Robbie conjufuckgated so many disparate elements of his travels that even close friends were often obliged to intuit his meaning.

"Now that we've shared enough experiences to have evolved our own Waterfuckin' loos," I said, taking a sip of scotch, "there's a beautiful irony about translating his reality for local reporters who consider working with him a trial by fire, while internationally vetted journalists fight over his time."

Staring as though I'd vanish if she took her eyes off me, Katerina asked me why I called him different names—or was it a quirk of all television crews to clip identifiers, she quipped dryly.

"Usually, it's about circumstance," I explained. "Robbie and Rob are off duty names. Leblanc kind of addresses the legend, but face to face, and R.J. is code: he can't see anything to his right when we're shooting, so if I see something he needs to know about, I call him R.J., and he does whatever I say without asking me why." I snapped my fingers.

"There's a lot more to you than you've shown in this place," Kat purred provocatively.

Sadly, this is all I remember about my last truly naïve night on the planet. The morning shoot in New York was also lost to a thumping, dehydration blur that mercifully gave way to an antihistamine-induced coma during the late afternoon flight to the place I would earn the right to call Salvador in press clubs around the world. And in the wee hours, hope the flashbacks would be in black and white...

I thought the profanity worked in the context of a scene that implied terrible things past, and to soon come again, but I questioned the wisdom of offering a sexploit in the first material Jeanette might read, so I didn't print it. Show and tell could wait; I had wowed her sufficiently, and there was a lot more where that came from.

Chapter 2: Contexts

During her early lessons, Jeanette learned to assess people's beliefs through the language they used. The key, body language aside, was to embrace a conclusion don Juan Matus made in Carlos Castaneda's writings—while endlessly rehearsing our self-image, we unwittingly practice a different set of beliefs than those we state. A related observation from Jeanette, and most helpful in terms of all my early lessons, was that nothing exists independently of anything else. It followed that properly assessing a single statement for its underlying nature reveals a deeper pool of beliefs.

The following slice of conversation is an example of what Jeanette could glean from just a few words. Of course, I didn't realize she had acquired this ability when we first met, but it later explained why her conversational contributions were often quirky, thereby evoking specifically focused responses from me.

We were following two twenty-something girls out of a mall when one of them complained to her friend, "Whatever happened to the customer is always right?"

"Retail is a gyp," her girlfriend commiserated.

Jeanette tugged on my arm to slow our pace, and to let the girls move out of earshot.

"Gypsy's aside," she then said clinically, "customer service is about correcting company or customer errors and misunderstandings according to the policies of manufacturers and retailers. There is no moral imperative, spoken or implied, and little that is personal about transactions between strangers, other than what their perceptions of personality and fairness can create out of an act of commerce. The continuity of the girls' thinking dictates that other aspects of their lives will be plagued by affront and confusion, because they don't realize they have made their happiness subject to availability, credit approval, processing fees, and that reality may not be

exactly as illustrated. Their emotional investments come with thirty-day manufacturing defect protection before their satisfaction becomes a warranty issue. True joy for them," she quipped, "has to be hand washed, never bleached, and if the girls read a promise into a sale's philosophy instead of reading the label, they will end up calling 1-800 Tough Go. Does this make sense?"

Because we had discussed social influences by this time, I said, "Everything the girls believed about their circumstance was based on their reasoning being manipulated through their gender, age, and commercial cultural influences?"

"And therefore how they think in general, just as you created a 'man's world' out of selective elements of your combat assignments." She said this as if it was an obvious comparison...which it suddenly was to me.

Chapter 2: Contexts

Finished writing for the day, I went for a two kilometer shuffle I would euphemistically call jogging until it was true, then I took a shower as a rare cloudless blue outside my window bowed to a tawny dusk. Still half an hour early for our appointment, I walked four blocks down Pendrell Street and across Denman to the English Bay Café, where I expected a double dram of Scottish bog would add sparkle to my personality. I was still dull from the night before.

"Waiting for someone," I said to the hostess, nodding toward the back bar.

"Aren't we all," she replied laconically, as I passed her by.

