

THE DAY WE GOT GUNS
Memoir of an Osho disciple

by Swami Prem Rajesh

Preface

Swami Prem Rajesh, dearly loved by family and friends, died 14 May, 2010. The unpublished manuscript you are about to read was found among his belongings. Based on his real-life experience while living at Rajneeshpuram in Oregon in the 1980's, *The Day We Got Guns* is a tale of sex, intrigue, and love for his spiritual master told in the captivating manner that is uniquely his. He would love for you to read it.

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Whew. With that out of the way, enjoy!

"People are afraid, very much afraid of those who know themselves. They have a certain power, a certain aura and a certain magnetism, a charisma that can take out alive, young people from the traditional imprisonment."

- "The Zen Manifesto: Freedom from Oneself" - Osho

Chapter One: EDISON

I am high on a hill, shooting reconnaissance photos of the dam and the electrical power stations.

The wind is roaring madness in my head.

Now I am no longer the hunted.

I have gone on the attack.

I am a transparent soldier, purveyor of deadly information.

I have become a real spy, in the real world.

And I am scared shitless.

What is this silent warrior's thrill?

No time to think.

Get going.

Drive down, into the town.

My assignment: map the town's water system. Surface details first.

Above-ground access. Cut-off valves. Hydrants.

Easily done, sketched by this artist.

Mapmaker.

Now, to the hard part of the assignment. I am to pose as an urban planning graduate student and acquire blueprints of the town's underground water supply system.

Under my blue denim jacket, cold sweat soaks my white button-down collar shirt.

No red clothes today.

The architecture of the Town Hall is quaint, rustic, its facade serene in the autumn afternoon sun. The lettering on the door is simple, like children's blocks. The welcome mat seems incongruous.

I step through the doorway but my eyes cannot meet the clerk's. My gaze downcast, I shuffle across the bright airy room, look up and stammer, "I'm... uh..."

The clerk is clean cut, with chiseled features and short black hair. A red and blue striped tie adorns his white shirt.

"Yes?" He responds cheerily, "Can I help you?"

He stands, watching me, curious. My hands grip the counter.

"I... uh... need... uh... directions out of town."

My voice, tremulous. My aplomb, down the drain.

I just cannot do it. I cannot brazenly ask this stranger for the blueprints to his town's water system.

"Directions out of town? That's easy," the courteous clerk chirps. "This main road here," he points out the window, "go straight if you're headed south. North, the other way, and jog right at the end of town."

"Thank you," I barely whisper, and I am back out on the street, adrenaline rushing.

But don't move quickly. Stay calm.
Walk differently, without the same rhythm.
Dance to it, a different little drummer girl.
Don't think about the pretty woman crossing the street. Don't think about
her red lips, her rolling hips.
Don't think about failure.
Where is my grey-green Oldsmobile, anonymous without the commune
identification numbers on the trunk?
The assignment.
Finish what I can.
Drive up and down through the town.
A flush of excitement passing the Armory. I didn't expect to find U.S.
military hardware here. Better make note of this.
A camouflaged tank, strangely huge in this demure little community.
Jeeps. Lined up neatly.
Nasty bug-eyed crustaceans.
Olive drab soldiers mill around. Maybe they're bored with the mere
grooming of their killing machines.
Drive-by!
Shoot one-handed!
Click click!
Bang Bang!
Get them on film. Get the soldiers. Get the guns.
Drive on.
Click click. The massive grey fuel tanks on the town's outskirts. Danger
Flammable. Red triangles. Installation marked.
Now get the hell out of Dodge.
Drive.
Breathe.
Coast.
Suddenly- how magnificent- this long straight stretch of the Columbia
Gorge. Giant-faced rock formations cradle the river's light-speckled
perfection. I drink in the endless surrounding forests, ten thousand shades of
green, lush.
I have to stop.
Pulling off the highway, I forsake my whirring metal cage on wheels, and
plunge into the woods. Inhale deeply. Drink in the cool fall air. Savor the
scent of the pines. Feel my footfalls on the soft nettled earth. Under the
domed sky of a clearing, I pause.
The sound of God's little furry creatures, scurrying in the underbrush.
A wise old crooked log calls me to rest.
Sit.

Touch the petals of this tiny pink wildflower.

So tender.

I have to think.

Oh God. No, don't think.

Just sit.

Feel the air. The sound of water in the distance.

Map the water system? Scope out this funny little town with the name that doesn't sound like it looks. "The Dalles." It's got a silent letter "e."

Silent, like me.

The Dalles. It rhymes with pals. And gals.

Phonetically, it could be Dallas. Where Jackie crawled, lady-like in her pink suit, onto that black limo trunk, trying to grab a piece of sweet JFK's suddenly missing brain.

But this is not Texas.

This is Oregon.

This is not the Sixties.

This is 1984.

No no no. I am imagining things.

But come on. Why map these people's water system, their electrical grid, their fuel tanks? This is outright terrorism. Or that's where it's going.

No no no. Nothing has happened.

Be in this moment.

It is just, simply, war.

I am a peace-seeking disciple, with an Indian master named Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who speaks the truth. And people hate us for it. We've come to Oregon to create a commune of love, and the people of this state and the U.S. government have declared an unofficial war on us. We are besieged by their litigation and immigration rules. Someone has bombed our hotel in Portland.

It's the same old story: they're jealous of our life of celebration.

And all I've done today is gather a little data.

Maybe this information is just to discover their weaknesses.

Not even that.

Maybe it's to help us learn to think like terrorists. We have a right to defend ourselves.

Not even that.

Maybe it's something absolutely unrelated, something totally off the wall, like maps for satirical cartoons in the Rajneesh Times, our commune's newspaper.

Look at this exquisite forest. Everything is perfect in God's universe. And I've got to get going.

I strip in the woods, a skinny, blond-haired, blue-eyed, 35-year old spy out in the cold. I hate the cold. Back into my red clothes. I love red. It's always been my favorite color, even before Walt Disney's cartoons, or the Star

Spangled Banner's stripes, or my master Bhagwan's dress code. Fire engine red, cranberry, Chinese red, cerise, rose quartz- I love them all.

We wear mostly reds, although our palette includes all the warm colors of the sunrise: reds, oranges, and yellows. And cool purples.

In 1978, when I first became a disciple, we wore strictly orange.

Orange orange orange.

A happy color.

If you were overzealous dying your clothes, or threw in a touch of scarlet, you'd get a fiery saturated tangerine color. Tangerines are one of my favorite fruits, but try breezing through airport security or an imposing U.S. Customs gauntlet in bright tangerine garb.

No, we're not the bell-ringing, flower-bearing group that pontificates in airports recruiting followers. We're not compulsive membership-number fanatics. Nor do we coerce people into remaining in the fold. On the contrary, it's more likely we'll be asked to leave the commune rather than forced to stay.

Driving back, I'm passing Antelope, a tiny rural village in the central Oregon boondocks. My red-clad fellow disciples walk about the main street. The wooden buildings seem too small, like on a western movie set.

Some of Antelope's forty original residents are unhappy that we've taken control of their town council, and some consider us a downright pestilence, but we've revitalized their little settlement, improved the roads, beautified the landscape, renovated the school.

Woops. Antelope is gone, just a blink in the road.

Did you see that woman in the tight red jeans?

Ohmigod. I didn't recognize her.

That was my ex-girlfriend from North Carolina.

The best sex I ever had- it was with that girl from North Carolina.

Ah, just me and the trees, and the winding road.

And the hopping toads. And this heavy load.

For sure, it sounds like a pensive country song brewing.

Ahead, on the roadside, in the late afternoon light, I see the white marble sign that says "Rajneeshpuram," the name of the city we're building.

The sign is simple and elegant, its chiseled sans-serif lettering lined with gold. It displays our emblem, two birds flying together, and it bears an inscription in Hindi, and the translation: "I go to the feet of the awakened one. I go to the feet of the commune of the awakened one. I go to the feet of the ultimate truth of the awakened one."

Like the sign, our city is simple and elegant, and I will do whatever it takes to keep the government from destroying us.

I am proud of our city.

But the name is hard to pronounce.

Harder to explain.

Few people call it Rajneeshpuram anyway, except the press, of which we

get plenty. It's also known as Rancho Rajneesh, but we just call it "the ranch."

Overhanging trees create an archway as I slow down, by a trailer and a small wooden kiosk that comprise our first checkpoint, known as "top of the ranch." The Rajneesh Security guards recognize me.

I nod back as they wave.

The woods thin out to scrub brush as the road snakes downward through the hills to the desert where lies our land: the former "Big Muddy Ranch," which we purchased for six million dollars. One hundred square miles of mud, this land, when it rains.

And out of this vast tract of mud grows the little lotus that is our beloved commune.

Sometimes, driving down to the ranch, these long grades seem like small mountains. Sometimes they are large hills. I get chills on this road, as if I can feel the ghosts of ancient dwellers still wandering the sparsely forested slopes.

There are a lot of valleys on the ranch. The center of our quixotic city lies at the intersection of three valleys.

