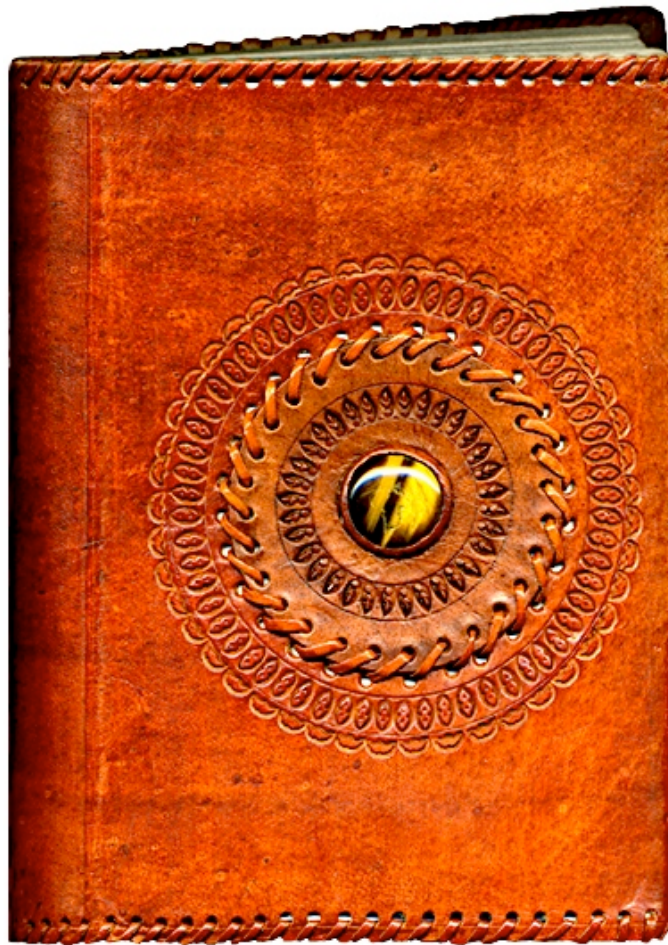


# Book of Dreams - Part 4



A M E M O I R

# THE BOOK OF DREAMS - PART FOUR

## CHAPTERS

- [OBSERVATIONS & QUOTATIONS](#)
- 13. [PERFECT WISDOM FORGOTTEN](#)
- 14. [SUZANNE'S RECURRING DREAM OF GROWING GUM](#)
- 15. [THE DREAM OF THE THREE TEMPTATIONS IN THE DESERT](#)
- 16. [THE DREAM OF THE TRAVELING BRIEFCASE \(PART ONE\)](#)
- 17. [THE DREAM OF THE TRAVELING BRIEFCASE \(PART TWO\)](#)



**Sappho**  
*Charles-August Mengin, 1877*

## Part IV

### OBSERVATIONS & QUOTATIONS

Nine months after his death, Dante appeared to one of his sons in a dream and told him where to find the last thirteen cantos of the *Paradiso*, until then believed to be unwritten.

Picasso, early in his career, sometimes used the whitewashed walls of a rented villa to sketch on. Once, a landlord demanded fifty francs for a fresh coat, after covering over everything.

Dylan Thomas was planning to sleep on Stravinsky's couch in Los Angeles while they collaborated on an opera. Thomas died before it ever happened.

Nikolay Gogol died a pauper. In his possession was a gold watch that had been Pushkin's.

Agathon, the first Greek dramatist to write without using a subject from a myth, at whose home Plato sets the *Symposium*, has not one surviving play.

More than 70 drawings of women from Paris brothels by Edgar Degas were found after his death by his brothers. The drawings were burned.

In 380 A.D., Saint Gregory, the Bishop of Constantinople, ordered Sappho's poems burned.  
In 1073 A.D., Pope Gregory VII ordered Sappho's poems burned.

A stupid man's report of what a clever man says is never accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something he can understand.  
- Bertrand Russell

How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?  
- David Markson

As we get older, we do not get any younger.  
- Henry Reed

I have wasted my hours.  
- Leonardo da Vinci, at the end of his life

## 13. PERFECT WISDOM FORGOTTEN

An ironic dichotomy of age: as memory gets more porous, creativity (making things up that haven't been memorized) becomes more essential, even as it may begin to calcify. (I've read that creativity peaks between the ages of 25-30, when the brain reaches its zenith in size and density. But creativity is a funny thing, and, in my experience, can become more youthful with age, more independently liquid the farther it is removed from life's sticky lessons and more carefree after one's critics have all died.) Some people believe age breeds habit and rigidity; I think it hones originality... and a delicious disdain for what others think.

I no longer have an iron clad memory. When a clever idea pops into my head, if I don't write it down - and soon - it's lost. Forever. It falls into the brambled fiction of personal antiquity, stirred ink in the swirling basin of short term thought. Sometimes I pretend to remember; but I know whatever is still in my head is merely a shell of an idea now forgotten.

I've convinced myself this degraded ability is balanced by my increased level of confidence and productive skill. If I forget something cool, I will, undoubtedly, be able to come up with something else *coolish*, given time. Maybe even *cooler*. So I rarely work (in my head) at something unless I have instant access to my computer (or, if its a first draft, my pencils and yellow legal pads or score paper)... What would be the point? I'll just forget it, anyway.

Occasionally, I've caught myself thinking of nothing at all... content to let my imagination slide firmly away from whatever creative project that, in the old days, would be constantly percolating below the surface.\*\* I'm just beginning to accept (and appreciate) this new *here and now*. Imagination can wait for its proper office hours. Let me enjoy my wine and cheese, thank you.

Lessened memory has made me rely more on improvisation, on making it up as I go along. On letting go. Trusting my under-consciousness.\* I actively embrace faulty memory as an excuse to think on my feet with the infinite reservoir of the Sometimes.

A lazy man's  
perhaps I care less about sharing  
certain they will lead to something  
me being more relaxed, content.  
need of me or my fleeting

I say all this to introduce a



jazz-like spontaneity, tapping into unplanned. It's more fun.

rationalization, perhaps. Or, flashes of insight; I'm no longer important. Maybe it's a result of The world is smaller. It has no musings.

dream similar to RAINING WORDS

\* I used dreams and this power of under-consciousness to create the music from my solo piano CD, "13 Masks."



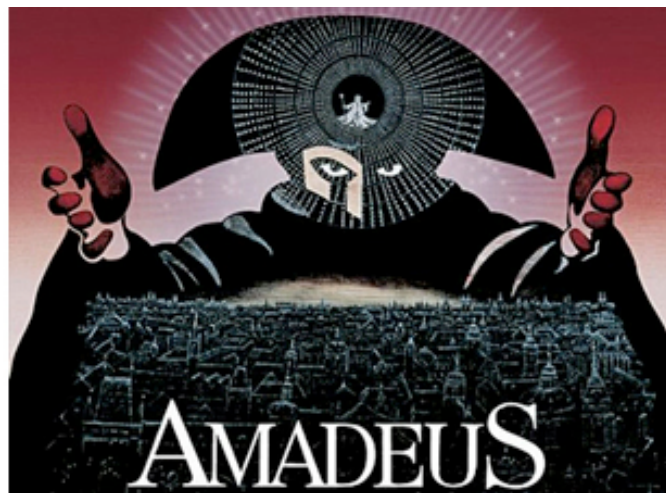
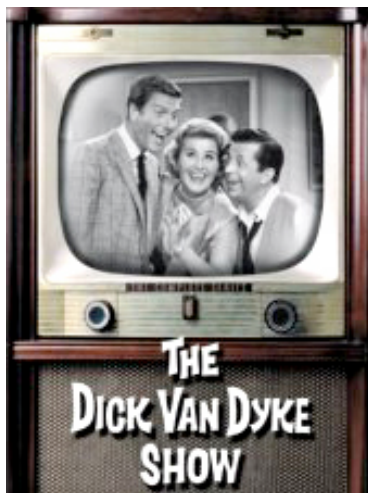
\*\* Prior to this recent state, everything I did (conversations, reading, cooking, etc.) included me carrying on **internal conversations** with myself about my work. Only sex, and perhaps playing basketball and stage performances, sufficiently diverted my attention to short circuit this continual mindspace musing.



(chapter 11), yet different in important ways:

*I am hearing a Mentor speak.* It could be echoes in a hallway outside a lecture room. Or, overheard whisperings from an adjacent library reading table, barely audible. There is an elusive quality, a fear that I'm not hearing everything, that soon the sound will become too quiet to understand.

The words spark a revelation inside me. I begin to speak aloud, inappropriately. I'm filled with energy. (Like when I wrote my second play as a fifteen year old\* - a high school sophomore - in Diane Hook's living room. I leapt from chair to chair, shouting out lines, orating melodramatically, playing every character, as she wrote down anything that came out of my mouth. Diane was the first non-elderly person I knew who had diabetes, a fact that made her even more alluring, since she, like my sister, was so intensely alive. She never lived her illness, was never a victim of it. Plus, she was incredibly sexy and a whole year older. Writing in her living room was like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* meets *AMADEUS*. Pure ecstasy.)



In my dream, there is no Diane taking dictation. I'll be unable to remember any of it. I'll lose the *Perfect Wisdom* and *Answers to Everything* I am so effortlessly articulating. Damn.

Then, *I realize it's a dream.* Not a lucid dream in which I have control; just an ordinary dream that I'm trapped inside of. I'm not able to search for a misplaced pencil or a scrap of paper. I can't remember a word I'm speaking *after* it leaves my mouth. Gone. *That fast.*

I watch myself elucidate the *Keys to Life* and realize I'm losing it all. Every generalized concept. Every detail.

I repeat certain phrases, utilize memory techniques. I try very, very hard...

---

\* "*From The Creation*," an avant-garde exploration of creation myths, first performed one year later (1973) by a summer stock repertory, *Odyssey Playhouse*, and a few years after that by *UW-Stevens Point* under the direction of Lyn Miller.