With a quick glance back, I saw her sardonic grin abruptly change to fright, and I barely managed to sidestep a striking woman in a sea-green summer dress. Quickly regaining my balance, I assembled my boyishly crooked smile to apologize, when she exclaimed, "You must be John!" thereby announcing our circumstance to the entire dining area.

Figuratively off balance, the spontaneous cleverness that having no tact had forced me to develop over the years abandoned me like sincerity in a confessional, and I tardily squawked, "You must be Jeanette!" sounding like an elderly parrot on Valium.

Laughing as if I had intended to be funny, Jeanette tugged on my sleeve leading us to a table as if we were a couple playing a familiar game.

Soon seated with drinks on the way, our exchange of approval pleasantries flowed like the patter of old friends meeting after years apart, including finishing each other's sentences and chuckling at the same unspoken ideas. Ironically, I was thinking this was too good to be true, just as our phone call had been, when she made me think I might be right: Jeanette interrupted my lead line about travelling to England, as a prelude to a battle tale, to say she had made a decision that had irrevocably altered her life, as well.

I hadn't said anything like that, but I couldn't deny that it was true; I dutifully asked her what it was.

"Oh—I'm sorry; it's too soon for that," she said sheepishly. Suddenly pitching forward, with misplaced ardor she said, "Why did you go to England? Why did you leave, for that matter?"

I thought our rapid-fire exchange might have caused a slip of tongue, which made little sense because we had been bottom-dealing nuance since my stunned Polly impression; then I noticed her emerald eyes were illuminating mischief lines in her expression.

"I went to England to freelance, and I left by invitation," I said as if no time had passed.

"Were you standing around the palace when a guard told you to move along, and you didn't think to ask how far?"

"A work visa problem moved me along. Didn't Tom mention that?"

"He said something about a deportation to enhance my interest in you," she said, with a discerning grin. "Why did you end up leaving Toronto to come here—the freelance world not as good as you thought it would be?"

"It was time to go."

"What happened?" she said too eagerly.

"Nothing big," I said, unsure if she was mocking me for some reason.

"It was big enough to bring you here?" she said, innocently.

"I guess stuff just added up until it made sense to leave," I said, cutting short a peppery sip of Caesar.

"Can I assume you're ashamed of that stuff, so I'll stop asking you about it?"

"Not at all." I shrugged to hide my surprise at her assumption. "I hit the wall writing a book, and a friend suggested I enter a short story contest to clear my head. I was fiddling with..."

"What was it about?"

"A guy gets a letter from a friend who's killed while working in conflicts. Still wondering what could have gone wrong, because the old pro had taught the young guy how to work in that world, he makes a call to the network to fill the vacancy."

Jeanette stared as if I had farted.

"It's called, '*You Taught Me Well*,' as in he won't make the same mistake," I explained.

"Ahhhh," she said, stretching a breath, "which is exactly what he's about to do. Clever. Can I read it?"

"Huh? Ya, sure. Anyway, I was working on that when I heard about development grants; I mentioned that last night."

She nodded for me to carry on.

"I had just finished working a job in Northern Ontario, a story filled my head, and I thought what the hell? Maybe four months later..."

"A story just filled your head?" She snapped her fingers.

"Writing the proposal was more like copying than making it up. Anyway," I shrugged again, "about four months later, the short story came in the money at the same time a core client and I weren't getting along. After that..."

"You saw the inevitable heading your way," she interjected, bobbing her head in recognition of a familiar experience.

"After that, my grant was approved on the same day that I got an offer to teach at my old college."

"When it rains..." Jeanette said, "but I haven't heard anything that would cause you to move three thousand miles into unemployment."

"I haven't gotten to that part... for some reason." I said wryly.

"Please continue," she said demurely.

"Thank you, madam. Freelancing in Toronto wasn't looking good in the long term, and the teaching offer evolved into something I wasn't interested in." I picked up my glass. "I talked to Ed, and he offered to underwrite my career change if I moved here. Like I said, little stuff added up."

"Giving up the sure thing was gutsy. Do you know how you actually made up your mind to come here?"

Having no idea what she meant, I grinned and said, "How many ways are there?"