It is odd.

The kids on the ranch- they all talk the way that Frank Zappa's "valley girls" talk.

It must be the valleys.

The kids say to me, "Gag me with a spoon."

I say to them, "Gag me with a trout."

Passing the second ranch checkpoint, a small white observation tower, I wave.

They know me.

No problem.

Past the lake on my right, its platform for sunning and diving, deserted. The kids get to play at the lake, but the workers go there rarely. We just work, which constitutes our form of worship.

There's the entrance to the AIDS colony, where the HIV-positive lovers of Bhagwan live in isolation. I've only seen their settlement once. It seems cruel that they are ostracized, but no one knows precisely how the virus transfers, and Bhagwan warns that the AIDS epidemic will kill two-thirds of the earth's population.

Although we used to experiment freely with sex, unfettered by precautions, AIDS has changed the whole face of things. Condoms are now required. Oral and anal sex, and even kissing, are prohibited. Celibacy and monogamy are encouraged. We're also supposed to use plastic surgical gloves for manual genital contact, but I'm not sure how many people follow that rule.

The final checkpoint, just before the reception center.

Stop.

I know the Security guard.

She leans out of her booth.

Long blond hair and freckles.

With a chuckling smile, she calls out, "Hey Whiteboy, where's your mala?"

"Whiteboy" is my nickname at the ranch.

My "mala" is a necklace with 108 beads and a locket bearing a photo of Bhagwan. I'm supposed to be wearing it, and I can't mention why I left it behind today. I make a goofy face, pretending to suddenly become aware of my missing accessory. The security guard laughs and motions me along.

On my left I pass the fire station, called "Siddhartha," after the illustrious Indian prince who became the Buddha. Our buildings all bear the names of enlightened or renowned historical personages. Siddhartha also houses our police force, which calls itself the "Peace Force." Up in the hills lie residence trailer houses, each one a comfortable home to about a dozen people.

On my right sits the motor pool, busy with trucks, bulldozers, backhoes, and the yellow school buses that make up our public transport system.

The nearby airstrip hosts the Rajneesh Air fleet: a few DC-3's, a single-engine Islander, a Mitsubishi prop jet, and a helicopter which brandishes heavy armament when on patrol to protect Bhagwan.

Farther on, I hear the sharp staccato crack of gunfire from the shooting range behind the hill on my left. I hate guns- I know nothing about them except what I read in the macho magazines- but I like the sound of the words Kalashnikov AK-47.

And the guns are necessary now.

Defending the master: a crucial imperative, our top priority.

There on my right stands Socrates, a two-story square building which houses our telephone exchange, the computer department, and a team of purchasing agents. I pass the six public phones, the first ones we tapped when the ranch armed itself in response to the bombing of our hotel in Portland.

Dead ahead, a modest white house which functions as our City Hall, and just behind it, a small compound of tan buildings called Jesus Grove: home to Bhagwan's secretary, Sheela, who's also head of the commune.

Turning right, past the little rustic post office and into the center of town, I notice a Security guard eyeing the trunk of my car where the commune identification numbers should be. I can hear him wondering why my vehicle is unmarked.

He's a good person though.

And he recognizes me.

Back with my friends.

In the dusty street strolls one of my favorite people in the world- the Dodger. He's a skinny young teenager, nicknamed for the famous Dickens villain, the Artful Dodger. But my blossoming friend the Dodger is anything but

villainous. He is a divine harmony behind a quiet, at times overly serious face. And he's hyper-intelligent.

I would die to protect the Dodger.

I stop at the ranch mall on my right, a long two-story wooden building of clean western modern design, with hand-shaped stair railings. The mall's ground floor contains a restaurant, a pizza parlor, a bank, a few small shops. I bound upstairs to the second floor, which consists of one large, open office space.

Long lines of windows look out on yellow-brown mountainsides and valleys sculpted into the desert.

One valley stretches off to the right, where there's a book warehouse, our medical center, more residence trailer homes, and a road that leads to a second lake.

In another valley, to the left in the distance, sit our greenhouses, Bhagwan's grounds, and a cluster of residential townhouses. Beyond that, out of sight, lie our two-and-a-half-acre meditation hall, the ranch cafeteria, and the many acres which we've developed into productive organic farmland.

When we first came, we planted hundreds of acres with sunflowers, to replenish the overgrazed land with nutrients; we've cultivated the soil, plowing and tilling, and now, we feast daily on the abundant harvest of our dedicated labor.

We've transformed this desert into a fertile, flowering oasis.

Our simple reddish-brown buildings blend with the serene landscape. We've paid attention to every detail- even the roads are paved with handsome red gravel. In every direction our harmony with nature is evident.

And here in the upstairs mall, it's a flurry of activity amid a sea of desks. Scores of women. The typing pool, bookkeepers, accountants, everyone dressed in sunrise colors and joyfully performing their individual tasks to make it happen.

I don't have a girlfriend- I'm too busy with my work- but there's a certain woman here, Deborah, with whom I've been, indecisively, flirting.

She's sitting at her desk.

Deborah is a tiny sprite, with cascades of wild strawberry blond curls and gleaming sapphire eyes. She possesses a sharp mind and a quick wit, and a subdued circumspect manner that belies her spunky attitude and penchant for candid repartee. Beneath her nondescript clothes I can see the trim body of a dancer; not a Madison Avenue barbie, she's gorgeous in her own quiet way.

Our conversations range far and wide- she's interested in everything- and she likes my southern accent.

Sometimes she seems bent on getting involved, sometimes just friendly.

Sometimes I wish I didn't feel such an attraction to her.

I slide onto the edge of her desk.

"Hey Rajesh," she beams.

"Rajesh" is the Sanskrit name conferred on me by Bhagwan when I became a

disciple, or "sannyasin," as we're called. There exist many definitions, but in essence, a sannyasin is one who has tried but failed to attain peace, and is ready to surrender to one who has completed the journey. The word sannyasin translates into English as disciple, which originally meant one who is ready to learn.

We're all here with the master to learn, and to celebrate.

"Rajesh" means king. My full name is "Swami Prem Rajesh." The "Swami" denotes a male sannyasin, while a female is addressed as "Ma." The prefix "Prem" means love, which makes me the "King of Love."

I can go with that.

Sometimes Bhagwan just supplies a prefix to our western names, the current target of my ambiguous affections being Ma Anand Deborah. Each name's prefix indicates a broad category into which the sannyasin's nature falls. "Anand" means bliss, which makes Deborah basically a meditator, while I am, being a "Prem," basically a lover.

It's all bullshit, but there's something to it. Like life.

And the titles "Swami" and* "Ma" are useful for quick introductions.

But with Deborah, I am past needing an introduction.

I resist a sudden urge to start biting her neck, asking coolly, "And how are you filling up the space between birth and death today?"

She balks for only a microsecond, saying, "With these numbers." She says it child-like, stamping her finger into the papers on her desk.

Looking at each other, little threads of light form in the air between our eyes, and I feel a gooey melting in my tummy.

"I have to get to work," I say.

Overacting a pout, she grumbles, "All you do is work."

"I know." Again, I feel discomfort at the closeness developing with this girl.

Woman.

Are they girls, or women?

She has the tiniest perfect hands.

I glance around.

"Come to my room tonight," she says abruptly, trying to pin down my eyes again.

I stop.

Rejoin my gaze to hers. She's right- we've been doing this dance now for too long, postponing the inevitable.

"Yeah... okay," I hiss, breaking into a dorky smile, "I'll see you later tonight."

The Whiteboy moves on.

To the debriefing.

I report to my boss, Julian, a handsome dark-haired Englishman of slight build and quiet demeanor. His Vandyke moustache and goatee are perfectly trimmed, as always. He and I are the best of friends. Both of us possess the same wacky sense of humor, and the same passion for intrigue. I love him like a brother, and I share my every thought with him. His gentle, steady nature complements my roller-coaster intensity.

It's atypical that Julian holds a position as a "coordinator," as we call our bosses, because the ranch ruling class consists of mostly women. The other noteworthy exception is our mayor, a 30-ish American male.

Bhagwan asserts that women make more compassionate chiefs, as their childbearing capacities give them a more receptive nature, in contradistinction to men who must kill each other and fly to the moon to prove themselves.

The master also indicates that women's ability to experience multiple orgasms contributes to a deep-seated sense of inferiority in males, with the average man finishing his one-shot while the average woman is still getting warmed up; thus men overcompensate with their power-base exploitation of women.

Perhaps Bhagwan's institution of this male-female role reversal on the ranch will foster a trend.

My boss Julian sits calmly, waiting for me to speak.

We occupy a tiny secret room which lies at the end of a dimly lit hall, atop the ranch book warehouse. Our door stays locked. This exclusive little spy's sanctuary, cloaked in mystery in the minds of our fellow disciples, does not officially exist. We are an unseen adjunct to the audio/video section of the ranch, which is known as "Edison temple."

