

Joe sat at the living room table reading some Raymond Carver after lunch. He had intended to read from his AA Big Book, which although had sat there gathering dust for at least a year...or more, had not been opened, neither had his New testament version of the Bible, not opened for at least two years as well as his various books on Transcendental Meditation and Vedanta religion; all which had brought him so much relief in the past...but not today. Joe was just too tired...again, to keep looking inside himself for the relief. But in the words of, Schopenhauer, who Joe well knew was quoted in one of those very books on the table..

*"It's difficult to find happiness within one's self but it is impossible to find it anywhere else..."*

Joe muttered, begrudged, rubbing his hand over his sun-creased, leathered face and got back into Raymond Carver's words that dove deep and true to the bone. That's why he cherished them, as when reading he felt right at home, in the same way he loved the short stories of one of Carver's inspirations, Richard Yates. He reminisced with a grim smile about how he got into a fight during a dinner party with a couple of his wife's actor friends who referred to Yates', 'Revolutionary Road' as a "Bummer." And it wasn't even the novel, it was the unrealized, cut to

shreds and in Joe's opinion, safe, limp movie version. He tired to explain to them if they might read the book, they themselves would realize the magnificence of Yates, but they answered together in a chorus of, "Who cares? Didn't you hear we said, Bummer?" An emotional argument ensued with Joe bordering on sheer animosity and disgust, expressing how shallow and moralistic they were, hiding under their guise of, "being positive" when they were just ignorant and fearful of what might happen if they actually submitted to the material. They told Joe that he was a, "Bummer" and he retorted the only thing that bummed him out was, them. "You're both the fucking bummer and you don't even see it!" And he left the dinner, his wife having to stay, embarrassed, excusing Joe for becoming, "So ridiculously involved in his reading, as if he had written the book himself."

Even though self-knowledge told him it was a risky choice, Joe was of late, feeling that he didn't like being in this world anyway, that he would rather live in those stories over and over then address his current cocoon of un-evolved inertia. Although he knew, absolutely he had to spiritually grow or die... one more time he was in refusal, even with the innate knowledge he was edging towards a crossroads, a jumping off point that could take him back

down into the darkness. *No big deal*, he thought as he took another sip of scotch in his mind with Ray before he got up and went to the front door, which was open to catch the late summer breeze.

Joe looked out at his old dog, Carla, sleeping on the shady side of the lawn, her whole body collapsed, almost melted into the grass as if she had already died and gone to heaven. Her deep soft brown coat had faded with age and became bristled with rough curled hairs of white. All she really did now, in her, "golden years," was sleep and dodder around like some senile elderly woman in a nursing home. Joe smiled bittersweet, remembering how she used to leap up the canyon trails like a Gazelle as he surveyed the wandering white rose bush that ran along the splintered and chipped white painted fence in front of his house. He looked at the narrow green shoots that jutted out over the sidewalk and while contemplating when he would trim them back, he stuck his hand down his shorts, pressed his middle finger against the shaft of his cock and fiddled it there for a moment. Then he moved his thumb and forefinger to the head and gave it about a three second squeeze before bringing his hand up to his nose. He smelled his fingers. They smelled all right, kind of a neutral, healthy, flesh smell, accented with a hint of the olive oil and Aloe Vera

soap from his morning shower. Joe didn't think much of squeezing his cock. It made him feel safe and dreamy, so he stuck his hand back down again and squeezed as he gazed up at the thick, long branched Magnolia tree in front of his house, with its fat deep green leaves and cup-sized blossoming milk yellow flowers.

The tree had towered high since Joe moved in some eight years back with its' wide gnarled roots buckling through the sidewalk and he wondered when the City might just mercilessly chop it down to save the pavement. They had already come by a few times during those years and butchered the long lower branches off, which irritated Joe as the branches helped block the nasty view of the sick mustard colored apartment complex across the street. Every time they grew long and full, the City would send a truck out with a couple of distracted hung-over workers, wielding reluctant chainsaws to buzz them back just because the branches sloped down over the street and brushed against a car top or two or hung low over the sidewalk where a neighborhood pedestrian passing by might get a mild swath in face. *So-the-fuck what...* Joe thought. *It's nature, beautiful nature. Walk around it. Let it grow.* The blocked view of the puke yellow painted building was well worth it. He gave a quick glance over there, thinking perhaps someone

was peeking through, their apartment window curtain, in disdainful observance while he pondered and fondled himself. Probably not though and he was too old to be embarrassed if they were...so he just stood there with his hand in his pants.