"Four," she replied easily. Glancing at the ceiling, she amended her statement. "No—there are five common ways of making up one's mind," she said confidently.

"Don't let me interrupt you."

With a curious nod to imply challenging her claim was uncalled for, Jeanette said, "We all have an internal dialogue that follows different processes depending on our perceived circumstance." Counting on her fingers, into my less amused expression, she said, "If the timing isn't important, we can boil down some situations into simple arithmetic and play the odds, or," she touched a third finger, "we can grind answers out of our experiences if it's a close call. If timing matters, we might react from necessity, or our egos might take over the ship. Anything familiar yet?" she grinned.

"They all fit to some degree," I said evasively.

"Was your move here a life altering decision?" she persisted.

"Any move could be thought of in that way," I deflected.

"Yet you didn't assess the very moment of making that important decision?"

"I told you, twice actually, that a bunch of little stuff added up."

"You didn't say what influenced that moment of significance." She raised her brow.

"How would I know that after seven months?" I chuckled awkwardly. "And what does it matter now?" I shrugged.

"Do you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"Do you want to know what influenced you, and why it matters?"

"Go ahead," I said, thoroughly puzzled.

"Let's look at what just passed between us, as a framework for investigating your decision making process."

"Okay, let's do that," I said, looking for our server.

With a crisp grin she might have thought I didn't see, she said, "You thought I was kidding about the ways there are to make decisions, then you felt put on the spot by me asking specifically about one experience. Your ego took over to 'twice actually' put me in my place," she mimed quotation marks, "instead of your brain grinding out an answer you didn't realize was available to you, because it's rare that anyone properly assesses any moment." She pitched forward to touch my hand. "I only speak about these kinds of personal evaluations to special people, because everyone else takes offence so easily." Jeanette painted the word 'easily' with exasperation.

"I can see how that might be," I said studiously.

She settled back in her chair.

"Good," she said, reaching for her drink, "so let's go through the processes: what did you feel in the moment you decided to come to Vancouver?"

Pausing to try to recall that moment, I honestly said, "I felt a mixed sense of loss and relief, like when you realize the end of something is certain, but there's nothing you can do about it. Or maybe there's nothing you want to do about it."

"That's the moment we recognize the demise of a circumstance, which frees us to create a better one. What thought drove the idea of moving here?"

"It's a beautiful place, and Ed lives here."

"How do you know him?"

"We met in basic training for the Navy, in 1970."

"Go back to Toronto in your mind."

"I've been interrogated before," I grinned.

"Meaning?" she said innocently.

"I'm familiar with techniques of loosening people's thoughts to catch them in lies."

"Are you lying to me?"

"No, but...."

"Then why not go back to Toronto in your mind for me?" she said simply.

I wanted to argue the unreasonable of expecting me to pinpoint a single moment, but my mind shifted focus as if it had been whisked there on her silent command; I suddenly understood what she was after. "None of my options looked good," I said confidently.

"The arithmetic method seems to be how you made up your mind, so why did you call Ed?"

Interestingly, hearing this took me past that phone call to the moment of my actually making a decision; Ed's presence in Vancouver, and his generous offer were certainly influences, but they were not the deciding factor. Enjoying this odd moment of reflective clarity, I said, "This may sound too simple, but I think it's what you're after."

"Don't worry about what I might think... ever," she said softly.

"Ultimately, by which I mean I *know* this was my deciding factor, I didn't feel there was anything wrong with coming here."

"Excellent. That's the fifth option; you did it as an act of faith."

"Pardon me?"

"You trusted that things would work out even though you focused on the negative to discover how you really felt," she said with a tiny shrug.

"Faith had nothing to do with it," I said coolly. "I've seen people pray for a battle to pass by their homes, instead of leaving with us, because they didn't believe a softening up bombardment is an oxymoron. Faith is a sucker punch," I explained into her baffled expression.

Scholastically, Jeanette said, "Your intensity mourns its loss concerning the rest of humanity, but your actions say that something inside you knew what to do. When you stopped fretting over peripheral circumstances your choice became clear." She waved her statement aside as if it had been embarrassingly obvious. Offhandedly, she said, "You can tell me what happened when you're ready. The same applies to your screenplay, by the way."