Our societal infrastructure subdivides us into functional departments called temples. Like the buildings themselves, each temple bears the name of an enlightened or distinguished person. Edison of course refers to the eccentric genius whose work with electricity became the founding cornerstone of the modern mega-corporation General Electric.

Downstairs, the book distribution temple is called Emerson, after the American writer who wisely said that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

The large, rectangular two-story steel block, where my tete-a-tete with Julian is unfolding, lies between two mountains and is named Zarathustra, after Nietzsche's acclaimed novel, in which Zarathustra came down the mountain with the law.

In our case, Zarathustra came down the mountain with a small communal paradise.

We enjoy our work immensely, but now, for me, behind the scenes, the fun has taken on a different spin.

I find it difficult to speak as I confront Julian.

I am a good person.

Why am I doing these bizarre things?

My face feels tight as I hand over my maps of the water system in the Dalles.

All my doubt rushes back in, flooding me crimson, burning my ears.

I unload the last roll of 35mm film from my camera, and present Julian with the film canisters.

My voice flies out high-pitched, tension-cracked.

"So..." I stumble, "...I failed. I chickened out on the blueprint business. I just couldn't deal with it. What's all this stuff for? Why are we mapping these people's water system?"

For a moment Julian stares directly at me.

His look is somehow sincere, penetrating, and aloof, all at once.

Breathing a small sigh, he speaks evenly, with the tiniest hint of exasperation in his voice.

"Don't worry about it, Whiteboy. It's like the problems I'm having with the kids. It's a question of being in the moment."

Although his statements make no real sense to me, I nod in agreement, concentrating on his energy rather than his words. I allow his sincerity, that he cares for me, to supersede my attempt to grasp his logic. He proceeds to explain how some of the boys are shirking certain responsibilities, and how they react to their own indiscretions.

Julian is an unofficial but natural mentor to the ranch youngsters.

He is great with the kids- at times stern, at times boisterous, and always emotionally available to talk about their problems. The young ones love and respect him. They call him "Jules," as in jewels.

My attention wanders to the cluttered shelves around us.

The racks of black-anodized recording equipment. Always black- with red and green and yellow lights.

Parametric equalizers, compressor/limiters.

Bins of electronic components.

Soldering irons. Toolkits.

Power supplies.

An oscilloscope.

Spools of heavy cable, and fine wire.

Miniature microphones, parabolic microphones.

Women's handbags into which I have sewn hidden microphones.

Video monitors, cameras, batteries.

Utility belts and coveralls to be used as disguises.

Arrays of odd-shaped gadgets.

I am only partially aware of Jules as he prattles on about the distinction between duty and freedom. His lecture ends without warning, and

before I can speak, he tosses the fruits of my information harvest into his briefcase, and is out the door to see his boss Sheela.

Sheela is an eastern Indian woman, the head of the commune, and Bhagwan's devoted secretary. Bhagwan has been in public silence for several years now, and Sheela is his mouthpiece. She's notoriously fiery and outspoken, and uses four-letter words regularly in interviews with the media. At times, she glows like an innocent child, radiant with reverence for Bhagwan. At other times, she flames like a hell-hound, ferocious and defiant in the face of the government's oppression.

Sheela can be a tyrant too.

Julian pops his head back in the door, adds quietly, "Just keep yourself mellow, Whiteboy. Easy does it. Ciao."

I sit, glazed, distracted.

Once again, I am left alone with my questions.

The clandestine things I've done up till now were purely defensive. I've been gathering information to protect Bhagwan, and our commune. But this mapping of a town's water supply, and their electrical grid, and their fuel tanks?

If this is not an overt attack, it's certainly indicative of... something.

I think they call this terrorism.

Today it has all changed.

Oh Christ, here I go again.

I tell myself to surrender, like a good disciple should. Forget this quandary.

But I don't feel good.

I came here seeking peace, and I find myself at war.

Where is this going to end? Where is love in all this?

Where is Deborah? Why do I avoid her?

Maybe later.

Rousing myself, it dawns on me that I have yet to make a night deposit into my digestive tract, and I need nourishment.

But I can't actually feel my stomach.

Rather than seeking food, I fix a cup of tea, very strong- my usual stiffly brewed dual-bag concoction- suffused with lots of milk and honey. I choose my monkish solitude, and an artificial energy burst, over the threat of human interaction at the ranch cafeteria.

Caffeine, and a Camel cigarette.

I smoke the unfiltered Camel straights, because I cherish the actual taste of tobacco, if it can be discerned among the appalling preponderance of toxic chemical impurities kindly included by the manufacturers.

The ranch rules stipulate that I have to smoke outside. Perched on the black iron railing of the fire escape's top landing, I watch stars appear in

the early night sky. That superb Prussian blue that saturates you with calm, dotted with pinpoint twinkles.

Suddenly it is very quiet.

For a moment, my mind, still.

A wave of bliss, like a cool breeze, passes through.

These spontaneous moments of meditation- they've been happening since I started using Bhagwan's techniques. Before I found him, I spent ten years reading about the bliss of the no-mind state, but I never felt it. Now it is a real experience, albeit unpredictable.

But there is work to be done.

Back inside to the spy den.

Work.

Twelve hours a day.

Seven days a week.

Three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

Sometimes twenty-four hours a day.

My list of tasks fills three single-spaced pages. At the ranch, work is our meditation.

Work is our worship.

I can work.

In 1979, during the year I spent at the ashram in Poona, India, I was a dedicated worker in the tape department, always ready to make the extra effort. Maybe that's why I was invited to live at the ranch. There's only a few thousand residents here now, and when I first came here two years ago, there were a few hundred. Not many people, but we've built an entire city- small, but a city nevertheless.

The mechanics of the commune's decision-making most often remain a mystery, so I'll probably never know why I was chosen out of the hundreds of thousands of sannyasins worldwide. Maybe it's because I'm an American. But whatever the reason, it's an honor and a thrill to be a part of this "experiment to provoke God," as Bhagwan calls it.

Back in India, we focused mainly on meditation, moving along the pathways of the inner pilgrimage, experimenting with various techniques, zen koans, therapy groups, a myriad of consciousness-raising practices.

We sat for hours every day in meditation at the feet of the master, sinking into an inexplicable nothingness, silent yet alive with awareness. Now it is time to bring that meditative quality into our daily work.

To do anything, in the presence of the master, is a blessing.

We may look like slaves to the uninitiated, but we're just deeply in love with a presence who shows us ourselves.

A loud thumping, rapid, overhead.

Louder.

And louder.

The building trembles as the ranch chopper thunders past.

I rush from my room, back out onto the fire escape. Searchlights from the chopper pierce the darkness, sweeping along the mountaintop, illuminating the dust clouds kicked up in the wash of the spinning blades.

The thrill of flying.

I identify with helicopters. Something... about them.

Somehow, I am that helicopter, invented by Leonardo da Vinci centuries ago. I am the rotors and the cockpit, the screws and the struts. I am the horrendous noise.

Forget enlightenment. I have achieved chopperhood.

Every time I hear a helicopter, I think of Vietnam.

The sound of war.

My mind churns, an alchemical soup of war and peace.

I ponder the insanity of glorifying war in the movies.

The very existence of the films says yes to war, regardless of the director's slant.

Look at war movies enough, and you become desensitized to the violence.

You enjoy watching people murdered.

You're fooled by the Hollywood heroics.

Sick.

Back inside, I fix another strong tea, another double-dose of caffeine.

Returning to the spy room, I slip a videocassette into the VCR.

I've watched this dozens of times.

It's the air strike from the movie "Apocalypse Now," where the jets scream in and lay down the napalm. Horrific wall of flame. Napalm is not nice. It's basically gasoline and soap, so it makes a flying fire soup, and the burning gel sticks to your body. Very disagreeable to the average sentient being. I like the fighter squadron leader's fervent southern drawl, crackling over the radio as he leads his flyboys in for the attack.

As a child, war fascinated me.

I received city-wide recognition for my crayon drawings of aerial warfare, naval engagements, and medieval knights in battle.

But the glory and romance of combat faded rapidly when Vietnam loomed on my horizon. Despite my thoroughly documented history of asthma, sinus problems, and drug addiction, the thugs at the induction center classified me 1A, ready to go. I saw myself, in dreams, about to die in a jungle village ravaged by fire.

I decided that free will exists.

Just because thousands of cattle were lining up to kill strangers- that didn't mean I had to follow suit.

I committed myself to a psychiatric hospital, professing to be a heroin addict. Upon my release, with the assistance of the ACLU- bless their freedom loving hearts- I waged my own paperwork war against the draft board. Demanding

they acknowledge the facts and obey the law, I wangled a 4F classification, permanently disqualified from military service for health reasons. They realized I was more trouble than I was worth.

I'd have gone to Canada. Or underground. Or to prison.

But never to Vietnam.

Damn these thoughts of war. I need music.

Balance this left-brain logic with some right-brain creativity.

Pull out my hidden guitar.

