

# Snake for the Hour

*Excerpts from Snake for the Day*

Snake for the Day Excerpts:

Chapter 1: (1 – 9 in original document) *1<sup>st</sup> scene, establishes character + premise*

Chapter 2: (10 – 25) *2 important scenes here – source of name Snake + Judy backstory*

Chapter 8: (61 – 67) *Dialogue with Riley + Wiley*

Chapter 19: (158 – 165 + addition) *Encounter with Riley, Iquitos bar, crazy guy*

Chapter 20: (166 – 173) *Riley's backstory, Initial meetings on the bus*

Chapter 28: (243 – 249) *Preparing for 3<sup>rd</sup> ceremony, we get some good Taki and build anticipation for reading the full thing and seeing all the lunacy and wisdom of the ceremonies*

***The Eternal Feminine draws us onward.***

***Goethe***

1

*I had this dream. It was a horrible dream. I was sitting in bed and there was shit everywhere, all over the bed, the sheets and the covers. It was a light creamy brown color, like maple icing on a cake, kind of wavy with peaks. It didn't smell, but it was ugly and it was still shit. It was my own shit, and I was wiping my ass over and over and over, and it never got clean. I woke up screaming, "I just want to be free! I just want to be free! I just want to be free!"*

*Can I erase all memory of everything all the way back to childbirth and start over, please? Fresh. Clean. Innocent. I wanna go for a walk in the woods under the golden sun, shining down through deep blue skies with floating puffy white clouds. I wanna see all the plants, vivid green and lush, speckled, spotted, striped, red, yellow, sienna, amber, purple and pink. I wanna see trees, from baby seedlings to huge towering Pines and Oaks, with every kind of forest Bird, from tiny Sparrows to massive winged Hawks, flying back and forth, and happy Squirrels of gray and brown scurrying about, and Bees! Honey Bees, Bumble Bees, Yellow Jackets*

2

*buzzing, Spiders, sweet and scary, crawling and spinning webs, Butterflies, floating soft-winged and vibrant. I wanna walk and feel and see every moment with all of nature, with no clutter in my mind, unmarred by regret and remorse and the usual kind of purgatory I project for myself—you know what I mean, anything but bliss...ha, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho...*

*I'm a lucky guy, though. I worked as a set designer for almost twenty years – decent job, union pay, until a 2K ARI Flex lamp weighing 20 pounds fell 30 feet from the ceiling and broke my shoulder in two places. I tore my kneecap up as I tumbled over, leaving me with a grueling six-month recovery and a couple hundred grand in settlement money. The recovery gave me time to reflect, I suppose. I read and philosophized with friends and most especially, I mean most and especially, I learned how to surf. It started off as part of the recovery, paddling to strengthen my arm, bending and balancing for my knees. To be honest, it was prescribed by my friend Ray, not my orthopedic surgeon. He gave me one of his spare boards, an 8-foot 'fun board,' as the surfers call them. It was wide and rounded smooth at the nose, easy to learn on, and my surgeon energetically approved it. "Sounds like a great idea," he said with a look of dreamy envy. The landlocked ol' Doc confessed he never surfed, but he always wanted to. He told me to be extra careful and take it easy at first, so I started paddling slow on the board when the waves were flat to get the strength back in my shoulder and find my balance. Then I worked my way up to belly boarding in one-foot whitewater waves, eventually getting up on my knees. Ray told me to go down to Manhattan Beach. There was a gentle break during summer days so I went down there and eavesdropped on a junior surf lesson class—I'm talking six to ten year olds. My ego just wouldn't let me join in. Funny, that ol' ego, huh? Anyway, I took my board and waded out about waist-high about 15 yards away from the class, and when the teacher told them to get on their boards, I got on my board, and when he told them to paddle, I paddled, and when he told them to*

*stand, I stood and I fell and I stood and I fell, and I did it over and over and over, disregarding the occasional nasty looks the teacher and little surfer groms (that's junior surfers) gave me. "You could pay for a lesson, dude!" Oh, yeah, that was a laugh. Ho, ho, ho. But it wasn't the money. It was the embarrassment that kept me from joining. But I learned enough, I suppose, because when they moved down the beach to get away from Johnny Freeloader, I repeated what I'd learned over and over and over, until I finally stood up and bent my knees, stretched my arms out and felt like I was finally riding a wave. I moved out further to slightly bigger waves, maybe two-foot, and I paddled and floundered, but I stuck with it and got better. I got hooked. Surfing took over and became a major part of my recovery. I had to do it every day, had to extend my recovery time, so to speak, until I extended it so far they told me not to come back to work at all.*

*The same thing happened to my marriage. "Don't come back," she said. "At all." That was just a couple of months ago. I'm still suffering. She called me a middle-aged juvenile, and a lazy...well, I don't want to get into everything she said. Scorned woman, ya know. I mean I didn't cheat on her, no, nothing like that. I was a hundred percent faithful, but being physically faithful was not enough. I don't feel like dissecting that either. She took half the settlement money and the house. She's with another guy now, harder-working I guess, some high-end furniture designer, a forty-five year old guy like me but rich and driven, who says he won't stop working until he drops dead. Good for him. Good for her. She's more ambitious than me and always was. God bless her for sticking with me all those years, although I thought I worked pretty hard. I helped raise my kid with love. I put him through school and now he's graduated and on his own in the world. I guess I'm on my own in the world too. I'm healed now, physically, somewhat mentally, and possibly spiritually, and wanting to have a good time, a damn good time.*

“Stop! Okay? Stop,” Ray said. “That’s your pick-up pitch? That’s what you’re gonna post on the dating website? Are you nuts? No one will date you.”

“Well,” I said. “It *is* kind of a lengthy profile but...”

Yeah, I was 43 years old and aimless with no direction that summer, that 2010 Summer of Gloom in Southern California, the summer of eternal cold gray marine layer, damp with drizzle that lasted from May until late September, the summer that never really was. Perhaps there were a few days of sporadic sun, mixed in here and there, and on one of those days I was with Ray, just north of Malibu Colony, past the first, second and third point surf spots of overcrowded madness. It was the “Secret Spot,” where I graduated from Manhattan Beach, where I learned to surf on bigger waves with Ray during my fall and winter recovery the year before. It wasn’t very secret that day, with 20 surfers lined up in one section where the nice four-to-five-foot sets were coming through. We were standing in front of a huge weathered wood-shingled beach house, painted simple white with pastel green trim that was all chipped and faded. It was probably worth \$10 million, but it never seemed inhabited. Some guy said the owner died in 1998 and no one had lived there since, that his son who lived in Seattle never visited or bothered to fix it up. He just left it empty, a rotting 10 million dollar piece of beachfront property. It meant nothing to him. He just took it for granted, like money in the bank he could cash in on any time he felt like it. Rich, ungrateful spoiled asshole. Well, I didn’t know him, but if I owned that house I wouldn’t let it waste away like that. There’s an old saying and I’m not sure where I heard it, but it goes, “Having more than you need is a sign of insanity,” and there were other houses on the north end of the colony that looked empty too. I imagined just moving into one of them myself. I mean why not? There was probably no one in them, except

maybe two weeks out of the year. Give me the other fifty weeks. I'll live there. I'll take care of the place. I'll appreciate it with all kinds of gratitude.

Ray and I were doing stretches before we paddled out, looking to see where we could situate ourselves amongst the crowd. We both had full wetsuits on as the water wouldn't allow spring suits, let alone no wetsuit at all, which is supposed to happen in summer in Southern California, but not this one. The ocean was cold, cold, cold. It never really warmed up from the winter months, hovering between 57 and 60 degrees.

"I don't know, I'm trying to be honest," I said, getting back to my profile "pitch," a word I hated but which Ray used often. He was a TV writer.

"And why did you say 'set designer?'" he said. "That sounds kinda gay. You built sets. You were a set builder."

"I guess set designer sounded like it had more flair."

"Yeah, more gay flair," Ray said, "like a gay flare shooting out of your ass." He bent over to touch his toes and purposefully shook his wetsuit-covered butt around. "But maybe that's what you're discovering about yourself at this point in your life. I'm not gonna get in the way of that, honey." He stood up and did some exaggerated, manly arm stretches with deep sucking breaths. He was only kidding me. Ray was a good friend and a good guy, but my fear of the unknown outweighed my sense of humor by far.

"Come on, I need serious help here," I said. "How am I ever going to date anyone again? I have no clue."

Ray smiled, mellow and compassionate. You could never tell that he used to be a hell-bent heroin addict. He was healthy, tanned, trim and fit. He lost most of his hair, but he kept it shaved

to the skull, which looked good on him. He had the right head for it. He looked like a well-groomed puma.

“Say you were in construction, say you were a contractor, say you were a solid hard working man, okay?”

“Okay, but I just banged nails and carried shit around and thought of other things the whole time, the whole fucking 20 years, and that’s how I really got hit by the lamp, y’know? I was distracted and didn’t see it falling.”

“Listen to me John, that’s not important anymore. You got your settlement and the job is over. You put in your time, hurt yourself real bad and now you’re starting over fresh, looking for a new life with new prospects without your brow-beating bitch of a wife. Thank God she left you.”

“I put that information in with my bio?”