"The same what?"

"If you were happy with your screenplay, you would have brought a scene to impress me." Wearing an elfish expression to diffuse my affront, in spite of her being correct, she shrugged another miniscule affair. "You also wouldn't have fired a salvo at me if your faith in anything other than yourself hadn't been damaged. As I said, whenever you're ready is fine. Or not."

Puzzled by the warmth of her indelicate approach to sizing me up, I felt trapped into explaining at least one of the issues she had mentioned: I told her about my diluted screenplay plot, to explain why I had arrived empty handed.

"Quality barbershop quartets can create the illusion of a fifth voice called a ringing chord," she said when I was finished. "It's very difficult to do."

"Hmm." I nodded as if I had a clue what she meant.

Chuckling, she said, "Your off-topic insights created the illusion of outside influences being active in your plot, without directly referring to them. You should run with it—it sounds like a gift waiting to be opened." She looked at me expectantly.

"My deadline is too close for that. Besides, Tom came up with a practical solution. Still..." I said, indicating that I wasn't out of trouble.

"You're experienced enough to know that expedience is everything it's cracked up to be, and you're letting a deadline ruin your story after all of that hard work?" Who's to say that listening to the fifth-voice isn't the way to go?" She sipped her drink.

"Following peripheral issues is what put me in shit—not that it hasn't worked before," I quickly added, lest she think I was unimaginative. "You are a curious one," I said ambiguously.

Pushing her drink to one side, Jeanette left me a full sentence behind by dealing with my idle comment as a personally important topic.

"It takes time to get to know people in the best of circumstances, but in superficial surroundings like these it can be more work than it's worth." A bolt of cynicism creased her academic expression, the influence departed with the memory of whoever he was, and she continued casually. "I don't mean some people aren't worth knowing. I'm saying there's no point in trying to penetrate their social mask unless they're ready to look at themselves, like you did a minute ago." She rested a hand on mine. "I also cut to the chase with special people, but it can still unnerve them."

"Is that why you hold their hands down?"

An electric interlude passed between us; she slid her hand away, leaving them both flat on the table. Whether she did this in anticipation of comforting me or protecting herself was unclear.

"It sounds more like you study people than interact honestly with them," I said, my casual tone belying an accusation of deception.

"We all do that in our own way." Jeanette reached across the table; tapping twice on the top of my hand, she said, "Learning what makes a person tick is as critical to my work as understanding the details of combat situations had to be for you. At their core, they're the same thing."

"Where's the threat in here?" I said, relieved that she had revealed the reason for her game playing, not that I understood the need for it.

"Almost everybody in here is in conflict with themselves in some way, and I'm not going to become a casualty of their internal disputes." She leaned forward. "The world is dangerous enough without my help. Speaking of which, Tom tells me you've lived quite an adventure so far: scuba diving, flying planes, parachuting, covering combat?"

The candle casting curious shadows around the pucker of her bust line made me a heartbeat slow at dismissing my splendor, before I said, "All past tense."

"You drive a donor cycle at an age when you should know better," Jeanette replied, dragging a finger across the tablecloth.

"I'm thirty-five and the motorcycle is an economic necessity," I said, answering both queries.

"Some people might think your activities are evidence of a death wish," she said, her grin belying the accusation.

"Some people think backgammon is exciting," I said, nodding toward a game underway at the corner of the bar, "when anything..."

"You did it for the excitement?" she interrupted me.

"... when anything you do can create the wrong impression for people who haven't rolled those particular dice."

"In what way?"

"The further away an event is from everyday activities, the more you have to explain in its context. Even then, as you know, it's a waste of time."

"Why do you think I know that?"

"Because you thought better of explaining your life-changing decision until you were reasonably sure I won't judge it or you."

"Which means you know things you won't tell to just anyone, as well."

"Only to special people," I deadpanned.

"Such as?" she said without hesitation.

"Few people understand what living for the day is really about," I replied just as quickly.

"A lot of them would claim they do." Jeanette nodded toward a gaggle of animated singles at the chrome and smoked-glass bar.