But when I wake up, I remember nothing. Not one word.

Yet, strangely, the euphoria, the sense of bewildered *knowing*, remains.

I might have had this dream more than once. I recall similar dreams involving music, the ability to play whole symphonies by employing specifically inspired hand motions, beautiful and complex music I was unable to recall upon waking. I've seen completely fleshed out films, annotations in the margins of accompanying scripts, director's observations still ringing in my ears. All lost. Works of genius (if the residue of my heightened emotions can be any guide, and, of course, it can't be). Gone.

The difference between earlier dreams and this new one is in the overwhelming after effect: *Carryover elation*.

As I laid in bed sorting out my feelings, I could not shake the sense that the Beauty and Wisdom of whatever it was I'd been saying/discovering in my dream was more than emotional gibberish, was something *true*. My euphoria was *proof*, not a mere vestige of make believe.

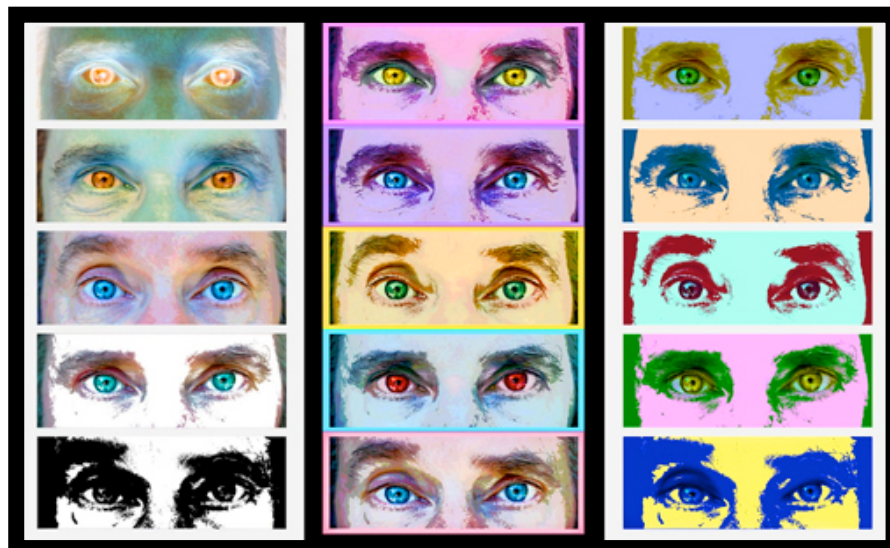
It was still dark in the bedroom. I could hear Suzanne breathing, the wind moving a branch against the window, a distant commuter train making its last stop-at-every-depot run out of the City. It wasn't morning yet. The room was dark. Yet, I fluoresced with *Godspeak*. That's what it felt like.

Wonder and knowing, shadows and clarity, all in one wordless moment. Something that can't ever be accurately written down, no matter how good the stenographer.

I realized: Even if I could recite the PERFECT WISDOM verbatim, it would be mere regurgitated content, not a recreation of *exhilaration*. I would not rise in transcendent delight while remembering it, not in the same way as when I had been speaking it.

**Knowing the Truth is different than thinking up the Truth for the First Time.**

It's the *Moment of Invention*, not the product of former inventiveness, that activates rapture. It's the motion of creating, not the stillness of the thing created. Once invention comes into being, it slips into the world of The Other, of Outside Self, and is no longer ME. It becomes an Archive of Me.

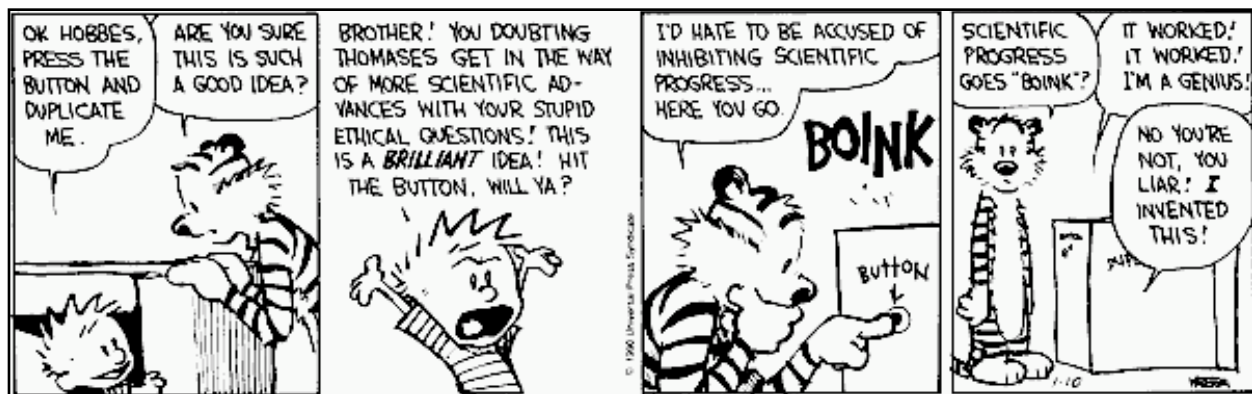


**Self-portrait**  
by Tobin Mueller

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED THE HUNGER OF CURIOSITY, THE CARELESS UNCERTAINTY OF WONDER, THE OVERFLOW OF AWE. THE PROCESS OF DISCOVERY. AS I LAID SMILING, THE WISDOM OF DREAMS SOMEWHERE AT THE TIP OF MY TONGUE GAVE ME AN ABSURD SENSE OF SATISFACTION. THAT I *COULD* KNOW. THAT I *DID* KNOW. THAT *KNOWING IS INSIDE ME*.

I had forgotten the exact words. I would be able to stumble on them again. Maybe better ones?

Oh, what a feeling that will be...!



[Reading this chapter, it all seems so incomplete, so poorly communicated. Some things just don't translate, do they? Maybe that's the point? The comic nature of the mind? The inescapable problem of intercourse...?]

## 14. SUZANNE'S RECURRING DREAM OF GROWING GUM

and another dream about her MOTHER'S HOUSE  
and a story about MY FATHER IN THE NURSING HOME

In my jumbled mind-closet of forced associations, the dream I just described (PERFECT WISDOM FORGOTTEN) made me think of another Suzanne dream. (I hope their juxtaposition will lend narrative synergy, better completeness.)

Instead of her mouth filling with words of wisdom and genius, it fills up with chewing gum. (See the connection?)

She describes the dream as more a *recurring event within* other dreams. The sequence inserts itself inside any plot line, hijacking the entire experience, virally, turning the sweetest repose into a **NIGHTMARE**.

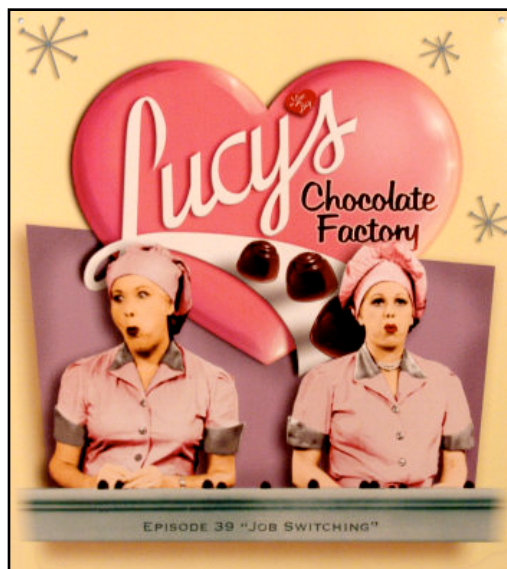
As Suzanne put it:

"I'm in high school, I'm at work, I'm in the checkout line at the grocery store, or in the car on my way somewhere. I can be in the middle of anything. And then I do something I never do in real life: *I pop a piece of gum into my mouth.*

"I don't even like gum.

"As soon as I put the stick of gum in my mouth, I know it's a mistake. I know even a single molecule, once inside my mouth, will be a disaster. But I always know this an instant too late.

"When my mouth first chews down, when my teeth touch any part of the gum, I know what will happen and try desperately to get it out of my mouth. The gum expands, wraps around my tongue, coils through my teeth, fills up the sides of my cheeks. I'm afraid it will suffocate me.



"I pull at it, grabbing handful after handful, tugging out an endless firehouse of toffee-like strands, but I can never pull out enough of it. I can never remove it fast enough.

"I'm nearly overcome with embarrassment. I need to slip away to someplace private so I can keep pulling at the gum without being seen. It's almost like an I LOVE LUCY episode, except no one has ever found me out. I've always been able to escape any notice.

"The dream ends before I am successful, before I solve the problem of how to make the gum stop growing, how to get it out faster, how to keep from eventual asphyxiation. I always wake up while I'm still pulling and pulling."





After describing the dream, Suzanne looked my way as if I might be able to decipher its meaning. “I had a good life, Tobin,” she said. “It was just stupid.” Too many nightmares, I imagined. I had to stop and think what this unexpected comment might mean.

I laughed, not wanting her to feel bad, dismissing the nightmare *as just a dream* rather than a judgment on her life.

I found it interesting that, in her dream, she was more concerned with being seen, with her embarrassment, than with choking. It’s a common reaction of people choking in restaurants, come to think of it. They often run to the restroom instead of asking for help or the Heimlich Maneuver from strangers, more concerned with not spitting up in public than surviving. In Suzanne’s case, she has never liked being the center of attention. She always avoids the spotlight.

I asked if she thought the dream had to do with saying or doing things she wanted to take back. (Like having a dream about putting your foot in your mouth.) Or, if there were things she wished she’d say but didn’t. (Like having a dream about pulling out an infinite string of colored scarves from your mouth as the audience laughs inappropriately.)

Suzanne didn’t think either theory was what was going on. She has few regrets. She says what she wants. She doesn’t care what other people think, normally.