No one here on the ranch knows that back in the Sixties the Whiteboy played in a blues band. Or that he and his stoned-out band members, beset by the angst and ennui mirrored in the books of William Burroughs, passed up a recording contract with a great blues label. Or that he's still a closet rock star wannabe with a repertoire of originals.

Well, ex-wannabe.

Too late now. No lofty pursuit of fame for this rash disciple.

Working on a tune that I started writing in Poona a few years ago. Sort of a cowboy yodel, in a major key, with some rudimentary right hand fingerpicking.

One verse and the chorus:

You may not know that there's nowhere to go-
You may not know that you got nothin' to show-
You may not know that you gotta let go-
But la da la, la da la, la da la, la da la, la da la
He knows.

I said,

Surrender- surrender-

Surrender- surrender.

But surrender to terrorism?

Does Bhagwan know what I am doing?

Who IS this utterly peaceful little brown man, around whom chaos seems to proliferate? He says that each master has a characteristic teaching method, and that conflict is his device. He says he will unsettle us until we can no longer be unsettled.

But to these extremes?

Granted, temperance and moderation are not my forte, but I wish he'd speak about what's going on here. He must be teaching us to make our own decisions, to give up seeking explanations.

I am not with Bhagwan because his brilliant oratory, when he does speak, resolves my questions. I am with him because he's opened my heart, and because he accepts me as I am. My involvement with him is not rational.

Understanding Bhagwan is actually impossible, as whatever he says is

filtered through a conditioned mind, inevitably distorted by limited perceptions and preconceived notions. One hears what one wants to hear. One can never second guess a master. When I relate what he says, it's my interpretation only.

Anyway, he stresses that what's important is not his words, but the silence in the gaps between them.

I set about soldering electronic parts onto small, translucent green epoxy printed circuit boards. These are custom-made modules for our enhanced telephone-tap system.

I am the Minister of Information.

I have a lot of names.

Caffeine peaking in my veins.

I delight in the aesthetics of the tiny cityscapes I am assembling.

Resistors, capacitors, diodes, optical isolators. The colorful little blocks create their own wonderful micro-metropolis, paved with networks of copper-plated streets. Each part is only the size it needs to be, to fulfill its unseen atomic function. In my eyes, all the pieces fit together as a sculptural work of art.

The acrid odor of lead solder fumes conjures up memories of my technical apprenticeship in California's Silicon Valley, troubleshooting chromatographic data reduction microcomputers during the electronics economic heyday of the Seventies. Years of ambition-driven success in the material world. Years of cocaine-driven escapism to avoid the emptiness of it all. Years of hefty pay raises squandered quickly, and lonely afternoons, baking on rooftops.

As midnight nears, I wrap it up.

The chopper roars over again.

Night patrol.

Reconnaissance mission.

The military buzzwords echo in my head.

Meticulously, I neaten my workspace into an immaculate order.

I abhor messy environments.

Driving to Deborah's townhouse, I slide an audio cassette into my car stereo. It's one of a series of Bhagwan's talks entitled "The Dhammapada," in which he expounds upon the teachings of Gautama the Buddha. Bhagwan's subject matter varies far and wide, and in the final minutes of this tape, he presents a delineation of the multifarious applications of the word "fuck."

It's hilarious, as he illustrates the various grammatical usages: noun, transitive and intransitive verb, expletive, and such. He concludes the lecture, commonly known as "the fuck tape," noting enthusiastically that he chants the mantra "fuck you" five times every morning to keep his throat clear. No matter how many times I listen to it, I laugh hysterically.

Bhagwan does not fit the somber and serious profile that most people expect of an enlightened master. He's outrageous and outspoken and funny and

wild, full of delightful surprises.

Refreshed, I tap softly at Deborah's door.

A dark crack opens between the door and its frame, and I peek in to see her all bare white and delicious, clutching a pillow to her breast.

"Come in, come in," she murmurs.

The door opening, her eyes closing.

I melt in her arms.

She crawls back into bed, and as I undress, she queries sleepily, "It's late, isn't it? What have you been doing?"

She is intrinsically inquisitive.

"Oh, just soldering wires."

A half-truth, which is a lie. The lie of omission, still a lie.

But no one, but no one... gets to know what I do.

I see the shadowy shape of her roommate asleep in the other bed. Almost everyone endures having a roommate; at the master's feet, you live with the inconvenient.

Deborah's face gleams, angelic in the striped shadows from a streetlight shining through the blinds.

"Mmm," she coos, as she wraps her warm nakedness tight against me. Sleep flees from her rapidly. The power of her longing- I feel it aroused- in the movement of her limbs, in her heartbeat. We've surrendered, finally, to this ripening between us.

"You feel so good," she whispers.

Fluttering in my chest.

I suddenly want her to be sure of me, to love me completely, with all questions thrown aside. So I go right down on her.

But slowly.

Dragging my tongue across her breasts- they're small, firm. The way I like them.

Psychologists say that insecure men like small breasts; secure men like big ones.

Whatever breasts represent, they feel good.

They feel real.

They like being touched.

Stop thinking.

I linger, to worship the fine silken surface of each nipple, to suck, and nibble and scrape the berry-like protuberances with my teeth till they harden in my mouth.

Tracing down the delicious curve of her stomach, I push my tongue into her navel, imagining the miraculous fecund ovaries that lie just below my face. Will I ever hear the pitter-patter of little feet?

Stop thinking.

I skip to the insides of her thighs and lightly, deliberately, map the

geography of her skin. She shivers- mmm, she loves this light touch.

Teasing her, I migrate back up into her pubic hair.

The downy thatch tickles my nostrils as I trap little tufts of curl between my lips, tugging at them gently. I move down between her legs, nosing around, postponing, hovering, breathing onto her, into her, feeling her want.

She starts to make little sounds.

I look up.

In the dim light, beyond an expanse of white belly, the graceful mounds of her breasts lie prone in silhouette, smoothed into perfect low-slung hills. A woman is never sexier than when she's stretched out on her back.

Love rushes in to fill me.

They say that men need sex to move into love; women need love to move into sex.

Stop thinking.

Pay attention to the magic opening before me.

She lies still, moaning softly, waiting.

A whimper escapes from her when I suddenly pretend to pull away, only to then descend quietly onto her labia with my tongue, spreading the delicate tissue folds, already moist with anticipation.

She sighs, long and low, as if a great burden is lifting from her.

Lick.

And pause.

Invade.

Retreat.

Give her time to want.

Make her want.

And this precious little clitoral bulb, nerve plexus, seed of ecstasy, like the head of a tiny goddess hiding beneath her cloak's hood- now rolling under the press of my tongue. Engorge her with her own blood.

Pull at her.

Pull her up.

Patiently.

Pull her closer.

Feel what she feels.

Taste the salt of her juices.

The sounds move deeper in her throat.

Ooohs.

Ahhhs.

Her legs begin to slide on the sheets, lazily reciprocating like pistons, flower stems waving. The room noise fades out when her thighs close around my ears. The air grows thick and humid with her heady scent.

Lick.

And pause.

Invade.

Retreat.

Each time I draw back, I can feel her desire grow, spreading across her body, till she sizzles all over with pleasure, and the exquisite torture of its absence.

She starts to rock.

Rocking, up and down.

Hips pivoting.

Rocking harder, and harder.

Slapping the mattress.

It's the most beautiful thing, a woman losing control.

She's grabbing my hand, speaking my name. I wish she wasn't saying my name. I want her gone, depersonalized, beyond any thought, just energy.

Stay with her.

She's starting to shake.

The room is an ocean of musky woman smell.

I rub my whole face into her wetness.

My jaw muscles ache.

I press through the pain.

Lapping at her.

Coaxing her towards the edge.

I plunge my tongue inside her.

She groans as I make circles.

I open her wide.

Stretch the walls of her pussy tight.

She shouts out loud when my tongue slides back her clitoris.

I feel her urgency, her desperation, and the same desire swelling in my own loins.

She's panting hard and I slip my hands under her butt, raising her up, supporting her, drinking her, attacking, attacking while she twists and rises, thrusting her pelvis into my face as I follow her with my tongue and the sounds are rumbling deep in her belly and she's breathing like a bellows and bucking like a pony and writhing and flexing, dancing up off her back, arched and wailing as she dissolves into pure light and spews a stream of satiny fluid down my chin.

She's one of those women who ejaculates.

What can her roommate be thinking?

Soft and mushy, the quiet after.

The delicious melting.

Well, I'm not exactly melting.

I'm riding the gentle wave with her; however, the troll sprouting from my groin is still ready to do battle. But sleep is taking her, and I am beyond exhaustion, and at the ranch, sleep is a priority.

I forgo the enforced ritual of completion for which I still yearn, and sink into the mattress, feeling both guilt and gratitude. Guilt, that I've broken the AIDS-related rule which prohibits oral sex, and gratitude that existence has brought me this lovely wildcat, whom I suspect is smarter and more alive than I.

In a dream, I am alone at night, barely afloat in turbulent high seas. I cling, exhausted, to a piece of wooden debris. I am aware of horrible things in the black abyss below me. My terror is immense.