The temperatures were easily in the nineties and Joe liked it as the dry desert wind gusted hot on his body. It was as if he were in a big natural sauna. He liked the heat way better than the cold; indoors and out. He had central air in his house but never used it unless his wife came home after work and demanded he put it on. He liked the windows wide open.

"Close the windows!"

"You close them if you wanna use it. I hate air-conditioning."

"Moron..."

What she wasn't saying was, "I'm done with you and I'm leaving," which she just did the prior week... so he didn't have to, worry about any more air-conditioning arguments...nor any other argument as she promised never to return. Now he would not only spend his two-week summer vacation without her but most likely the rest of his life...

If he didn't think about the sheer panic of the situation, the sheer loss of their twelve-year marriage, it

was ultimately a relief. He was the one who caught her cheating for God's sake. Well, he didn't really catch her. She announced it. "I met somebody. I'm pregnant. I'm leaving you..." Just in that order. And she announced she was going to the summer vacation cabin they rented in Big Sur, not with him but to meet the father of her, yet-to-be-born child. What? Father of what? "And I'm going to do it right this time, not how I did it with you..." she said.

Shit, that hurt. And Joe couldn't say those words she spit at him came from nowhere. He knew where they came from, from the past, the past they agreed to leave behind, the past they both buried under the guise of, "letting go," a good five years back, the past that neither left behind or let go of no matter how hard they tried to convince themselves. First was, the abortion before they were engaged, her reasons being, he was still smoking heroin and drinking whiskey, refusing to stop even though a baby was on the way. So she stopped the baby. But to Joe's credit after that devastating event, he sobered up instead of running away and proposed to her, staying sober a full year before their marriage, which seemed to set their lives in a positive motion...until the two consecutive miscarriages she had in the following years after the marriage, with the third, fourth and fifth years after that producing no

pregnancy at all, no matter what they tried. And then after that there was no more trying. No more tests. No more Doctors. No more in-vitro fertilizations. Finished.

"If it was meant to be it would have been," she said, adding "But for whatever reasons, it wasn't." And the explanation of, "whatever reasons," was left in the air. So for the next several years, the lovemaking definitely took a down turn, with her getting more and more into her work and Joe, more and more into his AA meetings and fellowship and conscious contact with God. He had become a sober man and had stayed sober, as promised, since the day of their marriage, which helped him immensely through the years of drama over the miscarriages and the burning guilt over his dope fogged agreement to go along with the abortion. He..."worked a good program..." as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, accepting "God's Will," at every turn.

"Your will is what you want to happen and God's will is what does happen," his AA Sponsor would tell him. So God's will happened and years passed and Joe and his wife went along with obligatory sex every few months or so, the hopes of pregnancy never being mentioned again (as she never did get pregnant) then at thirty-eight years old, she sprung it on him that she was pregnant...with someone else's baby. And leaving.

Simple. That was it. Joe could muse with self-loathing that some possible latent sterility on his part may have been caused by his former drug use but she had gotten pregnant when he was high, so how could that make sense? And he got sober, god damnit and doesn't a sober man deserve a kid? Doesn't getting sober make you more, healthy and more potent? Was it some karmic wave, perhaps? There were so many questions and questions he should have gone over with his Sponsor immediately after his wife's announcement but Joe was tired of the continued hypocrisy of his Sponsor, who in Joe's observation didn't, "walk like he talked." Joe had witnessed him screaming at his wife and terrorizing his kids and although his Sponsor always made, 'tenth step amends', Joe just felt the guy was too crazy, sober or not and didn't want to hear his advice, nor anyone else's in AA for that matter. He was tired of the whole fellowship and the whole, high school, herd like mentality of Alcoholics Anonymous. He had wanted more than just the same soiled old repetitive, whiney shit that spewed from their mouths, masked as spiritual growth. While most people in AA didn't drink or use drugs, Joe saw they remained fucking crazy, or got worse as the years went on. A high, percentage, were just spiritually stunted, dry drunks, living out their discontented days in AA drone land. Joe wanted what he felt

would be true spiritual growth after his twelve sober years. And when his sponsor called that last time with his spiritual bullying attitude to "check in" on him, Joe expressed some of his disillusionment with the people in AA. His sponsor responded with that age-old sappy line, *"When you're pointing the finger at others, Joe, you got three fingers pointing back at yourself..."*

"Thanks for that, you may be right..." Joe said, feeling although his sponsor was right, absolutely, that the whole AA thing was just another form of purgatory. Then his sponsor started listing off the continued sobriety necessities with his parole officer tone, raising his voice steadily as he spoke. *"When was the last time you did any steps or worked with a newcomer or went to a meeting or read the big book because people like you, people who don't work the program... eventually drink, they drink or do drugs and they die, they die Joe..."*

And Joe hung up, not in any rebellious or angry way but with some quiet final separation in mind, vowing never to talk to the guy again or go to anymore of those repetitive, droning meetings, with, "those people". He was not bitter...as far as he could tell and he was grateful for what had originally been given to him so freely... but Joe felt that AA, merely laid out a bridge to God that he was

now firmly on. He did not need any more help. In order to cross that bridge, he had to further seek his, own path to God, improving his, own conscious contact, with his, own private prayer, meditation and spiritual readings, which all worked... until they didn't.