I also suggested that it had to do with her mother. With conversations they’ve had. Or, more precisely, conversations they never had.

Suzanne’s mother was circumspect, often curt. She spoke in closed, concise, truncated phrases. She rarely shared details of past experiences or private thoughts, even though Suzanne took care of her during 13 years of cancer and shared countless meals and other intimate, one-on-one moments. If she spoke, it was rarely more than two sentences at a stretch. She went to her grave with many secrets, many questions (posed by Suzanne) unanswered. Maybe the gum represented conversations that never happened? Or that, in comparison, Suzanne asked too much?

Suzanne didn’t think that was it, either. Even though the period in which the expanding gum invaded her dreams most often coincided with her mother’s more difficult years.

A few nights after this discussion, it happened again. The gum dream infiltrated yet another of Suzanne’s dreams.

It happened while I was in Wisconsin, visiting my father at *Oakridge Gardens Nursing Home*, following his stroke. She told me about it over the phone:

***“I’m outside raking leaves.*** It’s very windy. The leaves won’t stay in piles. While I’m rounding up leaves from all around the yard, a tree falls onto the house.

**A FOREIGN INFORMATION NETWORK ADVISORY**  
**The Heimlich Maneuver / Manöver Heimlich**  
 Show the viewer an object from the throat of a person who is choking.  
 Do not begin the Heimlich Maneuver until the person is choking.



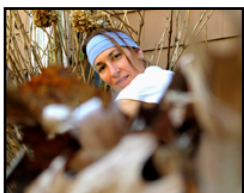
**DIRECTIONS / ERZÄHLUNG:**  
 1) Ask the victim if he/she is choking. If they can speak they are not.  
 2) If the victim is choking, do not let them go until they are not.  
 3) Stand behind the victim and with one hand, make a fist. With the other hand, place the thumb side of the fist in the middle of the victim's chest, just below the breastbone.  
 4) Grasp the fist with both hands and deliver upward and forward thrusts.



5) Grasp the victim's arm and rotate their arm over their shoulder. Grasp the thumb side of the fist with both hands and deliver upward and forward thrusts. Repeat until obstruction is cleared.  
 6) If the victim is pregnant, do not perform the Heimlich Maneuver. Call for medical help.



7) For choking victims in cases of emergency, stand behind the victim and place your hands on their chest. Grasp the thumb side of the fist with both hands and deliver upward and forward thrusts. Repeat until obstruction is cleared.  
 8) For choking victims in cases of emergency, stand behind the victim and place your hands on their chest. Grasp the thumb side of the fist with both hands and deliver upward and forward thrusts. Repeat until obstruction is cleared.



Smashes right through the roof. I know that you're gone, traveling, and that I will have to take care of everything on my own. I hurry inside to call the insurance company. The fire department. The tree guy.

"The doorbell rings. I figure it's Ted\* or Gregory.\*\* Someone coming over to help. I open the door. It's my mother. She's young, my age. Completely healthy.

"It's okay, doll,' she says. 'I'll take care of everything.' She walks into the house like she still lives here. Like she still owns it. Like she never left.

"No, Mom. I can handle it. It's my house now,' I tell her.

"She looks at me and raises her chin, sniffing slightly. 'No it isn't,' she says, walking passed me into the kitchen, like a queen.

"This is my house now,' I reply. 'with Tobin.' I'm really glad she's not dead, glad she looks so good. But if it's still my mother's house, I'd never continue staying here, not after getting married. She's so young, so vital; she's going to live a long time. We'd have to move. And I don't want to. I love this house. My life is perfect now in this house. So I tell her, 'I want to handle it, Mom. I've been doing just fine.'

"I'm sure you have, doll,' Mom says. She starts to cook dinner.

"I sit down at the kitchen table. I look over at the tree that's crashed through the center of the house. So much to clean up, set right. I pick up a box of Chiclets and pop one into my mouth, even though Mom's going to serve dinner any minute.



"As soon as I chew, as soon as my teeth touch the gum and break through that hard outer candy coating, I know I've made a mistake. *The gum starts expanding and I can't pull it out fast enough...*

"Mom looks over at me, from the stove, and doesn't even try to help. It's as if nothing's wrong. The gum is filling up the kitchen.

"And I wake up."

There's a pause on the line as she lets the story sink in.

"Why would I be dreaming about my mother," she asked.

I offered some ideas and then suggested that it wasn't about her mother at all. (Maybe it was my Wisconsin perspective, but I thought I might know this one.) "Sometimes the people we know best, " I said, "people like family members, friends, co-workers, they appear in our dreams but actually represent other things, other people, other issues. Maybe your dreams is about my father, not your mother. Not all of it, but some of it."

I was sitting alone in my father's house. Folding him into the narrative was easy.

"The first part could be about you and your mom. You're alone raking leaves. I'm not there to help. A tree falls on the house, bashing through the roof, interrupting a perfect

---

\*Our next door neighbor

\*\*Suzanne's brother who lives across the street



(Suzanne's mother)

afternoon, kind of like this trip interrupt our life. Your mom shows up, asserting ownership. That could stem from inheriting the house from her, how her ghost still walks the halls. Guilt over the ways we've changed things around since I've been there.

"But the main part of the dream - you feeling displaced, you and the gum - that could be about Dad. How his illness took over our lives. How we took care of him for seven months and how I still go and visit him so often. Even though you were an incredible hostess and a loving daughter-in-law when he was living with us, it was hard on you. A little like having a tree bash through the roof. We didn't really have our own life, for a long time. And I'm still 'on call' if he needs me again."

That made sense to her. She relaxed. It was always a good moment when a worrisome dream settled into a better place. I think she'd been afraid that she'd offended her mother's ghost in some way and her dreams were being haunted in retaliation.

"Thanks," she said, over the phone. "That makes me feel better."

Then I said, "I have a story."

"Oh, good. Tell me your story..."

We love sharing stories. One of the many hungers love instills. Each detail is scrumptious, tactile, penetrating. Fulfilling.

Here's the story I told:

I was aside Dad's bed, resting my chin on the guard rail. My head was maybe 10 inches away from Dad's. He was on his side, turned toward me, head resting against his pillow, motionless. Looking at me, barely blinking. We were contentedly looking at each other. I'd been there for four days so far and had run out of things to say, stories to share, even though I could repeat any one of them and he'd never notice. He was looking at me with huge little boy eyes, as if yet another wonder was about to be discovered. He was at peace, his hands perfectly still. No agitated fidgeting. No tapping of his thick fingernails on the railing or nurse call button. No slapping of his forehead like a caged orangutan, a nervous habit that had plagued him recently. No back pain causing him to grimace. He was just looking into my eyes.

Then, out of the blue, he asked,

"*Why aren't I happy?*"

I didn't know for sure how to answer. Was this a lucid moment that would last? Did I even understand the question correctly?

"I'm not sure what you mean, Dad. You seem happy, considering. You make all the nurses smile when you tell them how pretty they are." I smiled broadly, raising my eyebrows. "I think they like taking care of you, because *you* make *them* happy." Dad was a great flirt at the nursing home.

His expression remained unchanged. He kept looking into my eyes. Perhaps searching.

"*Why aren't I happy?*" he repeated.

He wanted to know. He can't put the pieces together any more. He trusted me to



"What is REAL?" asked the Velveteen Rabbit one day...  
"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse. "When you're real, you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept."

"Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand... once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

tell him the truth.

I held his gaze.

And sighed.

“Maybe it’s because you’re in a nursing home, a place you never wanted to be. And your left side is paralyzed. And you’ll never be able to stand up on your own again. Or be able to leave. Maybe that’s why you aren’t happy.”

*“Is that where I am?”*

“Yes. You’re in *Oakridge Gardens Nursing Home*.”

*“How did I get here?”*

He doesn’t look surprised or distressed. He honestly cannot recall.

“You had a stroke, Dad. Last November, the first Tuesday of the month, Voting Day. You were walking back to *Island Shores* after voting at the nearby elementary school, the longest walk you’d taken in a while. One of the *Island Shores* staff was with you. Afterward, up in your apartment, you collapsed in the middle of the floor. You had a massive stroke. By where they found the telephone, you were trying to call someone, probably sensing that something was wrong. It was about three hours before anyone found you.”

He was listening intently. I continued:

“At the hospital they did an MRI and discovered a stroke-affected area the size of an egg in the back part of the right side of your brain. They also discovered remnants of about five previous tiny strokes, pinpricks in the image, and lots of diminished brain density. That explains your recent dementia over the last year, what caused it. The doctors thought any recovery from your stroke would be very slow, minimal. The best prognosis gave you a 10% chance of moving your left arm or leg again. That was three months ago. 1%.”



He never looked away as I spoke. He seemed to understand everything. Some of it might have sparked a real memory or two. Unlike a year ago, when his dementia made him incapable of accepting that he was sick, now he accepted everything as gospel, temporary imagination filling in the spaces. He wanted a real story.

*“How can I get out of here?”*

“That one might be hard this time,” I said. “You might never leave.”

*“How can I get out of here?”* he repeated.

Up until now, whenever he had a problem, whenever he thought of something he needed, I figured out a way for it to happen. Or at least formulated a plan to work toward that goal.

“There’s only two ways to ever leave here, Dad. Either you figure out how to talk to your left side, your paralyzed arm and leg, so you can take care of yourself again at the assisted living center. Or, you can die. Those are the only two options.”

*“That’s not a very good plan,”* he said.

“I know. Sorry. But that’s all I can think of. You’re too big to lift. I’m not strong enough. I can’t take care of you like I did last time. And the staff here is great.”

He looked at me a long time.



*"That's bullshit,"* he said, using a word he'd never use normally.

It meant, to me, he was not ready to die.