As my strength is about to fail, pale light begins to edge across the horizon, revealing a vista of endless ocean, which is now ominously calm and flat. Nearby, the water's silvery surface is suddenly broken by a gigantic long dark mass exploding from the depths. Fear of the huge unidentified thing obliterates me. I jerk into the morning with a muffled shout.

Deborah rolls over, draping an arm and a leg around me, murmuring unintelligible but comforting words. The warm, womanly aroma of her sleep washes away my dream fear.

I sink into yummy contentment.

Easy.

Let this moment last.

I watch the rising sun's soft orange light create abstract patterns on the bedspread.

I forget where I am.

But.

There's a woman beside me.

I've never been inside her.

Now it is time.

Enough postponement.

I begin to nuzzle her, raise up and start licking her shoulders and neck.

At once, the monster between my legs starts to stiffen, and in its hardening dance, flops back and forth against her pelvis, tickling her pubic hair.

She clutches me to her.

She wants me.

I love her.

Stop thinking.

I'm whispering silly sounds in her ear.

She's laughing and biting my neck.

Her tongue darts in my ear.

Our mouths meet.

An electrically animal itch crawls up my belly.

The hungry thing down there swells to full size.

She starts to moan at the feel of its hardness.

I pull away, to aerate every inch of her skin while I roam lightly with

my fingernails all over her.

The light touch drives her mad.

I love knowing what she wants.

Stop thinking.

I kiss her hard.

Pinch her left nipple, hard.

Keep pinching it.

"Ungh..." she groans.

With one finger of my other hand, I descend, tickling the sweet hypersensitive patch of skin between her asshole and her pussy.

So delicate.

She gasps, guttural, sucking in air, trying to stay kissing me.

My finger finds the entrance to the little slit where she wants me most.

She's soaking wet.

She wants me with every ounce of her being.

She wants me inside her, to turn her inside out.

I love her madly.

She must be my soulmate.

Stop thinking.

I reach for a condom.

Fumble with the wrapper.

The alarm clock rips us into another reality.

It's time for work.

At the ranch, work is our meditation.

Work is our worship.

"Society wants slaves, not people who are absolutely dedicated to freedom. Society wants slaves because all the vested interests want obedience."

- "One Seed Makes the Whole Earth Green" - Osho

Chapter Two: MAGDALENA

Someone is watching me.

I can feel it.

It's the librarian.

The shrew behind the wire bifocals, the middle-aged rat face.

She is primly clad in proper plaid.

She is pale Nazi milktoast.

She is plotting against me.

I am incognito, inside the Portland public library, researching chemical and biological warfare. Inside my head, the words "nerve gas" trigger the words "laughing gas," but I am not laughing.

It is a funny and colorful world, and I do love red, but again today it is blue clothes for the man, and for this witch librarian. She hasn't had sex in a hundred years.

She's watching me.

I'm just doing my research.

I'm learning the enemy's tricks, for my boss Julian, who will see to it that we defend Bhagwan from every possible threat. Someone has to do this.

I can feel the librarian's eyes, drilling into my back.

She can sense that I am up to something, like a dog sniffing out a rabbit.

But Bhagwan, this unfathomable, incalculable man who reveals so much of ourselves to us, is irreplaceable, a rare rose.

His title, "Bhagwan," means simply, "The Blessed One."

He's not an omnipotent god to us. He's only a friend.

And this living source of truth, the only person with the compassion to uproot our defended inconsistencies, must be protected in every way. At all costs.

There is no question of laws.

This is serious business.

The secret tension. I love it.

The unspoken, which exceeds the spoken, in power, and efficiency. The unspoken intention, which moves the war's energy plot to a new vector with a higher magnitude, and a different direction than you thought. The unspoken reversal, that surprises you at the end. Call me Sun-Tzu, whose art of war cannot be studied enough.

The mouse-brown hairdo of the librarian flashes into my peripheral vision.

Do what? She is fumbling, taskless, in my sphere.

Could it be?

Does she want me to see her as a woman, rather than a stone fountain of information? Is she yet alive under that obdurate shell of harsh perfectionism?

Is she more than a statue, frozen by years of tense sexual repression? She must be a Virgo rising. With Saturn on the ascendant.

My God. It's true.

She wants me to notice the smallish breasts that once were classically ideal.

It seems like just yesterday.

She wants me to pay attention to her ass that is no more.

No, no! She doesn't want these things.

She is the enemy. I am the good guy.

She wears the black hat. I wear the white hat.

I smile at her. Flirtish twinkle.

It's hard to smile when you're nervous and intimidated, but, as the dauntless Minister of Information, I've gotten good at it.

It's my brilliance versus their mediocrity.

But the information, so far, is scanty, in her panties- in her library.

My crusade for chemical and biological warfare data is unearthing only generalized, dated, doomsday books, published by generalized, dated, doomsday professors. They offer only self-righteous diatribes and incomprehensible statistics. More bookstore genre stuff, just superficial top-layer slices of data. It's as if I'm finding only Fodor's Travel Guides, when I'm really looking for a database on how to co-opt an entire country.

Where is the good stuff?

I try the reference section.

Hmm. Juicy titles. Now we are cooking.

I use my real name on the little yellow requisition slips to get the books. The anal worrywart librarian is nosy enough to ask for identification, and I have no cover, so I can't afford any messes. No potty training slip-ups here. The stakes are too high to risk getting caught in a lie.

Smiling, just the facts, Ma'am.

Just the books.

She disappears into a row of ceiling-high shelves, clutching my yellow slips.

I love books.

I even love waiting, in anticipation, for books.

Too bad books are turning obsolete. The perverted miracle of social engineering. Keep those kids leashed to the violent cartoons and video games, where they can learn the joy of killing. Breed those illiterate generations of cannon fodder.

The librarian reappears with a stack of reference editions.

Yum.

Here they are.

The real how-tos: nerve gas chemical constituents; petri dishes percolating with salmonella; agent orange hungrily devouring the green of life;

smallpox and cholera; genetic engineering. Oh, this is fun, to a mind that wants to see everything that's in print. Let me get these volumes to a quiet corner where I can suck my poison lollipops undisturbed.

What is this article about cholera on the blankets?

God- that was bonafide biological warfare that the U.S. government waged against the Native American Indians. Genocide is not nice. Insult to injury- the Native Americans remain confined in concentration camps euphemistically called reservations. I'll bet George Washington reddens with shame. Or maybe he's beyond that now.

I'm hearing Beethoven-ish contrapuntal rhythms, running up and down my mind. Oh lordy mama, I got to get these toxins copied- I got to do the replication dance.

Whap whap whapping, I'm tap tap tapping and coaxing the ancient xerox copier into prolonged action. Oh damnit, I have to bend and scrunch these books down flat on the glass. The rip, as the bindings crack. I hate this, as I do love books.

But there is work to be done.

And the library is putting me to sleep.

The sound of the copier becomes a lullaby, its ozone output creating a fuzz cloud behind my sinuses. The pale blue glare of the overhead fluorescent lights takes me.

The edges of the room darken.

The weight of all this information and knowledge, and the weight of not knowing which is which- the immense weight of it all.

I'm going down. Down into the disinformation bog.

And I am awake, out of the library, and on the bus.

A nice clean bus, with quiet and friendly people, in a nice clean town, known for its roses. And there is a fine Japanese garden here in Portland.

I go to my mail drop, one of those private P.O. box arrangements. Better to go on the bus. Vehicle license plates can be traced.

I've invented a nonexistent business, really just a cover through which to buy information and devices. I call it "Gay Electronics."

Now, there is a mouthful.

But my legal last name is "Gaye."

So, I am legally gay. But only on paper.

Today, this gay, as in happy, fellow is picking up literature.

A package from Paladin Press, and one from a publisher named Loompanics. Imagine the most demented, degenerate, depraved psychopathic esoterica possible, and these guys have it in print. Any twelve-year old can order this stuff through the ads in the back pages of "Soldier of Fortune" magazine.

Who funds these publishers?

Fun new titles:

"The Anarchist's Cookbook."

"The Poor Man's James Bond."

"How to Get Anything on Anybody."

"How to Investigate Friends and Enemies."

"The Terrorists."

"The Plumber's Kitchen."

There are also more boring, narrow-scope anthologies of the technical aspects of electronic surveillance. I'm familiar with most of their contents, but they round out my treasure trove of bizarre literature. I always amass libraries around myself. I am the horny witch librarian, circumscribed by pages that drip blood and semen.

I'm so nasty.

But I love babies and waterfalls.

And I hate stepping on ants.

Oh.

Surprise.

More bugging devices in the mail.

These generally do not turn out to be the stellar performers that the ads imply. The bugs are most often all noise and fade-outs and insufficient voltage gain. Even the ones from Germany, from the super-slick full-color catalog, are crap. But we do the best we can with what we've got. In most instances, the frugal and expeditious application of basic Radio Shack parts gets the job done. We call it, "The Shack."

One more package.

Another miniature Minox camera. I wonder who will use it, and what they'll capture on celluloid with this little techno marvel.