“Dude,” he said, a word which seems so backwards and moronic, a word so idiotic and dull, a word synonymous with sun-drenched, brain-fried surfers, widely-used by the greater white trash population of illiterate unemployed meth addict, but a word that nonetheless has many different levels of meanings and can have the same meaning as a completely different word in fact, and not just another word – “Dude” on its own can represent an entire sentence, a full, concise and comprehensible sentence, all depending on the lilt of the voice, the intention, the subtext, the delivery and the circumstance. And “Dude,” in this case, delivered by Ray meant:

*“Let’s just surf and we’ll think about it.”*

We strapped on our ankle leashes, picked up our boards and walked towards the ocean. “I wish the fucking water would warm up,” I said, deflecting my life onto the ocean. And seeking further relief, I said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we owned this whole beach, with just these three north end houses on it? And we’d live in one and rent the other two for 40 thousand a month and all these guys in the water, we’d just let em’ surf here ‘cause we felt like it, ‘cause we were nice, ‘cause we gave them permission, and when we paddled out they had to disperse on our command and wait, wait and let us take the best spot, wait and let us take the waves we wanted to take, no matter how many in a row, and that the water, the fucking water stayed cold until we got in and then it changed to seventy-five degrees — no, seventy-*eight* degrees - and if any of the surfers gave us trouble, gave us any shit at all, we’d have a harem of ten Amazonian women, ready at the snap of a finger to sashay nude out of our house, butterfly stroke out to the line up and pound the crap out of whoever it was that mouthed off to us, right on their boards, and those guys had to paddle in beaten and humiliated and never come back. What do ya think of that?”

“I’m right there with ya...”

“No, I mean really,” I said, sensing a patronizing twinge in his voice, or possibly just imagining it. “What if we could make all that happen, like we tapped into some parallel universe that gave us magic powers and we could travel there and back from, from like those black dots ya know those dots you see when ya look up in the sky, the little black translucent ones that are floating all around in circular motions right above us—”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Ray said.

“Come on, Ray, they’re floating everywhere, everywhere into eternity! They look like about the size of an oblong pinky nail, well, kinda...we all see ‘em, and what if we could grab them and fucking swallow them, fistfuls of ‘em, and get the ultimate kinetic power, the power of

nature's energy and we could say – no, we would think in our minds, 'We want five-foot glassy waves today,' and when we blew the dots back out, they would spread like a miracle dust..."

Ray faced off with me, more concerned than pissed-off, maybe scared a little, scared for me anyway.

"What kinda miracle dust are you on?" he said. "Did you get back on the pain pills again? Are you having some kinda Percocet psychosis here?"

"No Ray, I'm just, I'm just...just listen. They'd spread over the ocean and the waves, say it was a flat day with no waves or a stormy day with sloppy wind-blown peaks or just a meager two-to-three-foot swell. It would all change in an instant and the waves we wanted would appear, they'd appear exactly five-foot and glassy or six foot or ten foot or whatever we desired the size to be, like we were Greek Gods commanding the elements."

"John, look, I know you did intense physical therapy for your shoulder, but maybe you need some intense mental therapy too, because Judy seems to have emasculated you in a deep and disturbing way, and it seems like you're wildly over compensating here. And dude, I'm going surfing. Now."

As Ray started to walk to the water, I closed my eyes as if I was seeing it all, seeing it all happen and I continued saying, "Wouldn't it be awesome to have a fucking lightning bolt in your hand that you could just hurl at anybody who got out of line? Imagine surfing with a lightning bolt in your hand like Zeus, like... Zeusasurferthruster!"

I clenched onto my imaginary lightning bolt, cocked my arm back and I thrust it, flung it, zapped it, sent it hurling. I opened my eyes, feeling alert and vibrant but with a certain serenity, as if I'd entered an altered state, as if I'd passed into the parallel universe of my desire. The sun

had burnt off enough of the marine layer to make the sky a sweeping electric silver. Ray had walked into the water. He was knee-deep in the white foam of the shore break. It was spraying over him and his slick, soaked head was turned back towards me, looking at me with a befuddled grin, kinda fed up with me, but amused at the same time. It was in-between sets, so the ocean was settled and the surfers looked like a flock of birds waiting for a school of fish to swim past. I was sure I was breathing but it didn't feel like I was, didn't feel like I was taking one breath, and I thought I should be conscious of my heartbeat so I didn't die, but I also thought I didn't care if I did. I felt the word "die" surge up into my eyes fast and register terror into my brain. My eyes became wet, purging tiny teardrops. Purging, purging, purging the terror out of me in milliseconds with each drop. Purging was what I needed, purging was good, purging was glory. I smiled back at Ray. "Get out here!" he yelled. "Time for you to Snake some waves!"

Okay. Snake was the name I was blessed with earlier that summer, sometime in late June down at Trestles surf break in San Clemente. Trestles is about an hour-and-a-half south of Los Angeles, right off the 5 freeway, going south towards San Diego. You get off the Cristianitos exit, make a left at the stop sign, go over the freeway, then left at the next stop sign and park in the lot that is always full (I mean I don't know if people sleep in their cars there or what), or you can try and find a spot on the street anywhere within a two-mile radius depending on how far you wanna walk back. Getting to the beach even when you park close is another long haul, which entails walking back over the freeway bridge to a narrow cement-covered path that leads you down a mile-and-a-half or so walk to the ocean. The path has warnings too: if you're not local, you're not welcome, and it's spelled out in graffiti profanity along the way. The locals live around the immediate area and don't have to drive or park or hike to get there because they live there, they inhabit the beachside gated communities that require nothing more than a hop skip and a jump to the cherished sand and revered waves. And because of these magnificent attributes of nature, the locals don't want to share their waves with any outsiders because they feel they own them. Their waves. All day. Everyday. And everyone else should stay the fuck out.

The 20-minute-plus walk to the beach from the bridge is tiring, especially when you are carrying a 9-foot long board under your arm, as I was that day (another selection from Ray's quiver), and talking about profane, longboarding is regarded as close to profanity as you can get amongst the majority of locals. I felt it as they passed, stone-faced and unfriendly on their skateboards, wielding their shortboards under their arms like weapons or whizzing by on bikes with their boards all 6'1"-and-under attached by nifty side racks. At the end of the path you have to cross over train tracks, ever-watching for the San Diego to Los Angeles Amtrak that might race past and flatten you if you're not careful. You walk under the old railroad trestles to get on the beach. Thus the name.

Trestles. Locals. Tussle. Trouble. Google search "Trestles" and read: *"Don't go there with the idea to get a lot of waves and snake people or you'll get yourself killed."*

As you walk onto the sand, you see four surf beaks, starting from the south or to the left. I don't know left from south myself but that is what Ray told me. "We were just at 'Trails' and that is to the south, John, past San Onofre which is way, way down there to the left on the way to San Diego which is south, get it."

"Okay coach, left is south, I get it."

"Well, you asked."

I did. I was nervous for sure. Dopey geographical questions gave me the feeling that I had some grasp on the situation, and Ray indulged me as he explained the layout starting from the far left. He pointed out, going from left to right: Middles, Lowers, Cottons and Uppers. Why Middles is before Lowers I don't know, but Lowers is the main break. It is the best break and crowded with the most competitive, aggressive surfers. The world famous and world-class surfers, they surf there all the time. Lowers hosts international competitions with all the top

surfers. Hurley Pro. Any surfer knows. Any surfer worth his wave-weight knows about the perfect ‘A’ frames that break left and right, in low tide and in high with ride-able waves practically 365 days a year and sets firing beyond awesome during the big summer south swells, ranging 7 to 10 feet high. Awesome! Powerful! Rippin’! Pro surfers tearin’ it up! And there I was. Trying it for the first time. A beginner. An old beginner. An old dog trying to do new tricks. That’s me. With a longboard, to boot, and talkin’ about “boot,” I was in very real danger of getting the boot from the beach, because what I forgot to add about the path was that on the last leg of it there is a map enclosed in glass with information about the steelhead and rainbow trout that spawn in the river that leads to the ocean. Scribbled on top of the glass, in black paint, over the description of the surf breaks it says, “LONGBOARDERS GO BACK TO FUCKING MALIBU OR WAIKIKI OR DIE.” Malibu and Waikiki are two of the top longboard breaks in the world and the reference was kinda funny, considering the stunted mentality of the local surf punks that must have written it, and I laughed thinking if they were the same jokers that posted the Google warning. Ha, ha, ha...but I didn’t find the, “Or die” part very funny, splayed across the glass, written in vicious paint strokes. I was standing there with a longboard under my arm, feeling that I was a prime “or die” candidate. So why was I even at Trestles? Well Ray, yes my good buddy and shortboard rider Ray, had his 5’8” quad and wanted to surf there. “Trails,” the spot we were at earlier that day, was weak and mushy and he was dissatisfied. He wanted to surf better waves. He saw Lower Trestles firing four-foot clean waves from the freeway on the way down to Trails, better known as “Old Man’s,” and bypassed it because I was the Old Man with him and he wanted to appease my limited capabilities. Now he wanted to appease himself and his capabilities. He wanted to surf Trestles and wanted me to come and not be a wuss about it. “You’ll get some waves John, don’t worry.” He only said that because he knew *he* would get

some waves. I tried to argue that point but he called me a wuss again and kept walking. So I followed, I followed him and worried, worried that I would surf bad, worried that I would cause accidents, worried that I would get screamed at, beaten, and maybe killed. I also got excited, excited that I would surf better than I ever had, excited that I would surf better than anyone out there, excited that I would surf like a shortboarder, a shortboarder on my longboard, yeah, cutting up the waves like a Pro, tearin' up Lowers with gasps of awe from the line-up with shoutouts of "Ooh's!" and "Ahs!" and "Go Dude Go's!" from everyone in the water, watching me make heroic Trestles history! The fantasy pendulum swung back and forth from death to hero with no in-between, all the rest of the way down. Typical me. No big deal. I was used to it.