"You could start by eating better, Dad. Being more cooperative at dinnertime. Don't spit food back at the nurses. Try and use your good arm when you eat. Every motion is needed exercise, useful stimulation. Your brain needs to work at new things in order to create new connections, so it can find your left side. I've seen it move in your sleep. And if you can stop slapping yourself, and hitting the table over and over, and shouting out things in the dining hall, like 'I'm going to shit in my pants! I'm going to shit in my pants!' Then they wouldn't take you out of the dining hall and you'd have people to eat with, maybe talk to. You know how you love to talk to people. And, you know, Dad, the whole feeling like you have to go to the bathroom is really a phantom feeling. Anyway, you wear DEPENDS and only have on sweat pants, so it's not like you'll wreck your good clothes." I was saying too many things. I needed to simplify. "The main thing you can work on is eating better."

He gazed intently the whole while. Two hours from now he'd remember nothing. By morning, he'd have forgotten I was even visiting.

*"I think I can do that,"* he said.

I smiled. I wondered if he knew what he was agreeing to do.

*"You have such a wonderful smile,"* he said. *"You can't know how it makes me feel to have you here with me."*

He closed his eyes and fell back asleep, looking for all the world as a very happy man.



And the tree  
was happy



When I heard Suzanne's dream, about gum filling her mouth as her mother cooked at the stove, I thought of all the heartwarming, intimate, involved conversations my father and I have shared throughout his storied life. Such a different relationship than Suzanne and her mother.

I thought about the way he taught me to explain things in scientifically precise detail, to never let a conversation stop half way, to never go to bed angry.

I thought about the beauty of being honest and complete.

I thought about how glad I was to be the one in Suzanne's life that stood by the stove and listened. And how, in real life, she never eats chewing gum.

It all seemed gloriously interconnected, somehow.

---

Even though I discussed this chapter with Suzanne several times, it wasn't until the final proofing (at the kitchen table, me reading aloud) that she thought her gum dream may have more to do with her *brain tumor* than with anything mentioned above:

"Dr. Parisier said '*We're going to know each other for a long time*' when he saw me after surgery. '*If we didn't get every molecule of the tumor, it will grow back. And keep growing back.*' The dreams started shortly after that."

This interpretation makes the gum far more ominous. Thankfully, the tumor never grew back. (The final of 6 surgeries was in 2003.) He got every last molecule, finally. We think.

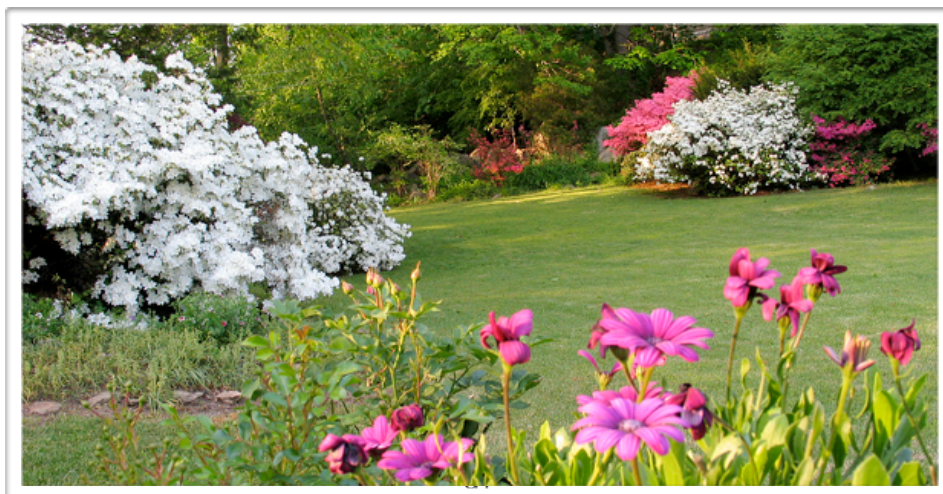
"Or maybe it was my father saying, '*You talk too loud. You're mouth will get you into trouble.*'" Suzanne continued. "I always imagine that my dreams have to do with my family. That everything comes back to them in the end."

She was crying when she said this.

It was a brimming-eye romantic kind of cry.

We went into the yard with a plate of cheese and a fresh bottle of wine. The azaleas were blooming. The daffodils had peaked. The birds were serenading.

"Don't think I'm crying because of the dream," she said. "I'm crying because you actually listen to me. And remember what I tell you. And write it all down so eloquently. I'm honored. No one ever listened to me like that."



## 15. THE DREAM OF THE THREE TEMPTATIONS IN THE DESERT

I used to have a *Savior Complex*. Perhaps I still do, but now I would characterize it more as a *Retired Savior Complex*, which is less agitating. If the Answers to Everything happen to pop into my head, I'm perfectly content to share them with Suzanne over dinner. I no longer feel compelled to *Save* anyone with them.

When I was a teenager, if asked what I wanted to be, I would silently think, "Prophet." My externalized answer would be slightly less ambitious, depending on the day: Composer; Playwright; Physicist; Poet; or, in the post-Watergate era following my senior year in high school, Journalist. No matter which answer I shared, what I really wanted to be was *A Savior*.

Not the "let me lead you to the Promised Land" kind of savior, so much as the "journey with me and we'll experience the Truth" sort. Part *Quixote*, part *Victor Frankenstein*, part *Touch of the Poet*. Unlocking the *Secret of Life*, if achieved, would be merely one oasis enjoyed along the ROAD OF LIVING. (But, then again, so would *Great Sex*.)

Come to think of it, all sorts of experiences qualify as revelatory: gourmet cooking; jazz solos; camping; sunsets. I jotting down this quote in a journal I kept for a few months as a kid:

*"The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say commonplace things, but burn like fabulous roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue center light pop and everybody goes 'AWWW!'"*

*- Jack Kerouac*



I wanted to write down my own *avant-garde* thoughts, I recall, but since I knew I was *not* very wild, since I figured I would never have the constitution to live an unadulterated Bohemian lifestyle myself, I had to quote other people's words. I thought them, nonetheless. And I visualized the feel of them on my skin.

As it turned out, being a father partially answered this need (avant-garde savior). So did directing, teaching, performing. Even marriage. Pieces of a puzzle that might some day frame fulfillment. (Funny, I have always felt both fulfilled and wanting, all at the same time.)

Every parent is a kind of savior. I tried to expand on this by attempting to create a family culture that was more "mini Utopia" than "normal family," a backyard Eden in which my kids (and I) could play and grow toward perfect beings beneath the TREE OF LIFE. (I've always been a big fan of Eve, of embracing the appetites of the spirit that nourish independent thought. If we fail to eat the fruit of *The Knowledge of Good & Evil*, we fail to become human, fail to grow into moral beings capable of extracting meaning from our choices and actions. If we refuse to swallow the apple, then we forever choke on the emptiness of second-hand *Rights and Wrongs*.)



Parenting is a Revolutionary Act. Nothing changes the world like innovative parenting. The power of play, confidence, truth, experimentation, independence and innocence is revolutionary to the core. Think Globally, Act Locally. Nothing more local than your home. I wanted my kids to be nanoscale Socratic Pan/Apollo-like proto-gods,\* capable of becoming themselves with the force of a roman candle (minus the flaming out early part), equally at home watching (or performing) ballet as well as digging (and eating popsicles) in the sandbox.

Of course, this attempt at Utopia was more internal myth than daily routine. But the feeling was ever-present.

At least for me. (I doubt any but my eldest child remembers well enough to agree.)

This, and one more digression, are important back stories to THE DREAM OF THE THREE TEMPTATIONS IN THE DESERT...

I applied this same Utopian Zeal to how I directed my traveling youth theatre troupe, **CenterStage Productions**. We didn't just put on plays; we empowered young people to change the world. Performance was a vehicle for self-dignity. Before each show, we recited this incantation, backstage, in unison:

*Grace equals Respect. Diction equals Meaning. Energy equals Commitment.  
Bring something New to Life Today.*



\* Pan, the Greek god of nature, was a great musician known for his invention of the syrinx, or Greek pan flute.

Believing himself greater than the chief musician of the gods, Apollo (the sun-god), Pan challenged Apollo to a musical duel. First Pan played; he blew on his reed pipes, and out came a tune so wild yet so coaxing that the birds hopped from the trees to get near; the squirrels came running from their holes; and the very trees swayed as if they wanted to dance. The fauns laughed aloud for joy as the melody tickled their furry little ears. Then Apollo rose, and in his hands he held his golden lyre. When he touched the strings of the lyre, such music stole upon the air as never god nor mortal heard before.

The wild creatures of the wood crouched still as stone; the trees kept every leaf from rustling; earth and air were as silent as a dream.

When Apollo stopped playing, it was like bidding farewell to one's father and mother...





They may have been 5 to 18 years of age, but every performer knew what we were saying.

The cast and I frequently discussed the philosophy of creative action, the psychology of earnest communication, the power of honesty and energy. I was a kind of Pied Piper, a bushy-haired age-hermaphrodite (half man, half kid) dressed in Harlequin innocence and playroom whimsy. Since we performed in front of audiences, I never had to add extra *gravitas*, that was a given. I added a subculture mystique, instead.



It was all too exhausting. Not as sustaining as I'd hoped. And artistically constraining. Some of the parents (perhaps trying to keep their own bubble of Eden intact) drove me crazy. I let the kids down one too many alleys.

...I say this because the dream I'm about to share may be about MID-LIFE CRISIS. The dream came after I had decided not to write any more children's musicals. I wanted to test the limits of my artistic mind, and that meant leaving CENTERSTAGE behind.

On top of that, my first marriage was languishing, putting at risk my very central self as Father (of kids who were growing up all too quickly).

We'd just moved into a new house. Our inexpensive (and mostly imaginary) Tree of Life backyard had been replaced by real trees, rolling hills, a picturesque creek lined with cattails, and a very large mortgage.

Perfect time for a mid-life crisis.

The dream took the form of Christ in the Desert - the Three Temptations posed to him by the Devil.