But I am daydreaming.

After another pleasant bus ride, toting my shopping bags, I'm about to open the door of my parked, unmarked vehicle, and the bookstore across the street calls me. I can't resist- this city boasts fabulous bookstores.

One quick bargain shelf browse.

A paperback on the predictions of Nostradamus.

I've read several of these.

They're hopeless, every interpretation so different.

This one postulates World War III developing in phases: South America, the Mideast, the Far East, the Baltics. Sounds like all the unofficial wars the U.S. has waged through the CIA for the last thirty years.

World War III ostensibly culminates in global nuclear war.

I prefer not to project such an idea, and return Nostradamus to the shelf.

Speaking of world wars: a volume on the Nazis.

Yikes, Henry Ford was a fan of Hitler's- they both hated Jews. William Hearst sold his news wire service to Hitler during the war. The census roles, key to the plan for eliminating every Jew, were tabulated on IBM machines.

Industrial U.S. companies conducted wartime trade with I.G. Farben, Germany's equivalent to Dow Chemical.

Think of it- fighting to contain the Wermacht juggernaut with one hand, and making money off them with the other.

Doing business with the enemy.

Tsk tsk.

It gets worse.

Post-war, the OSS, parent of the CIA, smuggled thousands of Nazi war criminals to America. Operation Paperclip brought not only scientists, but entire laboratories and medical research archives from the concentration camps- all of it formed the basis for the U.S. space program. God, the experiments in the camps: live autopsies, gangrene and ground glass sewn into wounds, low-pressure chambers to explode the victims' brains.

Yuk.

If that's what it takes to get to the moon, let's stay on earth.

I put the book down.

I've got to go.

One more quick scan.

A study of AIDS. This biochemist contends the AIDS virus is man-made, a lab-generated, bovine gene-splice. The author fumes, aghast, struggling to accept his discovery. He says no monkey business- the monkey theory of the origin of the AIDS virus does not hold up. His mathematical formulae are Greek to me, but he says that by tweaking a few RNA doo-dahs, some recombinant somethings, then Bingo!

Instant dead gays.

Instant decimation of the African continent's population.

The author fears that the white man wants Africa's mineral deposits. I have a feeling his book will fail financially and go rapidly out of print.

A nasty thought, that AIDS constitutes a man-made plague. But similar ideas have crossed my mind. Something about that monkey story never did ring true.

What can I believe anymore? My intuition? Can I hear it?

Enough of books.

I've got to go.

I step into the street.

A pugnacious drunk in rags springs from the next doorway.

Listing like a torpedoed ship, he accosts me, shoving his scraggly-bearded leering face right up in mine, soliciting a quarter.

He reeks, a trash bin, locker room bouquet.

"You should ask," I say, "for a dollar," reaching for my wallet and extracting a one dollar bill. He grabs it. Instead of thanking me, he snarls, slurring his words thickly, "Ah'm gonna kick yo' fawkin' ass."

I burst out laughing and run for my car.

Cruising.

Another resplendent drive along the Columbia Gorge, cherishing nature's glory.

I wonder if that librarian's laughing at me, her lost warrior who's not afraid to die for the truth. No, she wouldn't find me remotely funny. I'm too honest.

Stop thinking.

Let my mind roam free, over trees, and mountains.

Over rolling hills, and round breasts. Flat bellies, and flat land.

Ranch land.

What IS this thing called the ranch?

A sociological phenomenon?

A communal paradise?

An experiment in freedom gone awry?

There are so many facets to this jewel of experience:

At the outset, life on the ranch was exquisite.

Day upon magical day, our world sparkled with uplifting honesty, rich emotional freedom, and shared warmth. Out of the barren desert a new way of living emerged. Our work and our play melted into one seamless fabric of spacetime joy; life as it should be, with everyone's individuality respected, and all of us dancing in concert toward a common goal.

It was Heaven.

The people here, those that have lived it, they know.

I worked gladly, impervious to the long hours, drawing on the energy of our unified purpose; I functioned as a simple audio technician, dutifully duplicating the tapes of Bhagwan's discourses that we sell worldwide. The excellent thing- I could be myself totally at work. If I had a problem, or an emotional outburst, it was met with love and understanding. I had hundreds of best friends.

It sure changed fast, at least for me.

The day we got guns.

Actually, it was at night.

That horrible night.

We'd purchased our hotel in Portland to facilitate the increasing flow of disciples to and from the ranch. Although the violence against us happened there in Portland, the ranch sprang immediately into full alert.

Suddenly, without explanation, our boss Julian herded everyone outside of Zarathustra building into the dark, searching the bushes for- well, we weren't told what we were looking for, which made it all the more disturbing. Fear and panic charged the air as the story of the bombing leaked out over the ranch.

Who would attack us? And why?

A middle eastern man ignited the bomb, and he was apprehended, but I've heard nothing about who sponsored him.

The change which occurred that night- it caused us to adopt a defensive, vigilant posture, and to compile an arsenal; it affected everyone in our microcosm, for we are all intimately interconnected, but for me it marked an utter and total reversal, a watershed quantum leap into a new universe.

Soon after the bombing, Julian spirited me inside the tape archive room, and left me alone behind locked doors with an electronic eavesdropping manual, which I perused ardently. He knew, from hearing about my private boy's school education, and from watching me, that I learn swiftly from books.

I became a spy almost overnight.

But now I do more than listen defensively. A lot more.

Why so much privacy invasion? Why this strange literature?

Maybe I should leave all this.

But where would I go? And what would I do, in a world of money and greed, dead-end jobs, lifeless livelihoods, cretinous careers, and people that don't understand me? People who stereotype me as a queer or a wacko.

People that titter smugly, affecting appreciation for my humor, while behind my back they discount me as a pseudo-religious clown.

People that feed on trivia in their TV-induced virtual reality.

People who can't feel.

No thank you.

It's them against us. I'll take us.

I'll stick with the folks who accept me as I am, with the ones who love freedom, and its daunting responsibility. I'll stick with the man who's brought all these lovely, sincere people together. You can have your belief-driven robots, your uptight librarians and your sentimental biochemists.

I have my own library.

And my own science experiments.

Back on the ranch.

I am in time for Bhagwan's drive-by.

Every day, he comes.

It's early afternoon, and everyone awaits him, lined up along the roads.

Soon, Bhagwan will emerge from his driveway at the wheel of a Rolls-Royce and drive slowly through the ranch, blessing all of his sannyasins.

Previously, he'd take to the Oregon highways and terrify the disciples in the car by driving at extremely high speeds; he'd laugh at their fear, reminding them to stay in the moment. But now, with the threats against us, it's too dangerous for him to leave the ranch.

These daily drives comprise our only opportunity to see Bhagwan in the

flesh nowadays. Some complain that he's too remote, too behind the scenes, but we're learning about our intangible connection to him.

He's not here to be seen or adored, he's here to show us ourselves.

Here he comes, in a pale turquoise Rolls.

Armed guards with semi-automatic weapons march briskly alongside the car.

The chopper hovers noisily above, a heavy armament steel barrel protruding from its open side panel, poised to stop anyone who makes a move to harm him.

My God!

He is utterly radiant.

What is his secret?

Something...

I want more than anything in the world to be empty, like him; to be exploding with joy for no reason. But my childhood innocence is gone, replaced by bad habits to which I am now bull-headedly inured: anger, greed, pessimism, self-destructiveness- they all seem like old friends. I must not want to be like him with every fibre of my being.

I heard a story about Bhagwan. One day in Poona, when he was in his car pulling away from the meditation hall, with the crowd inside still singing, "Yes, Bhagwan, Yes," he turned to the woman beside him and said, "They say yes, but they mean no."

I guess I don't mean what I say.

Bhagwan's silly smile stirs me from my analyzing mind and I am filled with energy as he passes by.

The black emptiness in his eyes- when they meet mine- everything that I am is dragged to the surface in an instant, right before I disappear into something I can't explain.

Eyes closed.

Thoughts, gone.

When I return to my body, his car trails into the distance, and I am light as air, crying softly, boundaries merging into everyone, the landscape, the world, feeling more love than I know what to do with.

This glimpse- it's the reason I tell my non-sannyasin friends: don't believe the cult drivel that old guard conservatives and new age liberals publish about this experience: Someday you too may be unstoppably pulled by your heart, in defiance of all logic, to the feet of an awakened one.

At Zarathustra, in the spy room, I beep Julian.

I've got the requested chemical and biological warfare data.

He's on the way.

I wear a beeper too. Always on alert.

While waiting, I load "Apocalypse Now" into the VCR and watch the scene where the helicopter's roar across the water, playing Wagner's "Dance of the Valkyries" at high volume to "scare the shit out of the gooks."

It's gross.

These innocent Vietnamese people aren't dying because they believe in communism- they're dying because some fat old American men decided Vietnam's becoming too financially independent, a bad example for small countries.

Money: the only religion wars are fought for.