We got to the beach and sussed it out. Middles and Lowers had at least fifty guys in the water, all highly competitive, charging on waves breaking left and right with not a single longboarder in sight. A poetic tragedy just waiting to happen if I ventured out. I told Ray that he should go for it. I would sit on the beach.

"Dude, relax," he said.

"I am relaxed, I just don't wanna go out there and get killed."

"We are surfing together! Check out Cottons and Uppers, they're less crowded and we can surf there for, Christ's sake."

"Surf with Christ, yeah..." I thought of Christ, the long-haired and handsome one, but without the pain and suffering, his hair streaked blonde, ripped and tan and surfing next to me on a longboard, ensconced in a golden glow.

*"Ride with me, John."*

*"I'm ridin' right next to ya."*

*"Did you know John is a Bible name?"*

*“Yes, but I don’t know anything about it because I never read the Bible. Can I still surf beside you?”*

*“Sure, John, sure...”*

My lips were moving, but of course it was all dialogue from within. Ray looked at me and said, “What the fuck, John, are your lips trembling? Don’t let the fear get a grip on you.”

“No, Ray, I’m cool. I’m checkin’ out Cottons with ya. I’m cool.”

Cottons was less crowded but the waves were all breaking left. Being a novice ‘regular foot’ surfer, I imagined a series of nasty wipeouts on the drop while trying to actually cut left. I imagined nose diving or “pearling,” as they say, into the ocean time after time after time with my longboard, plunging under and exploding back up out of the water like some deranged baby whale at various angles which eventually would strike and injure some other surfer, and injure me in turn. I imagined the best-case scenario was I wouldn’t get killed, and perhaps only maimed.

“You go, Ray,” I said.

“No, we are surfing together.”

I took that as a true test of our friendship. There are many so-called friends that would have said, “Later Dude, I’m surfing here, go surf wherever or stay on the beach and mope, I don’t really give a fuck.” But Ray was my true friend and he gave a fuck even if it was a reluctant fuck.

We walked across the beach to Uppers. It was dotted with Surfers sitting on towels watching other surfers on the waves because Surfers on the whole are obsessed with surfing, in and out of the water. I noticed a couple on a blanket bundled up, arms around each other, waiting for the gloom to burn off. I saw a family huddled under a beach umbrella, hiding from what sun I

don't know, where the little toe-haired boy dumped a sandcastle from a plastic bucket on their picnic and got slapped by the mom, but my eyes were focused more on the inevitable break I had to surf. It was the last stop. Uppers. It wasn't as packed as Lowers, but I sensed it was a wannabe Lowers crowd, younger and intense but without the surf experience. I watched a few kids take waves and they seemed a bit sloppy, aggressive and anxious, anxious to move up the Surfer rung from Uppers to Lowers. I thought about that and laughed to myself, I mean why would you want to progress from Upper to Lower?

Ray gave me a raised eyebrow and another, "Dude," strapped on his leash and paddled out. It wasn't a long paddle, maybe twenty-five yards to the lineup, and I watched him melt right in as if he belonged there, and he did on his 5'8". He had the board, the talent, the calm and the confidence. I took a few deep breaths, strapped my leash on, waded into the water and hopped on my board, paddling as confident and nonchalantly as I could, hoping I too would melt right in. I might as well have had a siren strapped to my back because as soon as I got close, I received the most unwelcome stares from the pack of teenage piranhas. I winced and sat on my board. My 9' longboard.

"Put an engine on the back of that thing," I heard, followed by continued inimical glances and scattered hyena-type cackles. I ignored them and paddled out a bit further just as a nice set began to roll in. All the piranhas paddled out too but I caught the first wave from the outside out of sheer beginner's luck and ripped right on it, laughing, incredulous that I got it so easily and was riding it so well. I looked around to see if Ray was watching. I was more than proud of myself and hoped he had witnessed my newfound capabilities. I was ecstatic about it myself. But I couldn't see him. He was over to the other side catching lefts. No worries, I thought, I don't need Ray to watch over me, I'm the fucking man right now. I'm golden. Nobody can touch me.

I'm holding all the cards here, right? Me and Jesus, right? I paddled back and sat outside again, catching my breath as I watched the pack all clustered together about fifteen yards further in. I saw two kids catch nice waves, snapping their boards over the lip and down again as they flung their arms back and forth, graceful and acrobatic. It was a style I knew I could never learn but it was a thrill just to watch them. I wasn't jealous or anxious. The sets were so consistent all I had to do was wait until I was ready. The next set came. I let the first wave pass and eyed the second one, a four-foot glassy wall just calling me to hop on. I paddled and caught it. It seemed so easy. It was incredible! I didn't have to deal with the pack, didn't have to feel nervous and didn't have any problem getting up and ripping. I might have heard a couple of distant yells from one or two guys as I cut right because I did pass through the line-up, but the waves were pounding and I was focused on riding, riding, riding to my greatness. I saw a few nasty looks from the surfrats as I paddled back to my outside spot but I took it as jealousy. I caught my breath, waited, and took another wave, just noticing as I dropped down that a lanky long blonde haired little dude was coming up on my ass from the left. He was ripping and was only a couple of feet behind me when he started screaming, "Hey! Hey! You fucking snake!"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Snake. You snaked my wave. And you snaked my friend's wave before."

"I didn't even see your friend—"

"Dude, you snaked his fuckin' wave. He was paddling for it and you caught it outside on your kook longboard.

"Look man, I didn't know he was—"

"Yeah, well we're gonna call you Snake for the day, okay. How does that sound? And I'm gonna snake you on the next wave, fucker! And the next and the next and the next!"

It dawned on me after the fact. I was dropping in on them from the beginning, but I wasn't looking far enough to my left as I paddled and cut right. I didn't even see. The kid was in my face and I didn't know how to respond as I was crashing from my elation, down, down, down. I was still a fucking novice, inexperienced, naïve, ignorant, stupid, not enough, less than, zero, minus. Damn oh damn, what could I do, what could I do or say? His eyes, livid green and dripping with ocean water bared into mine. His lips were tight and ready, ready to respond to whatever words came out of my mouth with justified animosity. He sat on his board like it was an extension of his body, perfectly balanced, arms out and hands spread, prepared for battle. My hands were clenched tight on the rails of my board so I didn't tip over and suffer complete humiliation. The rapid crash of my ego cancelled out any adrenaline rush. There was no fight in me. I felt empty and weak. I had no intention of being Snake. I thought I was having fun, so much fun, the best fun I ever had surfing and now, now it was all for naught. I was deemed the worst possible being in the surf domain, a Snake, which at Trestles was punishable by death. I knew this kid was not vicious enough to commit that dastardly deed, but it was the principle. I made the number one offense over and over and over. I was guilty as charged. The death sentence was inflicted by me upon myself, swift, internal and excruciating. I was hollowed out and empty, a piece of shit slumped over and bobbing in unwelcome waters.

"I'm sorry man," I said. "This whole situation makes me sad, really, really sad." His gnarled-up lips loosened, almost slack jawed. The fire in his eyes, muddied over confused and incredulous. I wasn't weeping but it was evident I was crying on the inside as I kept his gaze. With no accelerating altercation on the horizon he spat out a nasally "Shit," wiped his wet hair over his head and paddled back into the line-up.

I paddled far to the side and sat there on my board bypassing any anger or retaliation. I went right to the source feeling, which was defeat, defeat after only twenty minutes out in the water. Nowhere to go but back to the beach and as I began to paddle towards shore I heard a befuddled chorus of “What the fucks?” behind me along with a few uncomfortable hyena cackles and a loud, “John! John! Hey John!” It was Ray paddling toward me, fast and concerned. He had been so far over on the other side he wasn’t aware of what happened until he saw me paddling back in.

“Dude...”

“I’m done,” I told him, and I gave him a brief synopsis of the situation.

“John,” he said and I knew he was seriously concerned because he called me John.

“Don’t catch outside waves unless it’s clear. These guys have to catch them further in and you have to wait your turn in a line-up. They were just giving you shit so you don’t do it again. At least you caught some waves, right?”

“I guess...”

“So come back out and surf some more. Just follow the rules and you’ll be fine.”

But I wasn’t fine. I couldn’t go back out there.

“You go, Ray. I’m going in.”

I went back to the beach, felt like shit for a while and dozed off, in the gloom, waiting for the sun to shine and warm my weary mind and body. Me and the gloom, melting and drifting and waiting, melting and drifting and waiting, melting and drifting and waiting for the sun in our muck marsh dreamland. *Where are you, sun? Where are you, waves? My sun, my waves, my sun*

*my waves, my sun my waves...oh, look, me on my board surfing up, up, up and into the sun, oh, no, too close, too close, too close—*

“John, Dude, wake up!”

“No! I’m too close! I’m gonna burn! No!”

He had to shake me awake. “Fuck,” I said as I spat out sand caked with drool and rubbed my eyes clean with the back of my hand. “Little daytime nightmare?” Ray said.

“Yeah. Ya saved me from being torched, Ray, at least in my dream. I got pretty beat up out there in the water.”

“I don’t see any marks.”

“Not literally, okay, but those grims or whatever you call ‘em—”

“Groms.”

“Groms. Fine. Grimy groms. Little motherfuckers is more like it. They made me feel like pure shit.”

“You shoulda stayed out there. It was fun.”

“I was having fun too until they chased me out.”

“I told ya man, you gotta just wait your turn. Anyway, I talked to them and described how much they bummed you out, how you left dejected and were self-flagellating on the beach alone.”

“You didn’t say that, Ray? What if they thought that meant I was jerking off or something? Why did you make it worse?”

“You were kind of boo-hoo jerking off anyway.”

“That is not making me any happier.”

“Come on, you think I’m gonna even say the word ‘flagellating’ out in the water to a bunch of surf punks? Especially concerning you.”