You might leap ahead to guess what sort of temptations a 40-something man might dream while in the throes of a mid-life crisis: Eternal Youth. Sex. Fame. Winning the Lotto. Something Faustian. Instead, my dream was heavily influenced by a Russian novel...

### **"The Brothers Karamazov" by Fyodor Dostoevsky**

Specifically, *Chapter 36*. "The Grand Inquisitor." A reinterpretation of the Three Temptations. Specifically, the question:

*What if Christ came back to earth, a second coming, during the Spanish Inquisition...*



*No signs from heaven come today...  
There is nothing left but faith  
And what the heart doth say.  
(Dostoevsky)*

# 1

*After reading those lines, I find myself standing in a rather barren desert.*

I recognize it immediately as the very same desert in which Jesus was said to have spent 40 days and 40 nights. I am vaguely aware of the irony. I've just celebrated my 40th birthday.

Sensing the tension in the air, I figure I'm going to encounter Satan himself very soon, the wise and dread spirit of isolation, the great deceiver, the fallen angel of self-destruction. I look around, expectantly.

A slight breeze carries the fragrance of laurel and lemon. Not cinnamon and sweat, as I had anticipated.

There, not 12 feet from me, is Jesus, seated on a rock, relaxing in the shade of the cliff rising just behind him. The warming sun is high, mid day, cloudless. He smiles softly, briefly, as if very tired. If I had not sensed an inner lightness of spirit floating him above despair, I would not have approach.

He's content to sit. I think I've stumbled on him during a private moment. He looks as if he's on vacation from being the Savior of the World, if such a hiatus is possible. It must be. Or, perhaps he was merely daydreaming. Or re-evaluating; re-calibrating. This is not the young man Jesus gathering himself before embarking on his famous 3-year public ministry, as Matthew chronicled. It's a moment of repose toward the end, out of some forgotten dreamscape that might have been conjured up during a sleepless night in Gethsemane.

We share a poignant sigh.

If he would've spoken (he never opens his mouth during the entire dream), he might've said, "I've been expecting you, too," as if we've met before and I'm the one late returning to the designated spot. "My favorite devil's advocate." There's a twinkle in one tired eye. "It's lonely without a good devil's advocate, among so much certainty, so much apathy." A memory of a smile lifts one corner of his mouth.



I look for somewhere to sit. I don't want to step into the shade; the sunlight feels too good. I remain standing, even if a little tired, my shadow bending slowly as the day wanes.

A very pretty birdsong breaks the casual silence. I cock my ear, welcoming the sound. My hand opens and lifts on its own accord as a fragile little bird lands in my palm. A zebra finch. I want it to keep singing but it's too out of breath. Far more tired than I. Its quick eyes are sluggish. It's not well. I draw it close and turn, shielding it from the sun.



While watching the bird, barely able to sense its pastel weight in my hand, I hear a voice like Satan asking a sleep deprived, thin and parched Jesus (after fasting 40 days), "IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD, TELL THESE STONES TO TURN INTO BREAD CRUMBS."

The first temptation.

I look at Jesus. He heard nothing, is not imagining the same scene.

I wonder if I should hold the little finch out towards him.

I wonder if he would say, "Man does not live by bird seed alone."

Just a few pebbles into crumbs. Tap the stones and find water.

I don't want to ask, fearing the reply. Or lack.

He reads my thoughts. He is near tears.

*Am I supposed to divine a meaning from this? I wonder. Does he refuse to help this tiny creature because he has no more powers?*

*Everything's been spent? Maybe he can't perform miracles while being watched. (Faith requires not needing to see, right?)*

I turn away, concentrate on the bird.

*What if he can't help because of some wager he's made with the Devil about men and death and overpopulation? (What's the point of being the Son of Man if you can't break your word once or twice... especially for a good cause?)*

It's harder to look at the bird, being so helpless.

A new shadow catches my eye. A man is peering around the corner of the canyon. nodding. He looks like a male Anne Sullivan.

Tall, wiry, intellectual, rounded dark glasses, sallow complexion. I think it might be Albert Camus, one of my favorite authors in my youth. Had he had a smug "I told you so" expression on his intense

face? No, he is too much the hero, refusing himself the indulgence of arrogance. He nods toward what I hold in my hands.

I look down.

The bird has died.

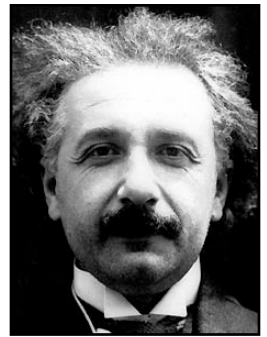
(In Camus' novel *THE PLAGUE*, the hero is a physician. I had become a pre-med student briefly, at the end of



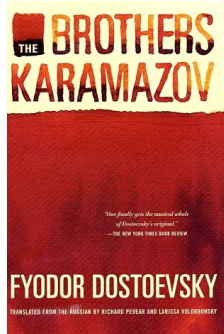
*Helen Keller & Anne Sullivan*



my college freshman year, after reading it. But the only way I could keep *myself* healed was through music, writing... so I switched to physics and learned German in order to better understand Einstein. After graduation I would become a writer/composer, without easy access to things like physics teachers.)



I look back up. Camus is gone.  
I look at Jesus. We're both less sad than expected.  
Death happens. Ghosts disappear. Life is tallied on biodegradable scrolls. Let worms and moths have their day.



In the chapter titled GRAND INQUISITOR, the cardinal (head of the Spanish Inquisition) asked the second-coming Jesus, "Hast thou the right to reveal to us mysteries of that world from which thou hast come?"

(I wonder, *Can mysteries be translated into human speech?*)

"Thou hast no right to add anything to what thou hast said of old," the cardinal concluded, not waiting for an answer.

The Inquisitor was hellbent on keeping The Second Coming from upsetting anything the Great Catholic Church had thus far established as truth, particularly as it pertained to the cardinal's prominence and power.

As I look over at my own silent Jesus, I too hope he has nothing new to add. Casual friendship, something utterly human, that's what I'm looking for. Keep the BOOK OF WISDOM back home in the library (wherever home is).

I want this moment to be meaning enough. Sufficient nourishment, as it were.

(A marvel, how gods and saviors exist in dreams, sure as anything. I can remain a searching spiritual atheist and encounter Jesus Christ without a hint of hypocrisy or intellectual consternation. Negation rarely exists in my dreamspace. A lesson.)

I've become comfortable with the silence. I enjoy the freedom it gives me to interpret Jesus' body language. It affords me a sense of ethical invention. (I could never feel that he and I were brothers together on a spiritual human journey if I were not free to interpret my own truth.)

Now dead, the bird seems lighter than ever. Lighter than air. I look at an empty palm.

The finch has vanished. The first temptation ends? Point proved?

"It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'"

What happens when God is silent? Or when it's someone else's hunger that defines "live"? It's not like loaves and fishes need to be conjured daily? Or that death disallows faith?

I need to sit down. These arbitrary questions have no gravity. The memory of the bird in my hand supersedes.

Suddenly, effortlessly, without having to bend, in the seamless way of dream scene changes, *I'm sitting along side Jesus as we look out over an ancient bleached city...*



## 2



*Our feet rest on the clay tiles of a sloping rooftop.* My guess is we're on the upper mansard section of The Temple. I hear muffled sounds of traffic below.

There's a bell tower nearby, like the one Kim Novak throws a dummy of herself from as Jimmy Stewart cowers into the edges of his phobia, unable to save her. I'm glad this is a dream. The view is spectacular and I'm not bothered one bit by the precarious height of our perch.

There's a woman in the bell tower moving from window to window. Each glimpse reveals with increasing certainty that she is not Kim Novak. Her hair is more severe, her body is thicker, shorter. As she leans out, elbows on the ledge, not at all relaxed, I recognize Ayn Rand, another favorite author from my formative years. The gusting wind barely ruffles her helmet hair.

A steady lighter breeze begins to erode layers of make-up from her face. At least, that's what I think, at first. As I watch, I realize it's actually a mask flaking off in puffs of powder, revealing an older and older woman beneath. The more the mask disintegrates, the softer she appears. Her real face is less pensive, less judgmental. More elegant.

"If you don't have the courage (and simple decency) to save yourself," she says, looking into the courtyard far below, "then don't expect anyone else to save themselves for you."

I'm reminded of when the Spirit of the Wilderness taunted Jesus, "IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD, THROW YOURSELF DOWN..."

The second temptation. (Go ahead, see if your father will save you...)

I'm also reminded of when voices from beneath called out to a crucified Jesus to save himself, to climb down from his cross. I don't recall who spoke these words, if it was the soldiers taunting him, the faithful voicing hope, or the other fellow nailed to his own cross next door. A final temptation. (Can we be tempted by something we're powerless to do?)

Jesus sits next to me, squinting. I think he preferred the shade. No hiding from the heat on this rooftop.

If Satan were to repeat his second temptation (about testing God) by asking Jesus to throw himself over the edge, I suspect this Jesus would laugh, saying that testing one's father is a young man's game. Also, you have to be a teenager to think jumping off a building (or cliff) held any glory whatsoever, whether you get saved or not.

That image brings to mind one of the most profound moments of my youth, of my life. It too was a test, although I didn't know it at the time. A test both my father and I passed.