Governments seduce the gullible populace into fighting for God, for country, for this or that. Blah blah. To increase the wealth and power of the ruling elite- that's why conflicts are waged.

On the TV screen, Wagner's music blares, the helicopter engines howl, the missiles hang ready, the surfboards ride neatly stowed under the chopper... the surfboards? Hey! Are those government issue? I don't want my bloodstained taxpayer dollars buying surfboards!

Did America lose in Vietnam?

The protracted military offensives floundered, but the U.S. achieved fabulous success in their real mission: the economic devastation of Southeast Asia. All the hype about losing- it holds the public entranced with the "dying for freedom" myth. Keep them busy with their grief. It's a powerful force- the pride that a father feels in sending his beloved son to die in a banker's monopoly game.

The death of American soldiers- it's as obscene as the deaths of the civilians they butchered. And the treatment our shattered heroes received afterwards- it's all gross.

What am I saying?

I'm gross- I like watching this insanity.

I go for another cigarette.

More insanity- a species that fouls its own lungs, its own nest, its own planet.

A people that self-inflict pain.

A society that sells itself lethal products, toxic indigestible food, and prescriptions for dangerous chemical experiments. Little red Seconals and little yellow Nembutals. They help you sleep, dear. Just like the tiny seashells for your ears, in Ray Bradbury's brilliant novel "Fahrenheit 451."

I'm no stranger to addiction. In my wild youth, I got strung out on heroin, speed, acid, from belladonna to sniffing glue- name it- I abused it, snorted it, shot it up, stuffed it down. Only through Bhagwan's meditations did I get free of drugs, except this caffeine-nicotine buzz.

But slowly, slowly... as the master is wont to say.

I've puzzled over addiction at length, and its societal implications.

What would be America's national drug?

Years ago I hypothesized the national drug to be TV, more treacherous than legal addictions such as alcohol, tranquilizers, or junk food.

With deeper inquiry I reformulated my model, deciding that patriotism, subtly fed to children through television and textbooks, is the real national

drug.

But lately I've revised my theory again: the national drug of America is blame. BLAME. Whether it's the latest foreign despot, the opposing political party's leader, or the demanding spouse, blame is the name of the game.

Back inside, Julian arrives, and we whoop it up, sharing a moment of playful exaltation with the new spy gear. He gloats over the miniature Minox camera, a happy boy with a new high-tech toy. Sighting through the tiny camera's viewfinder, he shouts, "I'm shooting girls on the beach."

"No way, dude," I holler. "Your girlfriend's always watching you."

His face clouds with dismay. I hit a nerve.

Rarely does Julian allow himself to be vulnerable, but he has a soft side. With his headstrong self-assurance gone for a moment, I feel his pain.

"Your love life going okay, Jules? Everything cool with the old lady?"

"Well, she's going through a lot of changes."

"What does that mean?"

"You know what she's like."

"No I don't. I don't know her. You're trying to say she's into some other guy?"

"Yes and no. She is and she isn't. She doesn't know what she wants. I feel for the girl. It's hard to watch her going through it."

"Sounds like you're going through it too."

"No, I'm fine," he insists.

"You lie. You're jealous. And you're pissed off. You talk about her, but not about yourself. You're in denial. Freudian defense mechanism 101. I'm not totally blind behind these white eyes."

Julian nods, self-conscious, but doesn't speak.

He's probably relieved by sharing his troubles and too proud to verbalize his thanks.

I let it go.

What are brothers for?

Back to business.

I hand him the chemical and biological warfare data.

The unsettling question of its purpose flits by.

But it could be a genuine defensive measure.

And my mind is moving towards sex, not salmonella.

The upstairs mall. Deborah's at her desk.

But she's occupied, talking to a tall, robust guy from the construction crew.

I'll try her a bit later.

To the restaurant downstairs for a cappuccino.

Now that the ranch owns an espresso machine, I can live here happily ever after.

And my friend Priya, from New York, is staffing the coffee bar. She's a small woman of Italian descent, with an olive complexion, long dark hair that she's always flipping back, and a husky unforgettable voice.

Priya's a good friend, but she rejects the idea of friendship, asserting Bhagwan to be our only true friend.

She's likely correct.

And she is wise.

She steers clear of ashram politics.

Whenever I see Bhagwan stand up, I remember Priya's transcendental experience with his knee, when something about his knee, the way it turned- just an appreciably small spark of motion- caused her to fall through a rabbit hole into complete silence. Trying to describe it, she says, "Something... something... oh God, could you die?"

And Priya makes the best cappuccino on the ranch- we learned the technique together, working in a west side Greenwich Village cafe. The milk needs to be very cold, and the foam- producing nozzle just close to, but not touching, the bottom of the steel flask.

The aroma of coffee grinding.

Women are like coffee.

They rev you up while they destroy you.

They course wildly through your veins, while they reduce you to a frazzle.

And like coffee, women are best when they're hot.

Unlike coffee, women taste as good as they smell.

Priya smiles, handing me the cappuccino, and I pass her two dollars.

You don't need money on the ranch; everything essential is supplied: food, clothing, shelter, and a provision for the addicts, one pack of cigarettes per day. We also get a modest monthly voucher, for fun. And my family sends money semi-regularly, which is nice.

I choose a seat by the big picture windows, looking out onto our dusty main street. The Big Muddy Ranch could be the Big Dusty Ranch during the dry season. I love this stark, yellow-ochre color spectrum of the desert. It reminds me of my beloved Spain.

I listen to the muffled thump of boots on wooden planks.

As people outside promenade by, their faces shine.

Despite our militarization, to them the ranch remains a paradise; they know we're at odds with the outside world, but they're accustomed to a master who teaches through conflict. On occasion I wish I still worked happily along like them, without my reclusive lifestyle and the pressure of worrying about

the government's adversarial tactics.

But somebody has to defend our home.

Inside the restaurant, the decor is simple and elegant- russet curtains, burgundy tablecloths, thick maroon carpet, pristine cleanliness. Everything on the ranch stays very clean. We are undoubtedly the cleanest city in America.

And the clean lines of the F-16. I glance through the latest issue of Air Force magazine as I sip my caffeine fix.

This is my real passion.

The F-16 fighter jet.

I love the F-16's tightly-engineered fuselage, her wicked air scoop, raked wings, her 7-G turning capacity.

Military aircraft. The words have a ring.

God, here I am, the peacenik who refused to go to Vietnam, slobbering over the beauty of these weapons.

It is amazing, the extensive detail the U.S. Air Force publishes about their avionics. Makes it quite easy for Russian intelligence. But the cold war justifies the development of the military-industrial complex.

Big business driving politics.

From the class on communism I took in junior high school, you'd think the Russian people are all three-headed cyclops, packing handheld nuclear warheads.

Go get 'em, Ronald Raygun, save us from these barbarous predators by building more missiles, more erection projections.

Delude us with the mirage of trickle-down economics; it's really trickle-up economics, the money rising from foundations and commercial tributaries to pour torrentially into the Swiss bank accounts of the good old boy network.

The collective beliefs we call reality...

The subjective string of crime-scene reports we call history...

The U.S. maintains a facade of separating church and state, but all its presidents, with one exception who met a bloody end, have been Protestants. The dollar bill says "In God We Trust," and virtually all the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Masons. The discrepancies between life and the history books are endless.

The caffeine stirs in my blood.

I glance outside.

Deborah is strolling by the restaurant, chatting merrily with that tall construction worker. She looks a little too happy, a little too sparky with him.

Tightness.

My jaw locks.

Gulp the cappuccino.

No smile for the waitress.

I'm out of here.

Outside, my hand opening the car door. But wait.

This is ridiculous, to let a little jealousy screw up a good thing. Deborah and I aren't that serious, but we have fun together. It's good, that she's interested in other men-it keeps the pressure off me.

I sail upstairs. She's back at her desk.

But she's still yakking to that guy.

Fuck this.

I'm history.

Dinner.

Nestled in a little valley at the far end of the ranch, our cafeteria bears the name Magdalena. I assume it's named for Mary Magdalen.

Wasn't Mary Magdalen known as a harlot?

I believe she was actually a wealthy woman, branded a sinner because she committed the unpardonable act of remaining unmarried. Her humble supplications at the Lord's feet didn't do the trick in the sin-seeking eyes of men.

Bhagwan jokes that he likes sinners more than saints- more interesting, he says. The master does attract all types, from all countries. In the majority are Americans, Germans, and Japanese- echoes of the trilateral commission- and of course disciples from Bhagwan's native India.

There's also a uniquely high percentage of successful, well-educated people here: lawyers, doctors, scientists, as Bhagwan draws people who've prospered in the world and now want something more. But Bhagwan welcomes anyone who's quest is genuine.

In Magdalena's mud room.

All the ranch buildings have mud rooms, entrance areas for muddy footwear.

I bury my boots at the back of the heap.

Boots tend to disappear.

I hear conversations in five different languages as I wander with my tray of food past the long bench-style tables, trying to locate a seat. I detest this part of the food ritual, as I never want to sit with anyone, and I feel conspicuous sitting alone. I am not a gregarious crowd person, not a party animal; I am an introvert, with a well-developed bubbly mask.