I shook my head no while blinking sand out of my eyelashes. “You know you look insane,” Ray said. I shook my head, yes. “But I desire sanity,” I said. “I love ya, John. I’m your best friend, remember?” He smiled at me reassuring, full and warm and I smiled back, lopsided, cracked but reassured, or at least until Ray’s warm smile shifted to a look of evil amusement.

“Okay, so what did ya tell them?” I said.

“Well, I asked them how many days a week do they surf there and when they told me with justified pride, ‘Every day,’ I said, ‘Well, my friend has only surfed here for one day, and it’s probably the last day thanks to the cruel and totally inappropriate fucked-up way you treated him. He just lost his wife and his job and was looking for a little solace to get him through a few more hours of pain. We drove all the way down here because his psychiatrist, who thinks he is on the brink of suicide, said it was of the utmost importance that he take ample time to do something that makes him feel life is worthwhile. But you kids cut that time short—”

“Come on, Ray.”

“No, listen,” he said. “It was a great moment and I really pierced em’ with my last line, stuck the knife right in, made them all look like Catholic schoolboys knowing they were headed for hell.”

“What, were you writing a script out there?”

“I embellished a little but it wasn’t that far from the truth. I mean I had your truth to work with John. And I was stickin’ up for ya, okay.”

“Okay. Fine. Okay”

“Anyway, I just ended it by saying, ‘I can see how important it is for you kids to have your every day of the week waves while my friend is on the beach dying.’”

“Ray, that is so over the top. I wanna get out of here right now and never come back. Fuck.” Ray laughed. Oh, he was having so much fun at the expense of me and the kids. Fucking writers, they’ll sacrifice everybody to get the story they want. “But it worked,” Ray said. “This one kid almost leaped off his board into my arms with profuse confession.”

“Into your arms?”

“John, I’m tryin to make ya feel better. The kid felt like shit about what he did, okay?”

“Lanky blonde kid?” I said.

“Yeah,” Ray said, and then I was kinda happy he weaved my woes in such a way to break the little bastard’s agro mindset. I looked out at all of them in the line up, hoping he was having a miserable time, hoping he was missing waves and falling off and crying tears of remorse into the ocean.

“He admitted he was kinda moody,” Ray said, “and then he told me he knew he shoulda smoked some bud before he came out today. He said he was really sorry, John.”

I looked back out at the lineup again, trying to see if I could spot him, the moody little surf screamer that turned the day cruel on me, the day that was turning again into potential forgiveness. “Should I paddle back out and tell him I accept his amends?”

“Dude, he’s not program, he’s a stoner. Sorry and amends are miles apart. You know.”

“Yeah, I know.” We got up and left, my thoughts lingering on the surf screamer without his stone on. He shoulda got stoned. Shoulda, coulda, woulda, and if he had then I coulda-shoulda-woulda-hadda better time surfing and woulda-notta-hadta leave with the name Snake

hangin' over my head—an accidental Snake, I have to profess—because it wasn't intentional. I just had beginner's luck out there. I am not an intentional Snake.

I am also familiar with that restless, irritable and discontent feeling, and I know if I don't do my spiritual maintenance for my daily reprieve, so to speak, there are some days when all I wanna do is curl up on the couch naked with a bottle of dark rum and have Demerol darts shot into my ass cheeks. So sober is a better way, not that I chose it, no, I was forced into it by my wife, or ex-wife now, God damnit. I knew this would come up. Ex. Pain. Shit. Okay, Judy is her name and here comes the history, hesitantly muddled up and jumbled as I hate going over it. Or maybe I shouldn't, because I'm the Snake now and the Snake don't care, the Snake don't have remorse or regrets or any of that shit. The Snake takes what he wants and takes off when he wants. *Yeah, I'm da fuckin' Snake here. Look out!*

Where am I? What's going on? God help me...

I was daydreaming that afternoon when the 300 pounds of glass and metal fell. I felt lucky as I was rushed to the hospital that I ducked in time or my head would have been crushed, but as the morphine effects shifted from warm and fuzzy to dark and horrifying, I realized conspiracies of the outside realm were taking form. The lamp accident was on March 3<sup>rd</sup> and both my parents had died in a car accident 27 years before to the day. My dad was 43 when he died and I was 43 when the lamp fell. I was supposed to be in the car with them but my dad was drunk, not that I hadn't driven with him when he was drunk before, but he was drunk and mean on that day, and I called him a motherfucker and refused to get in the car. We were just going to dinner and he had just drunk his three nightly homebrewed cocktails. Nothing out of the

ordinary. But I didn't get in the car. He got in, my mom got in, and they both died. In my hazy morphine delirium, it was no coincidence. I put together a theory to Judy that turned increasingly terrifying as I whined narcotic that I was supposed to die that day and that my dad was calling me, calling me to come and join him. He was still trying to get me, I was sure of it.

"Don't you see what I'm up against, Judy?" I said. She had already divorced me in her mind, but maybe she was thinking this could be her last hope, so she told me her interpretation of my dad's communication from beyond.

"John," she said. "If he was telling you anything, this is what he what he would be telling you: that he dropped the fucking light on you to shed some light close and personal, get it? That you've done nothing with your life. You're forty-three and where are you going? Are you just gonna wander around in a permanent daydream, saying serenity prayers and pounding nails until they put you out into underpaid union pension pasture, all lame and arthritic, or are you going to move forward and find some meaning to your life? Get some purpose, son. Just because I abandoned you to my selfish drunkenness, doesn't mean that—"

I flailed in bed with unhinged confusion.

"Shut up dad! Shut up Judy! Shut up! Shut up!"

"Stop being so negative, John," she said. "This could be a good thing, you and your dad reconciling—"

"I have to live with it, not you! It happened to me, Judy, not you! My parents died, not yours! And on the same day! Don't you get it? The same day! The same day!"

"I get it, John. I get that you're stuck. You can't come undone."

And I guess I didn't come undone. There wasn't any breakthrough. The narcotics just wore off and I felt like shit. I still hated my dad. I still felt guilty about his death. But I got the

settlement and I didn't want to return to work. I wanted to do something else but I had no ambition to do it. I mused about starting up a food truck, hanging out nights on Abbot Kinney in Venice, serving two of my best pastas, ones I used to make for my kid all the time, and steaks, or maybe just a combination of roast beef and turkey sandwiches or omelets in the morning, if I got up early enough. I envisioned a nice truck, a beautiful truck, painted gold, with chrome fender and decals of penne bolognese and linguine with fresh Manila clams and a big juicy rib-eye. But when I started surfing, surfing took over and the vision faded. Not quite the change Judy was looking for. Not at all. She was finished, done, and she left.

So what? Who gives a shit? Next. That's what the Snake would say, I guess, but I don't really know, I haven't been the Snake long enough to know. I wish I could just delete my history from my brain. I'd be better that way.

“John, John, John, what the fuck is goin’ on?”

My kid Riley had been swearing freely and calling me John since he was sixteen years old. We never had that official Father-Son relationship, even when he was a little boy. His mom demanded that, and he respectfully called her Mom, still does, but with me, well, I was just a guide, to make sure he didn’t get into any real trouble. Otherwise, I let him explore the limits of his imagination, even when it went far beyond mine, and most of the time it did. He was smarter and more creative than I was, and I supported it. No point in trying to control it or shut it down. I let him feel comfortable with who he was. If he wanted to run around the house at 5 with his underpants over his head or dye his hair green in third grade, light bottle rockets out of his friend’s butt crack when he was 12, play the guitar and bang on his drum set until 11 PM on a school night, I let him. Judy would do her best to lay down the law, but Riley could always win her over. She never had much to argue about, except that he seemed, “really weird and crazy.” Sounds familiar, right?

He was made from the best of us and surpassed us both. Judy can say what she wants about my inadequacies as a husband, and she’d be right, but she could never say I wasn’t a good father. That’s the one thing I wouldn’t stand for. I never said to Riley, “What’s wrong with you?”

or, “Go to bed, now!” or “No music,” or, “Do your homework or you’re grounded.” He did it anyway and he did it on his own time. I didn’t give a shit if he did it in the hallway before class as long as he got it done, so he didn’t feel pressured or threatened by my interference. Not that I could’ve helped him past eighth grade anyway, but he loved me for staying out of his way. He became a focused, ambitious boy by his own volition, which perplexed him when he saw those same qualities were missing in his Dad.

He came to my Topanga pad as a mediator.

“Mom wanted me to talk some sense into you,” he said. She used to tell him, “You can call me anything you want, but always address me as Mom, because that’s what I am, your mother.”

“And me?” I used to say. “What am I?”

“Tell him to call you whatever you want,” she told me once. “I mean you know what you are, don’t you?”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

Those were the purgatory hamster-wheel conversations that we used to have all the time. Can’t I just forget her for a fucking second?

“I just wanted to see how messed up your ankle is,” Riley said. “Because I know how she exaggerates when it comes to you.

“Exaggerates, that’s a kind word,” I said. “My ankle is still swollen, but I’ll be okay to travel and surf. At least a little.”

He was standing there with his friend Wiley. They were both gangly and long-haired with a relaxed coolness. Their band, which I couldn’t properly label, was popular for sure and they were touring the club scene throughout the country. Riley was a superb drummer, strong focused

and fast and Wiley was a bass player with fluid fingers and a permanent high. Maybe smoking weed all day helped him, I don't know. I wasn't gonna get in the way of that just because I couldn't handle the stoner life myself.

"I heard you're goin' to the North Shore, John," he said.

"Yeah, I am, Wiley."