It was over Thanksgiving break. I was a sophomore in college. After a huge feast (considering it was only me, Mom and Dad at the table), Dad and I had an argument, the most vocal and prolonged we'd ever had. He'd said something particularly insulting to Mom during dessert, something to underscore her 'lesser intelligence' or 'inadequate personality' or 'moral failings,' the usual mode of attack Dad used to score an optimum hurt. I can't recall the details. It was the straw that broke the camel's back, one too many insults added to the dozens of off-hand innuendoes that had gnawed at me that weekend. Throughout a lifetime. So I intervened. I defended my mother's honor and told Dad I thought he should stop saying things like that to her. My 'simple suggestion' escalated into a shouting match, or, more precisely, a very controlled, logic-driven, articulate argument at above normal decibel levels. (If you knew Dad or me, you'd understand.) We stood nose-to-nose, like an umpire and manager, throwing everything we had at each other without ever crossing the line into physical touching. (Something had been thrown off a cliff; no stepping back on, now.) His argument could be summed up: "It's none of your business." Mine: "Yes, it is. She's my mother. You're wrong." We repeated variations for over 30 minutes. When Dad realized I wasn't going to be diverted by straw men, could not be swayed by intimidation, wasn't going to walk away, he went outside to smoke his cigar (the stubs of which littered the back yard like dog doos.) He strolled down the driveway to cool off. I stood in the kitchen, proudly, still pretending not to have been rattled.

As we watched Dad through the window, from over my shoulder Mom whispered in my ear, "Never do that again. You get to go back to college. I have to live with him." Her voice was harsh, unsympathetic, no trace of gratitude.

(So much for being a savior. But that's not where the life lesson kicked in.)

The next day, Dad drove me back to school, a two hour car ride in utter silence. After we parked in front of my apartment, he walked around the car and met me on the sidewalk. He wanted to be standing upright in order to say goodbye. He took my face in his warm, dry hands and kissed me full on the lips. No words. In his eyes: more than apology, more than gratitude. There was respect. Pride. Deep humility.

I became a man at that moment. A gift.

Once you've become a man, you no longer need to test your father.  
Satan's taunt would fall on deaf ears.

I wonder, looking over at my squinting, perspiring Jesus, what sort of father he would have made. What would his children have thought of him as he (and they) moved through the many phases of inevitable growth. How would he have reacted to his daughter's first date?

As I muse about a typical dinner at the Holy Family house, I notice ***my own kids are now on the rooftop with me.*** All four.

Their ages are a bit mixed up. A Fellini film moment.

Sarah is the youngest and, also, the closest, which is handy. She's not quite a year old. I snatch her in mid-crawl before she toddles closer to the roof's edge. I balance her on me knee. Stiffness in my leg sets in, like when it had just come out of a cast after achilles tendon surgery.

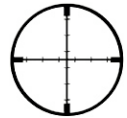
Balancing on the roof is a little awkward, but holding Sarah gives me a certainty of safety. Still, I know I could not stand without a fear of falling.

Anton is making his way to the bell tower, talking a blue streak. Ayn Rand is pretending to listen. (She's not pretending to be interested.) Anton is imagining he's *d'Artagnan* (or one of



the other MUSKETEERS) about to rescue *Constance* as flames dance around him. (Unlike the story, I suspect he will most certainly succeed.) In my dream, he's about seven years old.

Woody is watching him, still as a koala bear, muscles smooth as jello. He looks 4 years old. He's probably wondering, as he often did at that age, which way Anton would prefer to die: Fall from the rooftop, having seconds to fly through the air before crashing face first onto the stones below; or, get shot in the head by a sniper, dying instantly? Comfortably seated on a short chimney, Woody is lost in thought, no danger of moving soon.



It's Willie who worries me. In my dream, he is only about two and a half. The LAW OF GRAVITY has no hold on him. (I know it lurks in his future, and that fills me with protective sadness.) His feathery blonde hair sprouts in all directions, catching the breeze like the fur of a Persian cat. His long thin fingers weave butterfly magic, a Tamarin monkey incantation. His eyes shine like a Tolkein elf. Whatever he's imagining, he believes it with every ounce of his being.

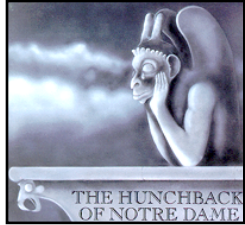
Willie looks over to me with absolute faith. A chill runs down my spine. He rises in the air, lighter than a *dik dik*.<sup>\*</sup> He pings along the tiled roof. He knows I'm with him, that nothing can harm him as long as I am in view. He skips and hops and twirls until one toe catches an out of place tile, hurtling him forward, over the edge.

<sup>\*</sup> A dik dik, pronounced "dik' dik", named for the sound it makes when alarmed, is a small antelope of the Genus Madoqua that lives in the bush of southern and eastern Africa. Dik-diks stand 30–40 cm at the shoulder and weigh 3–6 kg, making them the smallest of the ruminant species. They have an elongated snout and a soft coat that is grey or brownish above and white below. The hair on the crown forms an upright tuft that sometimes partially conceals the short, ringed horns of the male.



I realize, more at that moment than any other, if there has ever been a Savior somewhere in history, *it isn't me.*

He slips beyond view. I hope his shock will paralyze him, keep him from feeling any terror, from registering any sense of betrayal, any knowledge of pain.



In the bell tower, Ayn Rand has turned into my ex-wife, Jean. (They are, after all, both short-waisted.) She has a better view of Willie's descent. Instead of screaming in panic, she turns my way and glares.

Behind her, now inside the bell tower, Anton has switched games. He's pretending to be *Quasimodo*. High pitched yells of "*Sanctuary! Sanctuary!*" echo from within.

*The scene shifts...*

Sometimes in dreams everything changes yet you know it is part of the same dream. Perhaps it is a subconscious attempt to avoid tragedy, like the way Henry DeTamble leaps out of the present when something bad is about to happen in *THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE*.

I remember wanting time to stop... in order to mourn Willie's death, *to mourn the loss of all my children's childhoods...*

But the dream keeps going. The scene shifts, saving me from peering over the edge. Depriving me of peering over the edge.

### 3

*Somewhere out in space.* I know I'm out in space because of the utter silence. The lack of wind. The encompassing darkness. There is a vacuum of sound (more oppressive than the vacuum of air). I continue to sense the echo of Willie's unheard scream, knowing it will never reach my ears.



I find myself alone, riding the barrel of a telecommunications satellite somewhere over Eastern Europe. I can see what might be the Mediterranean Sea just over the horizon. I hear the Devil say, as if emanating from one of the millions of calls filtering through the wires, "I WILL GIVE YOU ALL THIS, IF YOU SAY YOU BELIEVE IN ME."

The third temptation.

(I think he also transformed my body into Marc Antony, as further inducement. I notice great abs, startling pects, and my hairline is no longer receding.)

What I like best is my ability to breath 21,000 feet above the earth. No pollen. My sinuses are as clear as a bell.





I think about what the Devil just said. What's he really asking? What kind of "belief"? Jesus most certainly *believed* in the existence of the Devil. But he also knew the guy was basically a liar. Maybe THE GREAT DECEIVER is asking to be *worshipped*. If we accepted his temptation to rule the world, wouldn't we, as his worshippers, be ruled by him, in turn?

Another lame temptation.

Looking down from my satellite, I wonder who would ever want to rule other people. (Such a gorgeous blue & white planet.) I consider monarchy an insult. (I love the slow motion shifting of the clouds.) Even the thought of lawyers playing golf makes me peevish. (So fragile, so special, so far from anywhere.) Plus, I hate the paparazzi and their cameras. Imagine how endlessly they would hound an *Emperor of Everything*. (Shivers up my spine.)

The satellite swings from its orbit, gliding closer to Earth's surface. City lights come into view, the glowing geometry of roadways. The sun winks behind an expanding globe. I can begin to make out a migration of a large herd of wildebeests as it merges with the shadow of a drifting flock of geese. Approaching terminal velocity, I hear the whispering of children as the radar dish alongside me focuses its sonic magnification. I recognize the voices as former members of my theatre troupe, asking me to save the planet, preserve the future, not fail them...

I have already failed them.

(I wonder, as part of any deal, if Satan has the power to turn back the clock. If he could do that, I might be tempted. To undo a thing or two, that may be the greatest temptation.)

Sailing through the sky, bomb in Dr. Strangelove, I doing everything over again. Would I remember *what I did* things on the second time in the end, after his pact with the Foolishness? Betrayal?

No, I simply don't have Momentum favors only one (If I were on my way up, it'd be my shoulder.) If I'd have to live moment I've already shaped, I

(thinking about how hard it all is) to get up in the morning. Not knowing what is going to happen makes it all less difficult. Knowing what has already happened would be too dulling, impose too much inertia. (Like rewriting a chapter after accidentally erasing it with an errant keystroke... right before you were going to press SAVE. Imagine having to rewrite a whole book! I wouldn't even restart. I'd have to write a new one.) In trying to undo something, I'd probably leave out one vital link in a chain of events and ruin everything. Domino destruction caused by too much careful regret. I like my current life *way* too much to risk erasing it, no matter how cool time traveling sounds. And I got here with *way* too many random acts.

Anyway, I don't like reruns.



straddling the satellite like it's the wonder if it would be worth it, Would I have have the energy? *right* and not mess up those around? What did Faust feel like Devil came back to haunt him? Vindication? Relief? the energy to go back. direction. I'm on my way down. even less appealing to look over each day over, each laborious think I'd be too nauseous

Plus, if I went back in time, I'd stop living in this one. I'd miss it. I'd always want to get back (go forward), be where I'm supposed to be.

As I come to this decision, *I am transported back to where the dream began....*

## Epilogue

*The desert, 12 feet from the shade of a looming cliff.*

Did Jesus have anything to do with rescuing me? Maybe Satan lost interest. Maybe I passed a test. Or failed one.

In life, you never really know.

But here I am, back where I started.

The man seated before me has a twinkle in one eye. Reassuring. Despite everything that's happened. Despite everything that will happen.

"Human beings are not as nice as I had hoped," I hear him say inside my head.

Not what I expect to come from a Savior.

I am, at that moment, supremely thankful that I am not him.

I smile back with both eyes. Like a cured man.

He can't lie. Only one eye smiles back at me. (The honesty of his internal dialogue may be his greatest suffering.)

Another line from THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV comes to mind:

*Man seeks not so much God  
as miracles.*

Jesus looks a tad younger than before. As if he's ready to start something.