I flashed a peace sign toward our server at the same moment Jeanette circled her finger for another round. We shared a smile over our like-mindedness, and the elevation in her status to 'special' as I said, "Intellectually, they know they could drop dead before the next round arrives, but it's not real to them unless their sense of immortality has been blown out of the proverbial nest. I was thirty before that defining moment happened to me, and you know I'm not shy about doing things other people just talk about." I looked away and eruditely said, "An end-of-the-world cataclysm aside, they have a decade to go... if the umbrellas in their drinks mean anything."

"What happened?" Jeanette gushed, grasping my forearm tightly.

Still unsure whether she was playing with me, or why, I reached for a cloth napkin forcing her to let go of my arm. Taking off my glasses, I breathed a spicy fog onto one lens. Rubbing slowly, I said, "It was late April of eighty-one; four-thirty in the morning, our producer called my room ..."

"You weren't kidding about defining a moment," she tittered.

"I have a garbage dump for a mind," I said truthfully, somehow failing to mention that I had reviewed that section of my book hours earlier.

"Anyway Carlos, our driver, told Tony there was a slaughter going on in Mexicanos—that's the suburb where the revolution began." I fogged the other lens and began rubbing. "The shoot-to-kill curfew didn't end until five so I took my time getting ready... just not enough of it." I snifle-chuckled as I put my glasses on. "We turned onto the street a Death Squad was just turning off, a block away, on the stroke of five so we waited to see if they would circle back."

"Why would you do that? Why would they, for that matter?"

"Death Squads usually drove around the scene of their crimes to discourage witnesses from coming forward. No one ever did." I sipped my drink, swallowed, and said, "Including us."

"You mean they would shoot them, as well?" Jeanette said incredulously.

"Maybe. Eventually. Hard to tell."

"Why would wouldn't they shoot you?"

"It was getting light, and it was too public a place to kill us as long as we stayed put." I cleared my throat to explain the way things were in that place.

"If they came back and we were out in the open, they would take our IDs as a threat that never went away, but our driver and his family would have to vanish as soon as the morning traffic picked up." Into Jeanette's puzzled expression, I said, "The Death Squad could have been waiting to take us out on the empty highway, if we had been spooked into running from the scene of their murders. They would have claimed the killers were reported to have been in a car with Prensa logos all over it—all press cars did—which would also explain why we dared to travel before the curfew was lifted, and were mistakenly killed as the murders leaving the scene of their crime."

"Hold on a minute," she said, taking a breath as if she had been trotting to keep up with me. Resting her palms on the table, she said, "Knowing what might happen around the next corner, you stayed in the car where the worst that could happen would be learning that your driver had to go on the run, because nothing would happen to you beyond the threat of authorities having your names?"

"Correct, except the threat was real."

"And this situation existed because it was five-oh-one?"

"Right, again."

"Okaaaaay," she said. "In other words, the time you personally took to get ready at the hotel wasn't a bit short; it was precisely enough to allow you to see what you saw, and live to talk about it." She leaned in with keen anticipation, of what escaped me.

"Sure, I guess."

She pinched in closer to the table. "Seriously, you're not going to tell me that you haven't thought about what might have happened if you had left the hotel sooner?"

"Correct, I'm not going to tell you that," I said straight-faced.

Poised like Mona Lisa, Jeanette awaited an explanation for my dire lack of curiosity over a potentially life-ending event.

"Looking back," I said, trying not to sound condescending "was a dangerous distraction from assessing the potentials in front of us."

"Such as?" she asked, quietly.