"Dude, that is so sweet. You and me gotta surf sometime. We can hang together in the ocean, talk about things that we can't talk about on land."

"I don't know why, but somehow that sounds kinda interesting. Maybe when I get back from Peru."

"Dude, Peru? You goin' on a vision quest?"

"Huh?"

"Ayahuasca, baby! Ridin' the space ship beyond your soul and back."

"Actually, I am doing something like that."

"Dude, I wanna go!"

"Wiley, chill," Riley said. "I'm tryin' to talk to my Pop Pops."

"What the hell is a 'Pop-Pops?'"

"Relax, John. I just say that once in a while when I'm serious."

"Serious about what? How much you love me?"

"Maybe. So what?"

"I love you too, Riley."

"Okay, okay, let's talk about something else."

He was looking at me with excited eyes, bulging weirdly, as if commanding me: the subject of love was over. He loved me. I knew it. No need to delve any further, not in front of his friend, who was on his own wavelength anyway.

“Ayahuasca, yeah,” Riley said. “I know a guy who’s done a lot of those ceremonies. He talks about contact with spaceships and aliens, like all the time. It’s kinda cool.”

“John, I know the guy,” Wiley said. “He’s whacked.”

“Okay, but I’m not interested in space ships or aliens. I am interested in healing. I’m going for one week.”

“Who knows what the aliens can or cannot heal?” Wiley smirked. “I’d take a ride along with ‘em any day just to find out.”

Riley gave Wiley a severe look. The message was clear.

“Okay dude,” Wiley said shrugging his shoulders. “I’m just sayin’.”

Riley focused in on me as if Judy was prompting him from a hidden earpiece or something.

“When you gonna get another job, John?” he asked me. “Don’t you want one?”

“Not now, Riley. I’m looking for something else. I know I’m going to find it, and I would like you to ride along with me on this one.”

“Dude, your dad is gonna become an alien,” Wiley said. “Get ready.”

Riley ignored him again, but I couldn’t help but grin.

“You better get ready too, John. You’re in for some—” and he drew the word out long.

“Spaaaaaaaaace time.”

“Dude, please,” Riley said to him. Then he looked at me, earnest, almost pleading. It broke my heart.

“Are you gonna look for some work after that, John? I mean I just want you to be okay, and, like, not run out of dough. But if you do, ya know I’ll always throw down some cash for you if I can. I don’t want you to be tapped out one day and find yourself in deep shit, begging Mom for money.”

“I love you for that,” I said, “But I’ll be okay.”

“Damn,” Wiley said. “You guys talking about love, I, like, never heard that word from my Dad. I heard, like ‘Moron,’ or ‘Asswipe,’ or ‘Shitball.’ Those were his favorites. But it made for some damn good lyrics!” He laughed at his own sad joke, made a couple of fierce air guitar strokes and sang out, “You gave me disease and I turned it into dough, Daddy!”

“Well, I love ya,” I said. “I love ya for being such a good friend to Riley too.” I gave him a hug.

“Dude, that feels so weird...but good, good weird.”

Riley watched with a smirk and called Wiley a fag but he was genuinely touched and moved close so I could give him a hug too.

“I’ll tell mom you’re all good, but try not to mess your ankle up on the North Shore.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“She worries about you like you were still together but you’re not. Bugs the fuck outta me.”

“Bugs the fuck outta me too.”

“Then why don’t you find somebody else, Dad? She did.”

“Maybe I’ll learn how to do that during the ayahuasca ceremonies. That’s one of the reasons I’m going. When I emailed them they told me intentions become realized.”

“Dude! Dude! Dude!” Wiley said all anxious and agitated. “I need to go do the ayahuasca with you. I’ve got mega chick problems. They’re always dumpin’ me and I don’t know why, and I don’t wanna—I don’t mean to diss ya John, but I don’t wanna end up havin’ to find out that shit when I’m your age. Can we, like, do a two-for-one ceremony or somethin’?”

“I doubt it,” I said, trying to ignore him again, but I guess it hit a raw nerve in Riley.

“What I doubt!” he exploded. “What I doubt is that you should go do this Ayahuasca shit at all!”

“It’s not shit, Riley!” I protested.

“How do you know? How do you know, Dad? You’re sober almost twenty years and you’re forty-five years old and you’re goin’ to do some drug in the jungle that kids my age are doing, kids like—and I’m not dissin’ my best friend here, but kids like Wiley, and he has years to get over it if it sets him back. You might lose it altogether and never get over it and never come back.”

Riley was hyperventilating he was so upset. I looked at his hair streaked over his face, his cheeks all flushed in frustration, his mother’s green eyes popped wide with fear. He was afraid of losing me, and I would have cried, but Wiley unwittingly spun it into humor, though for him it was a serious revelation.

“You have to go too, Riley!” he said. “Can’t you see? This was meant to happen, right here right now! The Ayahuasca is calling all of us! It’s calling us to come!”

After Riley and I stopped laughing, I saw him hedging towards the door. He’d alleviated his concerns and he had better things to do.

“You wanna hang for a while longer and have a cup of tea?” I asked, but I knew he just stopped by to see if whatever disastrous scenario Judy painted was true, and he got more than he

was looking for. Our love for each other was confirmed again, but he didn't want to hang with me after the fact. I was his dad whether he called me that or not, and what kid wants to just hang out with his dad?

“Nah, we're workin' on an album and gots'ta get back to da studio 'n shit,” he said. Now he was tossing out a rap demeanor. Talk how ya want, kid. I love you no matter what.

I took another nap in the hotel, and it was dark when I got up. Time was moving slow. I wished I were already on my way to the jungle. It made me nervous to go back out on the street with temptation knocking at my door. I thought of calling Judy, or maybe Ian, but I didn't know what to say. I knew I'd come off as scared and lonely and I'd regret contacting them, but I was a bit scared and a bit lonely and a cold beer at a bar sounded like a good solution.

I fell to my knees and prayed, *Please God, help me be safe, help me get through the night, help me get out of this place of and into the jungle tomorrow.* I never expected a miracle, but it always seemed to make matters better.

I walked in the opposite direction, towards the Amazon River. I knew if I stayed within a few square blocks of the hotel, I could always find my way back. The streets were crowded and music was playing everywhere, from restaurants and cafés to the boomboxes on the boardwalk. I stopped for a minute to watch a young Peruvian Michael Jackson moonwalk to "Billy Jean." A crowd clapped around him, singing along and cheering.

I heard some trippy reggae coming from a place further up and figured I'd hang out there for a while, get something to eat if they had anything that fit my diet, and come back to the hotel. It said Karma Café outside, which I thought was a good sign, but I knew I was in dangerous

territory as soon as I walked in. It was more a bar than a café, set up like a stoner's paradise with beanbags and rugs on the floor, wide couches with big floppy pillows and psychedelic paintings hanging from the pulsing pastel red walls. There were only a few people here and there in the dimly lit corners. It had to be a late night place, and I hoped to be long gone before it went into full swing.

I saw a sign that said "fresh juice bar" next to the full bar, which seemed kinda funny, but fresh juice was fresh juice and I wanted some. I stepped past a white guy sprawled on a pillow, dressed in loose white linen pants and shirt. He was soaring stoned, easily 60 years old, burnt deep bronze from years in the sun with silver hair flowing past his shoulders. A Peruvian girl no older than eighteen was curled up next to him in a short sundress, giving him a neck massage.

He took a guzzle from a bottle of champagne he had tucked between his legs and said, "Welcome," in a voice so spaced out it seemed to echo as he spoke. He grinned up at me and slipped his hand under the girl's dress. She giggled and pushed his hand away but he forced it back up. I figured no one would act like that unless they were the owner. On the couch next to him was another older guy, looking like some tough Russian mobster, stocky with a shaved head in a tank top and shorts. He stared at me like he wanted to set my head on fire. He had a young Peruvian next to him too. She was eyeballing me with intense suspicion, dressed in a tight black tank top and a leather mini-skirt. I didn't look suspicious or threatening, and I didn't look like I had any money to extract, so her look didn't last long. She put her focus back on the Russian. He grabbed her tit. She slapped him hard and he laughed. Lovely couple.

The bartender was a long-haired blond dude with an open white shirt and ripped jeans. He looked like he could serve you a drink or sell you drugs or fuck you any which way, but he was friendly enough.

“Hey man,” he said, in what sounded like a German accent.

“I’d just like a fresh juice,” I said.

“Cool,” he said. “What kind?”

What kind? It was a simple question but I couldn’t decide. I was alone at night in a third-world city, crawling with sin, panicking at a bar.

“Papaya-banana would be great. No sugar though. I’m on a diet.”

“The aya diet? When are you going?”

“Huh?”

“Are you going on an ayahuasca retreat? You couldn’t have gone yet because you’d be more...relaxed.”

“Huh?”

He began cutting fruit and putting it in a blender. I stared at him like he was a psychic detective.

“Take it easy, brother. See those people over there?”

He nodded in the direction of a couch in the far corner where an older couple about 50 years old were chatting with a 20 year old woman and a man who looked about 25. I watched them laughing and touching each other with looks of affection. They looked like one of the most loving families I had ever seen.

“They just came back from a retreat,” the bartender said. “They didn’t even know each other when they went.” He handed me my juice blend.

“That’s what you have to look forward to, brother. Don’t sweat it. I’ve been in Iquitos fifteen years. Seen the before and after many, many times. Where are you going?”

“A place called ‘The Light,’” I said.

“Great place. Loving maestras. It’s a good beginning, but you’ll probably want to come back, and there are more serious choices available once you get experienced. There are some powerful shamans around Iquitos – actually, there’s an excellent one in Kipitara, but that’s a real dieta, two months in the jungle.”