I, on the other hand, feel much older. My drama has worn me out. [In truth, the bit about Willie falling off the tile roof was one of the most traumatic moments in all my dreaming.] My shadow, cast flat against the rustling sand, is not as thin as I'd hoped. (Maybe the extra weight is just a trick of perspective.) I am older. But I feel less lonely.

I'm filled with images, metaphysical meat on spirit bones. Yet lighter, more myself. Cleansed (even thought my fingernails need attention and teeth need brushing).

Jesus, however, keeps getting younger and younger. Long dark hair like Fabio. Skin smooth as a child's. Preoccupied, a little prince.

Then he looks up and, in one quick mischievous moment, winks at me. *Winks!* And is gone.

I gasp.

I wake up.

I open my eyes... as if awakening to a dream within a dream.

The residue of everyone's childhood, mine included, twinkles like a Wendy thimble.



(Notations on photo of "Toby" made by Joan Mueller)

## 16. THE DREAM OF THE TRAVELING BRIEFCASE

### PART ONE: IN WHICH THE CITY TURNS INTO A FOREST

I'm trying to stop using *Afrin*, a nasal spray that opens up my sinuses at bedtime. It's very hard to fall asleep when you can't breathe. Without *Afrin*, it's hard to stay asleep, too. I've had a series of dreams in which I'm suffocating, running out of breath, etc. I wake up gasping for air (body alarms informing the dream's end). Often, a penetrating headache sets in, as if I've been oxygen deprived.\* I wonder what would happen if my dreams didn't tap me on the shoulder the way they do.



Perhaps, if I could sleep through the night, this next dream would have been one long epic like many I've recorded so far. Instead, it was a *serial dream*. I sometimes have dreams that come in episodes that build on one another. (Does being a writer causes this?) My serial dreams are often single stories interrupted by waking moments (or silly surreal dream-shorts that insert themselves like advertisements). A new episode of the dream begins if I am able to fall back asleep. Serial dreams can even occur from night to night, like a show in daily syndication. I sometimes have a feeling of incompleteness during the day as I await the next episode.

I can *will* myself back into it, creating my own serial, occasionally. But those forced dreams usually morph into less satisfying spinoffs.

What follows was actually a series of dreams over three nights. My *dreamself* knew for certain that they were episodes of a single, important experience. The main plot of PART ONE, in which New York City becomes a Forest, is me pursuing a mysterious briefcase. It is made up of two dreams that occurred on successive nights. The briefcase's contents (or true symbolism) isn't revealed until the third episode, what I have titled PART TWO (in which I become the Monkey of Death). This first chapter is a combination of what I dreamed the first two nights...

*I've just come out of the subway. After climbing all those moistened cement stairs, I'm a little out of breath. I want to stop and rest but the crowd carries me with it, creates its own current. The sky pours brilliant blue between the buildings.*

Looking up, the usual hole in my chest reappears as I search for what isn't there: The TWIN TOWERS (the former World Trade Center). Only sky. Disorienting, like having a necessary biological compass removed from a migratory brain. I'm not sure which way to walk. I resist the crowd's drift.

I stand nearly invisible as the crowd jostles by. Why have I taken this subway? Where was I headed?

I look down at my empty right hand. Where is my briefcase? Did I leave it on the train? Now the hole in my chest includes a lost briefcase....

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\* I had carbon monoxide poisoning once, due to a ventilation problem in the lab I was working in during the summer between my sophomore and junior years in college. The worst headache of my life!



I look back down the steps as best I can, people bouncing me left then right, anonymous faces blocking my vision. All eyes are on the pavement, except mine. How pointless it would be to retrace my steps... an amnesiac salmon trying to find its way home.

Then I see a teenage girl, perhaps 15, coming up into the sunlight. At first I imagine she's like many other teenagers, trying so earnestly to project the very embodiment of a *contemporary hipster zeitgeist*. A self-consuming "look at me" energy. I want to avert my eyes so as not to feed into it. But this girl glows, differentiating herself from the crowd in a magnetic way. She's not looking down. She will see me as she passes, I'm certain.

She's trying to appear adult yet hasn't learned the language of secret apathy well enough. I feel an instinctual affinity, as if we share a *Conspiracy of the Innocent*...

She is carrying my briefcase.



...My old brown hard plastic Samsonite briefcase, the one I'd used my first year in college when I was a music composition major at UW-Milwaukee. [The last time I'd seen that briefcase was May 1975. I'd just completed a 277 measure double string quartet and was proofing it before final submission. I'd placed the handwritten score plus every scrap of paper, every note I'd ever written on the project into the briefcase. It sat opened on the piano bench in a practice room. I wanted to go through all my notes, all my ideas to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

The practice rooms were on the third floor. Jean (my girlfriend at the time) was headed back to the dorms (she, too, was a music major) and I took a break in order to walk her down to the lobby. When I got back up upstairs, the practice room was empty. My saxophone and briefcase had been stolen. My double string quartet, all 277 measures, every draft, every written suggestion, every shred of evidence that it had ever existed, was gone.

I dug through a dozen campus garbage cans, looking everywhere. Someone had surely dumped the contents in order to sell or use the briefcase. Nothing. I never found the score or the saxophone. (I used the insurance money to buy a better sax, but I never re-wrote the double quartet. I've never even used any of its musical themes. Ever.)]

Seeing that briefcase again... I forget to exhale.

The girl is not a past ghost, even though she glows like one. Nor is she carrying a briefcase full of lost works. She's firmly embedded in the present. Or, perhaps, the future.

She walks passed me, not exactly knowing where she is going, but she doesn't want to stand still. She doesn't notice me. Forcing myself to breathe, I follow close behind.

We make our way to Washington Square. When almost to the center of the park, where the big circular fountain lies dry and unused, she turns abruptly, pulling the briefcase to her chest, like a schoolgirl holding a teddy bear. Her eyes are two galaxies, spinning out infinity. She looks about to run.



*"Everything needs to have been here, in this space where nothing makes sense."*

I'm sure that's what she says [even though it doesn't seem right as I relay it to you].

She's no longer close to smiling, as she'd been when I first saw her. No longer amused at something deep inside. Deadly serious, as only the young can be. Deadly serious about something besides death, about something she thinks must still be true.

She speaks like she's 10 years old, pronouncing everything with big round letters, considering what each syllable means.

*"Fear is like a clear sky; not a thunder cloud, not darkness."*

She looks up, passed the trees. The City transforms into a forest, alive with wild Hawthorne-story growth. Then she looks right at me. I think of Pearl.\*

*"Everyone needs to be gutted, if they want to know love. If they want to be able to love. Gutted by the clear sky of fear. Otherwise, there's not enough room."*

She points to the hole in my chest. The hole I had thought was merely metaphorical. Wherever her eyes look, there I have an invisible space.

*"When you are no longer seen, clear as sky, then compassion becomes you."*

Riddles. (That's what we call words that sound like wisdom yet can't quite be understood, isn't it? Words we might grasp if we took enough time to think about them?) I'm somehow humiliated because I cannot translate her words into anything that makes sense.

*"Nothing unbreakable has meaning."*

She hands me an apple. I take a bite, suddenly hungry. The crisp snap in the autumn air shatters the briefcase into a *million pieces*.

...I awake imprisoned in riddles.  
They haunt me all day.

The next night, the dream continues...



*I'm standing in the center of Washington Square.* The archway is still discernible through thick trees and hanging vines. Skyscrapers loom beyond. The circular forest is an oasis. Shards of broken briefcase, once scattered like the Big Bang, have turned into a hundred

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\* from the Scarlet Letter

identical businessman all on their way to work. (A variation of a scene from THE THOMAS CROWNE AFFAIR.) They're all carrying identical briefcases.

I have no idea which is mine.

I search back into the eyes of the girl. They seem more like those of an ancient man. Carl Sagan in the grip of cancer. Carl Jung dreaming.

I've heard that this park is built on an ancient mass public grave, a cemetery of the anonymous. Which ever Carl it is, he would know if the rumor were true.

He is not holding my briefcase.

But he offers to help me find it. He seems apologetic, wistful that the random causations of the day hadn't ended with it in his hand.

There's a brief moment in which I recall a poem I wrote while sitting under a large elm (long since diseased and cut down) on the lawn outside my old high school (that is no longer a high school). I was 15. It's the first poem anyone (Lyn Miller) considered a "work of art." It talked about how I was a little girl gathering flowers, an old man throwing sticks into patterns, a young man searching for his way, empty handed. (I've lost the poem and cannot quote it for you.) Somehow, the girl, Carl, and myself all seem connected, like in the poem.

I begin stopping businessmen, asking each if they know what time it is. The TWIN TOWERS are satisfyingly silhouetted against the sky. Are things better again?

I awake, only slightly less imprisoned than before...





## 17. THE DREAM OF THE TRAVELING BRIEFCASE

### PART TWO: IN WHICH I BECOME THE MONKEY OF DEATH

*...It is a dreamy monochrome landscape.* The earth, the dry grass, the large boulders ringing the clearing are all concrete grey. I'm in a business suit, rich dark grey, nicely tailored, silky and comfortable. Underneath, I wear a white buttoned down collar shirt, opened, no tie burdening my ease. Even though it looks like winter (due to the lack of color), I am warm.

I'm trying to avoid a conversation with a guru-type fellow named Carl, perhaps Carl Jung. (He keeps referring to "billions and billions of dreams," which makes me think of Carl Sagan, further confusing me. It immediately connects me to the earlier sequence of experiences; I'm certain this is a continuation.)

I don't look away, since I like his eyes. (They are the only non-grey things visible.) Yet, I don't bother listening to what he's saying. His eyebrows are witty and wild, moss covered Everglade caterpillars. I watch without hearing, preoccupied with the silly thoughts that pop into my head (because of those eyebrows).