Or maybe they weren't working, as he perceived them to be. How could they be if his wife left him? Was he kidding himself this whole time? With a painful inner throbbing, Joe pondered that perhaps his continued spiritual path became an escape from intimacy, that his spiritual path that was nothing but a self serving fallacy, that there was nothing going on in the universe at all...nothing to, tap into as they say. "Just tap into the universe..." No, in honest review of all his years practicing prayer and meditation with the occasional self-pronounced spiritual experience, he always drifted back to emptiness and quiet despair. So which one was the real path he was supposed to be on? Was he just continually fooling himself when he perceived...well it was all perception anyway...however one's self tapped in, so-to-speak...

"Tap, tap, tap..." Joe said to himself, in a detached, self-depreciating way as he took his hand out of his pants. Then he went back inside to get a glass of water and check if Carla had eaten her raw beef and vegetable meal he had

prepared for her that morning. It was her cancer diet, the continuing treatment for the cancer she had beat. She had developed a raised, thick marbled golf-ball sized goop of deathly purple black on her tongue that was threatening to take her down. After they bypassed the fancy Oncologist with the five hundred dollar tie, who said she'd be dead in two months without immediate chemo, followed by radiation and interferon for a mere, nine thousand dollars, Joe, crushed and infuriated asked everyone he knew to ask everyone they knew of an alternate approach. Later that same day he got word of an old hippy woman doctor in the Valley that had an alternate approach...that worked. So they went over. The hippy doctor patted Carla and made her tail wag as she looked at her tongue. "I think I have something to help that," she said. "I may be wrong but this seems to work in some cases." Simple. Humble. Then she took out a hand sized white jar and dipped into it with a, cotton q-tip that came out covered in a thick, black paste she said was from an Indian blood root. She swabbed that on Carla's tongue once a week for two months at thirty bucks a visit and recommended some calcium and a raw beef/vegetable diet. That was two years ago and the cancer never came back. But Carla still got older, becoming fourteen the past May and she was waning in most other areas. Heartbreaking. Joe even

thought of shooting her sometimes before it got too bad, before she could no longer see or hear or walk or eat. He imagined standing behind her, patting her head, while putting a gun to it, but he neither owned nor knew how to shoot one.

Carla's appetite was nowhere near the voracious level it used to be. The gobbling days were gone. A nibble here and a nibble there, in between naps was how she liked to pace it now, so the remaining raw meat was scattered in small moist clumps around her bowl. And there were flies on it, the ones with the sick, glowing shine, in combinations of toxic blue, green and gold depending on how the light was hitting them as they buzzed on and off the food, to the rim of Carla's bowl and then up to the front bay windowsill where they rested for some seconds before buzzing over to the kitchen drawers, cabinet knobs and then back to the beef. Joe watched the six, seven or maybe even ten flies (as they moved too fast to tell) all as content as could be, whizzing back and forth, landing on their center of nourishment to eat and regurgitate and shit on whenever they chose. Joe stared at them, mesmerized at their movements, becoming completely caught up in their world as if he were sailing on a solid mantra without any other distracting thoughts entering his mind. He was,

transcended by the flies...but the blissful ring that focused meditation brings was not sounding in his ears. He was not transcended into the loving cosmic consciousness of the universe. It was more as if he were hypnotized by the subtle hellish buzz and satanic, sun-reflected shimmer off the flies' backs that sent him into a stunned nostalgic state of involuntary purgatory.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzz...

*...into the forgotten teenage memory of a hot, humid summer morning in upstate New York, crashing hard from crystal meth... outside his parents' house, after his brain fried friend, Sean, just dropped him off from a three day tweak...Joe just stood there at the top of the driveway, barefoot, stringy long-haired and dazed in his t-shirt and jeans, spiraling downward, not able to either sleep or stay awake, squinting like a caught vampire at sunrise... and as he dropped his head, hurtling in his mind straight to hell, he saw ants, black ants crawling through the cracks of the black paved street onto the black paved driveway...big black ants seemingly by the thousands, crawling everywhere around him then over his feet and up his legs as he stood immobile, staring, waiting to be engulfed by the flames...*