I was astounded by this stroke of luck, this treasure trove of information standing behind the bar. I took a sip of my drink, contemplating what to ask him next when the owner yelled out, “Bruno! Bring me another bottle of bubbly, my boy!” The bartender gave him a thumbs up and grinned before giving me a subtle roll of his eyes.

“All of us have sacrifices to make,” he said in a hushed tone. “I like to travel a lot and I needed a little help with cash flow, so I acquired some silent partners that aren’t so silent.”

I nodded, though I didn’t quite understand. He gave me an empathetic smile.

“Enjoy your journey,” he said. “Maybe we’ll talk when you return.”

“Thanks.” I took out some soles to pay but he waved them off. “On the house,” he said. He pulled a bottle of Moët champagne from the fridge, peeled the gold foil off the top and gave me some final words of advice before he went over to his unruly partner.

“I’d leave before it gets too decadent in here. And believe me, as the night wears on, it most certainly does. The whole city gets that way.”

I downed my drink like a good student and walked towards the Karma door. I glanced over at the ayahuasca family as I left and they all smiled back at me and waved. I wanted to believe in the magic. I said to myself, “I believe it, I believe in the ayahuasca magic,” when I heard a voice behind me rasp, “You better believe it.. bro.”

I didn’t have to turn around. He was right next to me a second later with his shaking palm against my back. It wasn’t a weapon, but I froze anyway.

“Take it easy bro, I’m not holdin’ ya up,” he said. “I mean, I’ll take some dough if ya have it, like American dollars – but I’m not gonna rob you for it. I just wanna talk, tell you a little story – that you’ll even wanna pay me for –”

He gave a short laugh that turned into a hack. He hacked and hacked from deep down in his chest until he spat out something of substance. I heard it land on the sidewalk. I didn’t want to look at it. I kept my head down with my eyes in front of me but he stepped around to my side.

“Dude, don’t be scared of me,” he said. “I’m more scared of myself.”

I hesitated before I glanced over at him while he lit a cigarette that was more like half a cigarette – probably a cigarette butt he’d picked up off the street. He wore ratty cargo shorts and a torn yellow t-shirt that was probably white at one time. He was taller than me, about 6-foot with matted blonde hair, a long angular face and sunken, stubble-covered cheeks. He must’ve been good looking once, but the remnants were barely detectable. He just stared at me while he steadied his hand with the lighter. I looked into his watery, bloodshot blue eyes. It seemed like he’d already knocked at death’s door and now he was on his way in.

“I was headed to an aya retreat,” he said. “About...I dunno three, four months ago. I was strung out on dope back in Philly – Philadelphia, ya know. You’re American, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Lotta dope in Philly,” he said. “Too much. I was in New York too, was in a band...played a mean harp, sang, even toured around...went all up and down the east coast, New Orleans, over to Texas, played Dallas, Austin...where you from?”

“Los Angeles,” I said. I didn’t want to engage. I just wanted to walk away but I didn’t want to alienate him either, ‘cause I wasn’t sure what he was going to do. Maybe he did have a weapon.

“Yeah, never made it out there,” he said. “I wanted to, but...ah, fuck it, fuck my bullshit story. The point is I got fed up, fed up with myself. I wanted to change. I wanted to change real bad and this dude I met, he was from Santa Fe – this dude told me, I mean he had the light in his eyes and he told me he was just as strung out as me, more even – and he made his way down to Peru, did ayahuasca and it changed his life...changed his whole life, man! He even said he’d pay for my treatment if I cleaned up. So I cleaned up. I bit the bullet and I cleaned up. Did the whole aya diet he told me to do and came to Peru on his dime. I guess I shoulda worked for it myself and then – ah, fuck it –”

He hacked and spit again.

“Listen,” I said. “I can give you, like, 40 bucks if you want, I mean I don’t have–”

“No! You listen!” he said. “Are you even listening to me?”

People were skirting around us. No one was interfering. No one was asking me if I needed any help. We were just two crazy ex-pats having a gonzo quarrel on the street on just another normal night in Iquitos.

“I’m trying to save you,” he said. “So you can be what I shoulda been.”

He started to cry big heaving sobs. If it was an act for money, I believed it one hundred percent, and I was ready to pay. Ian should take lessons from this guy. On the other hand, this guy was me in my worst nightmare scenario.

“I mean, I came down here and I was clean,” he said. “Totally clean, on the diet and everything. But I had to wait two days before I went to the retreat. Two fucking days in Iquitos is like an eternity. You know what you can get down here? Every fucking sin available to man. At the end of the first day I took a hit off a joint in the park with some chicks, hot chicks, teenagers

– and then I was like, oh no, what have I done? And then I went to some restaurant with them and ate this tasty dish, but I found out it was guinea pig and pig is not on the aya diet, right?”

He laughed and hacked and spat. I had my hand in my pocket on my money. I wanted to throw some at him and run, but he had me paralyzed.

“And then,” he said. “I was like, to hell with it, I might as well have a beer. I went out with them that night, I had a little money, more than they did and of course cocaine is cheap as sugar down here and I bought some. That led to crack and heroin is right around the bend, and you know I went around that bend. Fuck yeah, I did. Both those girls blew me and I watched them lick each other until the sun came up. I wired my bank back in Philly for the last of my savings in the morning and stayed up for five days. I never made it to the aya retreat, obviously. I mean obviously, right?”

I was dizzy, quietly hyperventilating. He started to scream at the top of his crusted lungs, “Obviously! Obviously! Obviously!–”

“God, please!” I said cutting him off. “I’ve heard it. I’ve heard it, okay! I get the message!”

I tore out a few twenties. His hand was there and ready, and I ran, I ran as fast as I could towards the hotel, hearing him bellowing behind me, “Lock yourself in your room like the Wolfman! And don’t come out until you’re ready to go to the retreat!”

Sleep was tough. The sound of engines outside my window rang in my ears until dawn. I looked out and saw the fireball sun rising. It was 5:30 AM. I turned on my phone and looked for emails, but my inbox was empty. Judy and Ian had let go. They both loved me but wanted me to have my own experience. I made up the dialogue as I was thought about it:

*“We have to let him have his own experience Judy.”*

*“I know, I know. You’re so much better letting go than I am Ian.”*

*“Well, I owe it all to the program. Please come out to the North Shore anytime you want. You’re always welcome.”*

*“Really?”*

I imagined Judy and Ian having a secret affair and laughed out loud. I turned the phone back off and I intended to keep it that way until I got back to Los Angeles. I checked out of the hotel and went to the Amazon Café, another place recommended by the website. It opened at 6:00 AM and the bus left at 7:00 AM so I had time for a quick breakfast. Mangy dogs scrounged for scraps along the riverside and black buzzards circled around over a big boat gliding past. I thought maybe it was a fishing boat, and they were circling for the bait, but maybe they were just waiting for one of the dogs to collapse from starvation so they could swoop down and eat its scrawny carcass. Maybe someone was dead on the boat, and they were waiting for them to be thrown overboard. I remembered my early sobriety years, the third step and the serenity prayer every morning upon to keep me from plunging down again. I’d have to get back to them if the ayahuasca failed. What humiliation that would be. I-told-you-so’s from AA members already rang in my ears as I walked down the street, hardly paying attention to the foreign country around me. Blind thinking can be done any place in the world. Try it, you won’t even know you’re there. My sandals slap-slap-slapped me to my destination and there I was at the café, where I could concentrate on the menu instead.

I got a fresh mango juice and fried egg sandwich with lettuce and sat on the bench outside. I ate and watched the sun rise in the sky and the mighty Amazon and for a few seconds I had no other thoughts in my head until some executive-looking white woman jogged by in neon blue Nike-wear with her iPod headphones stuffed into her ears. She looked ridiculous, but I was

calm and wanted to stay calm. I got back to my sandwich, thinking how nice it would be if my son was sitting next to me and we were both savoring a sandwich and the surroundings, and as if by request I heard a young man's voice.

“That sandwich looks tasty, mate.”

“Did you just fly down from the sky?” I joked because he just kind of appeared out of nowhere. He laughed.

“No mate, I walked right up to ya but you were off somewhere in the clouds yourself.”

“Yeah, guess I was. Are you from New Zealand?”

“Aw mate, don't insult me right off. I'm Australian.”

“Sorry, it's just that my good friend is a Kiwi.”

“Aww, well that's too bad for him isn't it?”

It was a running joke between the countries – I remembered Ian offering his condolences when introduced to an Aussie. The kid laughed again. He was lean like Riley, but his face was more rugged and outdoorsy and his hair was light blonde.

“So what are ya eating?” he said.

“Egg sandwich with lettuce and lime. I'm on this diet.”

“What kind, the Aya diet?” he asked.

“Um, yeah.”

“Me too.”

“I'm going to ‘The Light’ retreat,” I said.

“Me too. Gonna meet people a few blocks down in about twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, my hotel was on the same block. I got in last night.”

“Lucky you. I just arrived this morning. Let me get one of those egg sandwiches and we can walk over together.” He put out his hand for a shake. “Name’s Riley Landers,” he said. I couldn’t believe it.

“Get outta here.”

“Get outta where, mate?”

“Sorry. It’s just that my son’s name is Riley. I mean it is a weird coincidence,” I explained, holding out my hand. “John Hutchings,” I said, and as we shook, a street dog and a feisty little puppy started wrestling on the pavement beside us. The sun’s morning rays beamed off Riley’s back, bathing him in a warm glow. I looked into his fierce green eyes playfully looking back at me, and I felt a sense of ease, a sense of trust and familiarity. I think I was grinning. He had my son’s name for God’s sake! “Seems like the magic is already in the air, John,” he said.