"Soldiers played with us by detaining crews outside of town around curfew time, so that we might run into other soldiers, or the guerrillas, on the way back. This meant we always had to be aware of where we were in terms of travel time to a safer place. San Salvador is in the middle of nowhere, so we did our best to time our work to be no more than half an hour away before curfew. If we were delayed, we needed to know how far we were from Santa Ana and the Guatemala border to the north, or San Miguel and Honduras to the east. We also had to be sure we had enough water to spend the night in the jungle, if it came to that, which was a bigger deal than you might think. A single person could easily go through two gallons a day, but the biggest thing to get right was making sure someone knew where we were going, and when we said we'd be back. If we were even a minute late, and I mean that literally, someone called the press liaison office to say the next call was going to the American Ambassador. That call would kick start an immediate radio search for the missing crew, because America was spending a billion dollars to support the government, and even the common soldier knew it would be easy to track our movements. The bottom line was that their own Death Squads might pay their own soldiers a visit for risking their finances. That said," I grinned ruefully, "we couldn't count on that irony, so a group of reporters designed photo ID cards with Salvadorian emblems, had them signed by the Press Liaison office, and then laminated them like an officially issued card. Taking the idea as his own, the Liaison Officer made registering with the Salvadorian Press Corp Association mandatory, which created a legitimate safeguard because many soldiers were illiterate."

Jeanette raised her brow.

"Any official looking document was deemed to be permission to be where ever we were, and flashing the S.P.C.A. card left a trail. The downside of it," I said, snickering, "was the general population sometimes thought we were working for the government, and they literally ran from us."

Jeanette's expression briefly betrayed appreciation for the acronym, before she anxiously said, "Wouldn't that apply to the guerrillas, as well?"

"It wasn't a perfect solution," I admitted.

"No kidding." Studiously, she said, "Is your sense of humor based on soldiers being more at risk than you guys, because they just wanted to intimidate you, but you could get them killed?"

"Not at all, three or four Dutch journalists—I can look it up—wrote about government death squads after being warned not to. General Garcia's men kidnapped and killed them."

"Where can you look up that information?"

"I have a pay diary and newspaper clippings to keep things realistic."

"Realistic? Why are you writing fiction?"

"Official history changes with every coup. I'm not trying to correct the past."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to explain a context for adopting the philosophy of living for the day," I said evenly.

Shaking her head self-consciously, Jeanette said, "I gather the death squad didn't come back to check out the area?"

"Correct." I paused to conspicuously allow Jeanette time to interrupt, a gesture she grinned about for only a brief moment; I told her that we crossed an ominously quiet street before walking through the front door of a tiny bungalow that had been left open as a mark of contempt, and a reminder to witnesses that soldiers weren't accountable to anyone. The first four bodies were stacked in the middle of the small living room. Flies buzzed in clustered clouds around their gaping wounds, and the still-pooling blood on the plank flooring. Three children, ranging from about four to ten years of age, were on the bottom. After watching them die, the soldiers shot their mother in the head, and draped her across the top of the pile. Grandma lay sprawled on the kitchen floor, a few feet away; pieces of her brain dripped off the wall above the ancient wood stove. We found the husband in one of the two closet-sized bedrooms--his throat had been slit, tongue pulled through the opening, and his severed penis stuffed into his mouth.

"The Salvadorian Necktie," I explained to the wan beauty sitting across from me, "was about the insult and indignity of imagining their death pose as they bled out, while they suffocated. Curb-side mastectomies," I said, picking up my drink, "were common for the women who pissed off soldiers, so I don't know why they shot the mother. Maybe they were tired."

"Jeee-zus," Jeanette whooshed in disgust.

"Nowhere to be found," I said around the rim of my glass.

A suspended moment of incomprehension passed through her eyes; quietly, she said, "Living like that would have pushed me off the edge."

"Then you've almost got it."

She cocked her head.

"My context of living for the day was born in a place that was all edge, all of the time, which is why I don't tell just anyone about it. Or at least expect to be understood when I do."

"It must have taken courage to just leave the hotel in the morning."

"Everyone was scared most of the time."

"You overcame it," she said.

"Nope." I said, glancing toward a naïve-as-a-turd young thing at the bar, twirling a miniature teal and cobalt colored umbrella over her red drink.

Tracking my gaze, a fledgling grin twitched Jeanette's lips as she made a connection between my gaze and her comment.

"Combat changes how you think about a lot of things," I said, dissolving the correlation into a harmless glance.

"Is combat the source of all your secrets; you know, the ones you only share with special people?"

"They're not secrets. People who understand those situations don't talk about them for the same reason you stopped short earlier."

"Which you think is what?"

"Tell me the funniest joke you've ever heard."

"Pardon me?" she said confused, which was satisfying before she understood my point—you had to have been there.

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