There is a tree in the center of the ring of boulders, surrounded by knee high grass. Carl and I are suddenly standing directly beneath the tree. I lean to touch the soft grey wolf fur grass. I look up, notice fascinating fruit growing from the tree's branches: crystal balls, blown glass ornaments, each with a tiny briefcase dangling inside. (Perhaps they are briefcase seedlings waiting to drop and grow into adult size briefcases.) Each tiny seedling is a different shade of grey.

I want to reach up and examine the ornaments more closely, but they're too high. I'm unable to climb the tree.

The guru Carl looks intently at my chest. He's detected an opening. He reaches inside... (I feel nothing but a slight cool invasive breeze) ...and he *flicks a switch*. I hear the *click*.

There is an implication, made plain by his expression, that I should now be dead, that he's turned something vital off. He smiles a gargoyle smile, revealing a very large mouth cavity. He shrinks as he ascends, although the cavity does not shrink enough to keep pace. He is pulled up into the tree like a yo-yo. He's now just one more ornament, inert and grey. Bouncing lightly. I can no longer make out the color of his eyes.

Something about Carl's transformation makes me think I, too, can rise like a yo-yo.

I begin jumping. My arms get stronger, longer. I'm no longer wearing a suit; rather, my body is covered in soft grey fur.

I am the *Monkey of Death*.

It's exhilarating.

There are many more trees than I noticed at first. I leap into sturdy branches. Catapult from tree to tree. Since I'm already dead, I am fearless. A Disney chimp. A monkey god.

Hopping from tree to tree, the view is beautiful. Shining silver crystals reflect everywhere, more magical than sun-drenched frozen snow after an ice storm.





Whenever I touch one of the dangling crystalline fruits, the thing inside begins to stir. Fetus briefcases unfurling refracted prism light. (How can this visual beauty not make music?) If I can touch enough of them quickly, the effect is stunning.

In the silver grass below me I see footprints. A trail of parted grass. It leads to a river. A destination.

I hop down and inspect the prints. They look like they were made by a seedling human, a little girl, barefoot. I follow to the riverbank. Rushing water and wind chimes become audible.

There is a bench on the riverbank. A man, dressed in grey (open shirt, no tie) sits on the bench. He's holding a hard brown plastic briefcase on his lap.

The briefcase does not want to be brown.

The briefcase does not want to be held.

(These things are obvious to my transformed monkey brain.)

I climb the tree behind the bench and extend my arm downward.

The briefcase leaps into my hand.

The handle fits exactly right.

The case is unlatched, slightly ajar. (The man must've been searching through the briefcase for something and then stopped, not yet ready to shut the lid tight again.)

I reach into the opening, just as Carl had reached into me.

The briefcase becomes instantly happy.

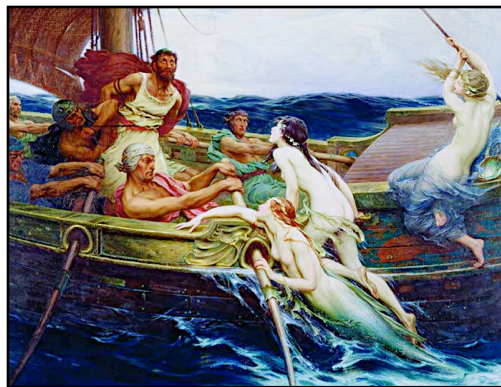
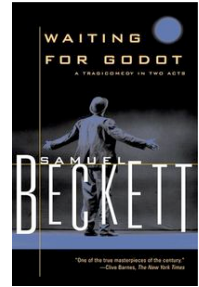
(Had I become instantly happy when Carl reached into me?)

It smiles, like a cartoon briefcase would be able to do, every fiber of its being expressing sincere emotion. It nods the corners of itself and flaps its handle.

I'm thrilled.

It opens itself further and hundreds of silver white sheets of paper cascade out, followed by dozens of silver black pens. They swirl in the air until they find the river just beyond view.

I hear the water rise, the wind chimes celebrate. Almost singing.



The briefcase is emptied. Finally. I hear the *click* as it closes.

It thanks me before it sails over the tree tops, away.

The man below me folds his hands. Then raises one finger to his lips, tapping, as if he's just thought of something marvelous. His other hand no longer searches for the lost briefcase,

for the paper that has flown out of sight, for the pens now free of human utilitarianism. It moves expressively, as if it, too, is dreaming. Independently.

I crouch in the limbs from an unobstructed view.

Crystalline fruit begins to drop from countless trees.

Silver winged little things spring forth, a rush of faeries, of things I can't explain. High pitched music, sweeter than Sirens, fills the air. A world beyond dying.

I sit on the silver shining limb and relax. I am more at peace than I can ever recall. Satiated in a way only something that is absolutely itself can be.



When I read this chapter to Suzanne, her first reaction was, "How absurd."



A dreaming mind employs metaphor without effort, integrates surreal events without judgment. A mind not dreaming doesn't react the same way.

I move through my waking world thinking everything needs to line up according to equations, based on what has been handed down, what has happened before, what needs to be accomplished using known (yesterday's) tools. This is not my dreaming expectation.

When I consider my dreams, I need to use a dream-like mind.

On the surface, these three dreams were the least coherent of any I've chronicled in my BOOK OF DREAMS. Yet, internally, they were the clearest, the ones that meant the most, the experience that left the strongest impact.

"What do they mean?" Suzanne asked. "Do you even know?"

Hmm. It's not that I know precisely what each symbol meant, although I have my theories. (Not one detail seemed irrelevant.) But the trio of dreams, like a parable, has meaning because of the intensity of emotions it left me with... *even after waking*.

When I was sitting on the tree limb as a monkey, I felt *absolute contentment*. Surrounded by a gorgeous silver world, alive with imagination, pregnant with surprise and hope, I had no need to act. No need to capture. No need to translate. Observation, itself, was generative. The internal and external consubstantiated.

Perhaps what Carl switched off in my chest was some aspect of ambition, the compulsion I've always had as an artist to make manifest something new for others to witness. To synthesize, perfect, tweak, obsess, finish, and present. Instead, I could sit on a branch like a monkey, the embodiment of my instinctual intuitive self, and be **untroubled**. (The briefcase, you recall, was not happy until it was *emptied*, free of all pages and pens and projects.)

"Besides the briefcase," Suzanne continued to inquire, "what did this night's dream have to do with the earlier one, when you saw the girl carrying the briefcase out of the subway station?"

"Actually, there were more connections than just the briefcase," I suggested. "There had been a space in my chest, a space the girl found simply by looking. There had been a space in the skyline, where the Twin Towers had been. And a dust grey world..."



Goodness. I wondered, Could this have been a 9/11 dream? It seemed so much larger. (Is it improper to say such a thing? Larger than 9/11? Is that self-centered? Unpatriotic? Stupidly forgetful?)

Witnessing the Towers collapse on 9/11 had been an experience of such size, no words would ever represent what I felt. The numbness, the disbelief, the waking from belief; the tragic loss, the sense of brotherhood; the sense of guilt, the failure, the hopeless inadequacy of being a mere spectator; the inability to justify any aspect of the event, the inability to ever do anything important enough to make up for what had happened. For a long time after 9/11, I didn't sleep well, couldn't write or compose, couldn't even edit what had already been put on paper (scripts that no longer seemed relevant).

I volunteered at a command post on the West Side Highway, helping to supply firemen and EMS workers with everything they needed. I became the coordinator of what the guys at Ground Zero dubbed "The Home Depot," an ad hoc army of neighbors and volunteers from around the country. (To this day I have no idea how some of those people got there, what with all the road blocks.) Within 3 days we filled the entire parking garage at *Chelsea Piers Sports Center*. Rows and rows of gas masks, antibiotics, food, clothing, equipment, contraband. Every 20 minutes a Harbor Police boat was loaded with donated items; items that stocked the area behind the Tower's remaining atrium (the Hudson River side). Since we weren't official, we could procure anything that was needed, including cigarettes, beer and stolen (borrowed?) tables.

I'd walked the Pile, breathed the dust and DNA, saw the infinite energy of every worker. The concept of "personal agenda" no longer existed. Only the quest to find survivors, assist the people working the Pile. Clean up the space. Make way for rebirth. Build utopia.

I'd slept in the Towers' shadow. They had filled by my Manhattan apartment's bedroom window. I no longer felt comfortable when my eyes closed.

About three months afterward, I decided to write music about the event, as a cathartic exercise. I hadn't written something not connected to a specific money making project in 20 years. But 9/11 was all I could think about; it was either write about that or go on writing nothing, regardless of whether or not it fit into a show or was commissioned by anyone.

The four songs that resulted ended up starting a new period in my life, a juncture after which I began writing purely for my own fulfillment, without any extra purpose or incentive. To bring something new into being, something that was merely growing inside and needed to get out. Like when I was a teenager learning how to do it for the first time.

My dreams involving the TRAVELING BRIEFCASE were not 9/11 dreams. But they were colored by those events. My Real Life nostalgia for the Twin Towers had already morphed into something past loss. It had become a metaphor of *what is important*. We (those who volunteered) did what we did because we were unable to do otherwise. And we did it with huge holes in our chests. Hollowed out people walking in a graveyard. Dead monkeys just trying to help each other make it to the next moment, trying to be efficient, clearing out mangled beliefs with each purifying motion. Energy beyond concepts of meaningfulness or inspiration.

This wasn't the first, nor the last, nor the largest, nor the most difficult. It just was.

And we just were.

A monkey on a silver limb. Surrounded by the absurd. Content.



I can't explain it any other way.

A voice like Pearl had said,

*"Everyone needs to be gutted, if they want to know love....  
Otherwise, there's not enough room."*

The hole in my chest, the hole created by so many personal 9/11's, so many dates remember and forgotten, both private and public... the hole, it is being filled. That's what the monkey knew. Filled with something unimaginable... something that hadn't been there before.



**Willowgrove and Shepherd** by Vincent Van Gough, 1884