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On the way to the meeting place, I found out that Riley was a 28 year-old from Melbourne with MBA in business administration who quit his job, broke up with his fiancée, went on a six month drug and booze binge, had a private nervous breakdown and was coming to Peru to investigate his life and its possible purpose. I shared my experience, how I felt AA hadn’t taken me far enough on the path to discovery. I still didn’t know what my resistance was to live life to the fullest of my potential. Maybe I’d find out I was just an average to dull person but my intention was to find out the truth as scary as it might be.

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“Just you talking about that makes you above average and anything but dull, mate. You think an average dull person would trek to the jungles of Peru to drink Ayahuasca and sit with Shipibo Indians for a deep spiritual journey into the depths of his soul?”

“Wow, that was well put.”

“You said it, mate. It’s all about the intention. And well done on the eighteen years of sobriety. That’s a feat in itself. I couldn’t imagine being able to do that.”

“Did you have a problem not drinking for the ayahuasca diet?”

“No.”

“Then I wouldn’t worry about it.”

We were solicited by a couple of beggars with hackneyed popped eyes, matted hair, brown teeth and nothing on but shredded shorts. They looked like local crack addicts that hadn’t slept or eaten in days. It was sad and horrific. Riley tossed them a few 5 sole coins and I gave one a 10 sole bill. All in all it was about eight dollars worth. They both garbled out some words and hustled off as fast as their bone-thin legs could carry them.

“I guess that will keep them high for a day or so,” I said.

“The way I see it, guys like that will never get better. Might as well help them on their way. Fucking tragic, mate, isn’t it?”

I wanted to hug this kid already and was so glad he was going to be part of my journey, but I kept the thoughts to myself. I didn’t want to alarm him into thinking I needed a son replacement or anything and I had to remind myself I didn’t either.

“Yeah, grateful it’s not us,” I said, and we came to a parked beige minibus with a dozen green plastic chairs lined up next to it on the sidewalk. There was a bohemian-looking guy with shoulder length-hair and a goatee holding a clipboard. He wore only loose black cotton pants tied

with a drawstring and sandals, and an assortment of beaded bracelets on both wrists. Three women sat in floppy sun hats, looking up at him with wide-eyed anticipation.

“Hola,” he said, and it sounded perfect, like the way it was supposed to be said. He wasn’t a local for sure. He looked like he was from Spain or Brazil or someplace cool like that. I gave a smile and waved. Riley spoke right up.

“Hola to you, mate.”

“Are you guys going to ‘The Light’ Ayahuasca retreat?” he asked in accented but perfect English.

“We sure are, mate,” Riley said, and I nodded as more people gradually filtered in. The guy introduced himself as Mithra and someone commented that Mithra was the name of an ancient Persian god of eternal light. Mithra made fun of it with a beaming smile.

“Yes, I have a lot to live up to,” he said. “My father was a Spaniard, and he wanted to name me Javier, after his grandfather. But my mother was Persian, and during her labor they feared she’d die of bloodloss. When I finally come out, she held me in her arms, and she said a light shone out of me and the bleeding stopped. They both agreed my name had to be Mithra. I’m your coordinator, and we’ll be working together with Helena.”

It sounded like some Greek mythology, but I liked it. He told us he was our coordinator, and that we’d be working together with Helena. She stepped out of the bus and greeted us with the mellowest, “Hello,” I’d ever heard. She was tall, Amazon tall, somewhere in her mid-thirties with the blazing yellow eyes of a tigress and fire red hair. She sounded Danish or something, but spoke in Spanish to the bus driver and ushered us all inside. We smiled politely and awkwardly acknowledged each other. Everybody seemed excited for the unknown. I figured we had 12 days to get introduced and we’d probably find out more than we wanted to know by the end of the

ceremonies. Riley sat in the seat in front of me next to a cute young woman named Jill. I mean, why not? I sure would have if I was world traveler of 28. They started chattering away about why they had come. Jill told him she had a high-powered job that seemed meaningless so she quit. I overheard another woman further up say she kept having break-up after break-up and didn't know why. In the seats across from me sat a strapping guy around 25, with white lycra shorts and a black tank top that had "Matt and Kat's Dojo" emblazoned across it in big red letters. The woman next to him had to be Kat, with matching lycra shorts and the same tank top. They were doing some martial arts meditation exercise with their eyes closed, elbows tucked into their ribs and the palms of their hands clasped together in front of their faces. They had to be a team.

Next to me was a mild-mannered Japanese guy. He seemed about thirty or so and also had an air of detachment about him. It seemed like the whole trip was perfunctory to him. His name was Taki, and he was also from Los Angeles. He was a journalist for a Japanese paper and an aspiring science fiction writer, and he'd done ayahuasca fifty times already. "There is still so much more to learn," he told me, then he said he was tired and fell fast asleep in seconds. We drove off and were out of downtown Iquitos in minutes. I looked out the window of our air-conditioned bus at the tin houses and bodegas as we traveled to the outskirts. We passed a bus painted aqua green and filled with locals. The bus was coughing fumes with glassless windows, and everyone riding was leaning out, staring at our bus, smiling and waving as if their impoverishment meant nothing. They seemed so happy. I wanna be happy, I thought.

"Are you kidding me, Judith? Really!"

I turned around fast and stared at the two women across the aisle a few seats back. One was a waspy housewife with a white tennis visor over her neat shoulder-length hair and a rosy

complexion to match her pink Ralph Lauren polo shirt. The other one, the one called Judith, looked like a wild hippie chick from the 60's, with round purple-tinted sunglasses and a floppy straw sunhat resting on tendrils of straw-colored hair. She wore a loose cotton blouse with psychedelic paisley patterns on it and her freckled face was lit up with laughter that echoed through the bus.

“Chill out,” she said. “It’s just my mission with Mother Ayahuasca.” Her accent had an almost Irish lilt to it, like she was singing every word.

“But over a hundred ceremonies?” the other woman said. “I mean, how—?”

Judith’s stopped her speech with her hand, her eyes on me, the eavesdropper.

“Anything else you would like us to tell you, Mister Nosy?”

“Shit, sorry,” I said. “It just that my wife, well, ex-wife’s name is Judy and – I’m sorry – and see, there’s a guy on the bus named Riley and my son’s name is Riley and... it’s just strange and, I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

“My, you can be sorry so many times in one sentence, can’tcha?”

“I guess.”

“And what’s your name, Mister Guesser?”

“John.”

“My dog’s name is John!”

“Huh?”

“It’s just a jokey joke. Who else on this bus could be a loved one from the other dimension?”

“What?”

“Give me a name, love, a good friend perhaps.”

“Ian.”

Judith stood up and yelled.

“Is there anyone on this bus named Ian?! John is having déjà vu.”

A hefty looking character sitting alone in the back stood up. He was dressed in a wife-beater and cut off Levis and had sweat-drenched, stringy hair hanging in front of his bloated sun-blotched face.

“Rudy Ians from Brooklyn. Who wants ta know?”

Judith looked at me and grinned.

“There ya go, comforts from home for your journey away. Riley, Judith and Ian – well, Ians. Close enough.”

“Close enough to what? Are you messin’ with me?” he said. Judith blew him a kiss and told him to mellow out.

“I didn’t come down here to get messed with or get close to anybody, okay?” he said.

“Okay, Rudy, okay,” Judith said. “Everything’s peachy, big man.”

“Did you say big or fat, ‘cause I heard fat.”

Riley popped his head over the seat and whispered to me. “If he makes a move mate, it might take both of us to stop him.”

I was still a little steamed at her so I just nodded. Matt came out of his meditation and leaned over, his pecs and biceps bulging with authority.

“I’ll step in and take care of it, don’t worry. Sixth degree black belts in Jiujitsu, Karate and Kung Fu qualify me, boys.”

“He’s all yours, mate,” Riley said, rolling his eyes at me. What a crew. Mithra and Helena, both sitting up front, stood up and told us all to be “tranquilo,” as Judith glided back to Rudy.

“I said big and loveable cause that’s what you really are, right?”

Rudy shrugged his shoulders, threw his hands out.

“Listen, I don’t know what I am yet, that’s why I’m here. But what I do know is it’s hot, I’m anxious and I push people away. That’s my thing, that’s what I gotta work on. So lay off and leave me alone, okay. Sorry everybody.”

“Well said, sir Rudy,” she said and bowed to him graciously. He couldn’t help give a smile, even if it was a broken one. I marveled at her powers of persuasion, how quickly she neutralized him. She looked back at me.

“And you Johnny boy, how are you feeling?”

She gave me one of those looks a mother gives a child. I felt embarrassed and defensive. I felt like telling her how my own mom died, how I indirectly killed her, and I felt like vindictively asking her if she could figure out that mind fuck too, if she could fill that gap with her magic mother earth powers. Nasty scenarios raced through my mind, but I kept my mouth shut. Judith walked over to me, leaned down and cradled my face with her hands. They smelled like honey and patchouli, her whole body did, and she had no bra, and I felt the swell of her breast under her soft cotton blouse brush against my cheek.

“It’s all in fun, darlin’,” she said. “I didn’t mean to upset ya. The coincidences of all our names should be comforting and I’m glad ya have them.”

“I won’t try to substitute you for my wife in any way. I promise,” I said, but it didn’t come out right. She worked her magic and covered it up before I could commiserate with my character defects and apologize.

“Woah, hold on a second,” she said. “Let’s nip that little diddy in the bud. You have no idea what is going to happen in that mind of yours once Mother Ayahuasca gets in. Before we even get close to the first ceremony, I will be known to you as Tish, okay?”

“Tish?”

“When I was a wee babe I couldn’t pronounce Judith. I said Judish instead, so my mum started calling me Ishy, then Tishy, and Tish stuck as my nickname. She still calls me that, and so do my close friends. So ya see, John, now you are in the company of my loved ones. Okay?”

“Okay Tish.”

“And of course everyone else will be calling me Tish, too, so as not to confuse the matter.”

“All these other strangers on the bus?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it was nice being a loved one for a second.”

She was relieved I was getting attuned to her sense of humor and patted me on the shoulder.

“That’s the spirit Johnny, now we can relax and enjoy the ride.”

“I’d prefer John,” I said with a grin. She lifted her sunglasses. Her eyes were a powerful bright blue and had specks of green and violet in them and her lashes were like long luxurious wings over them. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. I got lost in them. She knew it, but she beamed back nothing but pure benevolence as she spoke.

“Johnny or John, Judy, Judith and Tishy Tish. Mother Ayahuasca will take care of all of us.”

There was a downpour just before the third ceremony. It didn't last for more than a few minutes, but my headlamp illuminated the jungle as I walked over to the Maloka, making the raindrops look like tiny diamond drips. I started to think how I too was becoming illuminated, how I would shine before Judy on my return.

The rain was a sign. I had to stop in my muddy little tracks, close my eyes and say out loud, "No, John, it just rained in the jungle, okay? Keep it humble. Don't set yourself up. Just keep your intentions pure."

Mithra was standing right in front of me when I opened my eyes. He had his shirt off as usual, holding his broad shoulders back like a prince. His skin was slick and shining in the rain, his mass of hair like a lion's mane. His eyes were blacker than his hair, but they glimmered with an enlightened spirit. His teeth, chipped and stained brown from many a mapacho, were straight and strong. A breeze came up to cool the night air, and made me feel like Mithra and I were floating a few feet above the earth. I wondered if I was still in a dream, if I was already in the middle of the third ceremony, or if I was actually on my way to the Maloka. I stayed in the transcendent buzz of it all and waited for him to explain.

"You are shining, John, only let that statement come from me. You remain the humble student."

"Okay," I said. He put his arm around me and we walked together to the Maloka.

I drank more Ayahuasca than I wanted to again, but Rosa gave me a glint of mischievous omniscience and impelled me to drink the full shotglass she poured. At least it was one of the small ones. Taki downed two of the large ones, filled to the brim, and pointed straight up with his finger after he wiped the last drop from his mouth. He was the rocket man, for sure, but I wondered how high he could go before getting burned. Jill drank as much as me, put her hands together in prayer and bowed to Rosa. Jill was so mild-mannered and solid in her soul searching, following the path already laid out for her in bold silence. I didn't know if she and Riley would actually consummate their relationship after the ceremonies were over, but I did hear him mention they were going to Machu Picchu together. I wished Judy would just fly down to Lima and do the same with me. Maybe she would visit me in a vision and tell me herself. That sounded more reasonable.

Everyone was deep inside themselves, legs folded, eyes closed, hands clasped together or on their laps. I glanced over at Taki, on his way out of his body and stiff as a cadaver. I felt the impulse to watch the Shamans, so I kept my eyes open. They all drank and were smoking their pipes and mapachos, whispering to each other in hushed voices. Celestina had a small wound, maybe a bug bite or something, and she held out her arm. Tomasio got up, holding a mini-flashlight with a red beam, and leaned over her. He made some sucking noises above her elbow and blew smoke over the area, making little popping noises with his mouth. I heard the quiet, "Yah, yah, yah..." and he sat back down. I felt a wave of compassion wash over me, realizing how much they gave and how much we took. I took a few big breaths to keep from sobbing outright, but tears of gratitude rolled down my cheeks anyway. I closed my eyes, thinking if I felt nothing else tonight, it would be enough.

Time passed but I felt no effects of the aya. Maybe I'd gotten all I would get with my rush of compassion, or maybe the Shamans were testing me. If I had to sit in place with no effects at all, could I hear the Icaros and be content for the rest of the night? Yes, I thought, of course, yes.

Taki began breathing in and out in deep rasps. His body dripped sweat, like he was sitting on the launch pad, burning, as his spirit took off to other galaxies. I actually felt the heat emanating from him but we were forbidden to interfere so I couldn't ask him if he was okay. I was sure he wouldn't respond anyway. Moans and sighs came from around the room and I could see the ayahuasca was working on the others, but I continued to feel sober and in the moment. I watched the Shamans yawn and sigh, clear signs they were feeling the effects too. I would be the observer tonight. Rosa began to sing and the others broke into soft harmony. I closed my eyes to accept the love into my body and saw a few subtle patterns of light, a few gnashing teeth and changing colors, but nothing swept me away. I opened my eyes again to see the Shamans guiding each other to students on their mats and the Maestras looked like ancient warriors in the dark, wearing long black hair like helmets, swaying to their songs. I felt the strong power of love in the room, but still I felt it was only the Icaros that elevated my senses. I was not *marejada*, the word Mithra used to describe the pulse of the ayahuasca through the body. I was relaxed and smiling from ear to ear with my own love power. Celestina came over and sat in front of me. "Buenos dias. I mean, noches," I said, and I giggled.

She smiled back at me and gave a little chuckle. It made me want to reach out and hug her, but I humbled myself and I bowed my head as she began to sing. As soon as I closed my eyes I saw jeweled robes and flashes of magnificent sunrise and sunset, blasting with color. It was as close to an orgasm I could imagine without actually having one, and it was completely

asexual. I suppose it was spiritual joy. I felt her hands on my head, molding my temples. It felt so good. Then a voice said, *Do you deserve it?*

I hesitated, and before I could answer, Matt screamed out, “No dad, I don’t want to! No, I won’t call you Sir! I’m done with martial arts! Don’t make me! Please don’t make me!”

I had to open my eyes, though I was caught up without resolution to the last looming question. Matt jumped up into a series of violent karate kicks and punches, and the Shamans all gathered together, singing, trying to bring him back from his unhinged departure. Celestina took her hands off my head and looked over, then looked back at me. My head was up and my eyes were open. “Yo soy bueno,” I said, knowing it meant something like, “I’m okay,” though I didn’t feel too okay in the moment. She got up to assist the others. The Icaros built until Matt threw one last kick and collapsed sobbing on his knees. It was a heartbreaking scene. Rudy got up and walked over to him, which was against the rules, but the Shamans let him. He put out a hand to Matt, and Matt took it. Rudy helped him up. “I had to fight with my dad,” Matt said. “I didn’t want to, but he challenged me. He said if I won I could do what I wanted to with my life... and I won... I won... I won...”

Rudy took Matt into his lumbering arms, with no words, just a big loving hug. Rudy sat back down and Tomasio guided Matt back to his seat. The whole event only took a few minutes, but it was mind-blowing and emotional, and I sobbed for Matt and for everyone in the group. Taki was oblivious, of course. He was somewhere way, way off the planet. It seemed like his skin was turning red, but I wasn’t sure if it was the mild touch of the ayahuasca or not. I closed my eyes and settled down, savoring the pleasant reverberation of Matt’s breakthrough. The voice returned. *Do you deserve to feel good?*

“Yes, I do, I do,” I said, and my mouth broke into a wide smile. I saw visions of liquid gold flow like a waterfall. I put my hands out to touch it and felt someone holding them. I sensed it was a Maestra, but I kept my eyes closed, because the flowing liquid god was so beautiful. My hands got warmer and warmer and I opened my eyes a crack to see my hands were glowing golder than the waterfall. They had a supernatural aura to them, a luminescent gold, a color I had never seen. I wanted to open my eyes, but I was afraid to, and suddenly, I felt like I was floating. I opened my eyes and I was, I was floating in space and holding hands with an alien. My first thought was that this must’ve been how they got the idea for E.T. I was floating in space with a real alien, and we were connected. My hands had merged into its hands and my legs were its legs. Our bodies had become one body, a golden glowing mass. We were floating eternally together, and the Shaman’s true identity all made sense to me.

*This is how they know so much about me. They’re all aliens!*

Frozen panic follow the thought.

*I’m with an alien! What do they want? What’s gonna happen? What are they gonna do with me?*

Then I heard a soothing, omniscient voice.

*What does it matter if the message is love?*

And I floated amongst the billions of stars, merged into the universe, in golden glowing love.

My eyes opened when I heard Helena announce that the ceremony had ended for the night. I was back on Earth, back in the Maloka, sitting on my mat. I looked over to Taki. I wanted to tell him that I too had gone into space, and that I merged with an alien. Was it true? Did it really happen, or did I just fall asleep and dream it? I had to ask him about his experiences.

His body was slumped over and his head was tucked into his chest. I thought I smelled burning flesh, and I giggled to myself that he must have gotten burned re-entering the stratosphere. I mean, come on, I didn't actually, physically travel into fucking outer space, but God, I was confused. I had to sit and breathe and wait until Taki came plummeting back to Earth to explain.

Vander walked around lighting a few candles so we could make our way out of the Maloka and get back to our tambos. He lit one behind us, giving me his sad, gracious and compassionate look. I gave him a silent, "Wow," but my focus was on Taki, who lifted his head so painfully and slowly he seemed to come out of a violent crash landing. His face looked like someone swept it over it with a red paintbrush, and there were bubbled burn blisters on his cheeks, and his hair looked like singed straw. He looked over at me with bloodshot eyes, swirls of sheer madness.

"I got caught in the solar whip," he said hoarsely. "A 500,000 mile loop of glowing red plasma. I was basking in the ultraviolet light and just got anchored to the sun's surface. I had to struggle to get to the corona, but I made it back. How was your journey?"