There's my partner in crime, Michel, a French-Canadian man, also enlisted by Julian when the ranch turned military. Michel is tall, diffident, and unassuming. Beneath his balding dome pulses the brain of an electronics genius. I call him the Minister of Technology. Sometimes when it rains, and the dark curls on the sides of his head friz out, he looks like the clown Clarabell from the old Howdy Doody TV show.

Michel is the only one, besides Julian and I, with a key to the secret spy room.

On most missions, Michel and I constitute a team. He can design a circuit to do anything, but he can't lie his way out of a paper bag, while my

electronics knowledge is average, but my ability to bullshit shines. Together, we are unstoppable.

Of course, as Ministers, we call our boss Julian "der Fuhrer."

But Michel is busy, gradually making time with the Dutch woman who is the object of his long thwarted amorous dreams.

Ah, there's a seat.

Next to that German woman.

I recognize her.

She's new on the ranch.

We've exchanged looks.

She has a slight speech impediment, a lisp crossbred with a gargle and a stutter.

As I descend into the seat beside her, she nods a welcome. It's clear she's an introvert also. She looks as uncomfortable as I feel, amid this clatter and chatter.

But she is sexy in a sweet way, and I like staring into her melancholy eyes.

The food is excellent.

Wholesome, organic, vegetarian.

I have a finicky appetite, but I love these spicy, funny-shaped sprouts. And it's best if you like tofu. I mean- you really better like tofu. If you don't, well, I've heard of contraband hamburger on the ranch. Secret carnivorous feasts in the woods.

Rumor? Gossip?

Rumor and gossip are the real meat and potatoes, the true lifeblood and sustenance of the commune around Bhagwan.

Someone is screaming Italian obscenities in the kitchen. The cafeteria crowd's buzz level doesn't drop to listen, as every one's used to people catharting at any time. That's quite different from the outside world, where strong emotional expression at work will get you instantly fired.

I go home with the German woman.

She lives in a tent, as did I for my first few months here. Since then, I've inhabited two different trailer homes, and now a townhouse. It's easier to be Bhagwan's sannyasin if you enjoy moving. I pray that my beeper won't conk out tonight, as its charger rests at home beside my bed, and to retrieve it will break the evening's flow.

Where would I plug my charger inside her tent anyway?

We navigate carefully, in my tan Toyota pickup truck, along the rocky road which zigzags up the mountainside to the settlement of tent dwellings where she stays. I cringe at the clamor coming from the undercarriage of my truck, which I call "La Noche,"

I christened the Toyota "La Noche," because I love the sound of the Spanish words, and because "La Noche" means "The Night," the time when the

Toyota does most of her work. I'm also writing a song in Spanish entitled, "La Noche."

The chorus to my song, goes:

La noche.

La noche que viene.

La noche que nunca viene.

It translates as:

The night.

Tonight.

The night that never comes.

My song satirizes the eternal promise of fulfillment, never delivered by hot nights with lovers.

The German woman's hand finds mine as we stumble in the dark along the path to her tent. She squeezes my palm when I hold the entrance flap open for her. Crawling inside, the space is cramped, with barely room to sit up. We stretch out on her air mattress in the subdued light of a tiny lantern.

"Not many men," she says, "have their own car here. You must be important."

"That's not true. I'm a nobody. I just wear the beeper and have the car in case the meditation audio system doesn't work. It's no big deal. It's nice to have a vehicle though."

I lie about why I have the car, neglecting to point out that "my" car is mine to use-but it's not actually mine; it's a power trip perk, for which I've sold myself to the company.

"We're very fortunate to be here on the ranch," she says.

"I know. This is the closest thing to heaven on earth that's ever happened. And we're lucky to be here, sloping together."

She laughs. "What is sloping?"

"Sloping is taking it easy. Sloping is avoiding work. It's a term that my temple, Edison, uses. It comes from England, I think. It got started by my coordinator, Julian, who's English."

"Oh, I met Julian. A very nice man."

"Uh, yes. Very nice."

I reach out, touch her face, arrange her hair. The wistful longing in her eyes pulls me in, stirs something inside me. Shyly, we undress, trembling in the fall night air. The curves of her naked form glimmer softly in the lantern's yellow-orange light; she moves with inordinate deliberation, a stifled grace.

We're wrapped together inside her sleeping bag.

With her misshapen mouth, she is a fierce kisser.

To hell with the no-kissing rule.

I love good kissers.

We kiss and kiss.

She's aggressive, but in some corner of her being, she's holding back. I try to feel the real person that she is, sensing in her a sadness, a loneliness trying to merge with me, with someone. In the dark space inside my head, I see another woman's face: Deborah's. I hear Deborah's voice.

Who am I with? I can't remember this woman's name.

Stop thinking.

Caress this woman- here now in my embrace- tenderly, the way you'd touch a newborn baby. I tease her everywhere, taking my time, barely touching her smooth skin with my fingertips.

She starts to moan as I move around between her legs.

I wet my fingers with saliva, finally drifting onto the expectant pair of lips. My gentle fondling starts to heat her up. Women are like water- they need time to reach the boiling point; whereas men are like fire, always hot and ready, but prone to burn out quickly.

And this woman is heating up.

Her warm secretions spread across my palm, down her thighs.

Does she love this as much as I do?

I've always wondered if women like sex as much as men do; or do they just pretend- a device to keep men's shoes nailed to the floor?

Stop thinking.

Can I satisfy her?

Damn these same old performance thoughts.

Men think too much.

Women are lucky- they feel, while men think.

Men think about sex every 18 seconds.

Men think too much about sex, even during sex.

Stop thinking.

She reaches out, her hand probing below my waist. There's a subtle agitation, a resigned urgency in the way she gropes. But when she finds what she's seeking, I pull it away from her, and position myself so she can't touch me there- so she understands that her pleasure, and her pleasure alone, is the game.

My pleasure lies in pleasing her.

She relaxes and falls back with a delighted sigh, thrilled to just receive.

I listen to the silent night outside, to the silence inside the sleeping bag become a tiny slurping, as my fingers penetrate her, sliding in and out. Yes, she's loving this.

In. Out.

I coax her, stopping and starting, gently kneading her breasts and pinching her nipples with my other hand. She pulls me closer.

My thumb settles, gradually, onto her clitoris, moving around it, pushing it side to side, up and down. In the same slow rhythm, I stroke the upper wall

inside her pussy with my middle finger, gliding steadily back and forth across her g-spot.

She groans, her body loosening, liquescent, undulating.

Stay with her.

Savor the slick feel of her hot skin against mine as she breaks into a sweat.

Hearken to the childlike song she's composing in my ear.

She wants more.

I dive in and out of her with my fingers, still assailing both her pleasure spots at at the same time.

She's going crazy, her wildness breaking loose.

Don't stop now.

She's straining her pelvis against my hand, crushing her mouth into mine, and I feel a shudder ascending inside her as she suddenly breaks from our kiss gulping oxygen and my face is still filled with her hot breath while she's falling into me shaking and flying in it and I'm about to come too and I'm thinking desperately of trash cans and trying to stop this intrepid surge and she's coming and coming so beautifully and my thing is just on the verge of losing it and oh shit I've made a big wet spot for us to avoid in our sleep.

There'll be no donning of the mandatory AIDS-protection raincoat tonight, although the ranch supplies condoms in generous quantity to all residential areas.

My Fraulein is all cuddly and moist and fragrant and doesn't care that I've spent my load. Energized, she showers me with sugary nibbles and love pecks, cocks a leg around me, and starts giggling in German, rubbing her crotch on my thigh.

I try to enjoy the heartwarming cornucopia of her advances, the bountiful feel of her supple post-orgasmic body, but I'm already starting to worry that she wants to make some kind of alliance with me, and damn why did I do this?

Be in the moment. Love the one you're with.

Maybe I can get it up again.

Don't worry so.

Do I have to create a routine with her?

I still can't remember her name.

God, free me from this sex and relationship nightmare.

I pretend to fall asleep.

In the morning, I awaken to bird songs, and this woman, tousled and wispy and deer-like. Just beauty, and my enslavement.

Honey kisses as I leave, smiling, praying to never see her again.

I hate myself. I hate sex.

I hate that I can't stop hating.

I am a prostitute.

I can't get this sex trip together. I keep thinking if I do it enough,

the desire will subside, but it pounds inside of me, unending. Monogamous, promiscuous, either way- I'm miserable.

That German woman is wonderful, but...

I hate being part of a "couple."

Fuck it. Bhagwan says freedom is a higher value than love.

I have to get to work.

I stop at home, for a quick change of clothes and to pick up my beeper charger. Back at the wheel, weaving through the cluster of townhouses, I see Deborah on her porch, standing straight and shivery in the chilly morn, nursing a steaming cup of tea and immersed in a book.

She's probably reading something deep.

All at once, Deborah is the other woman.

No, the German woman is the other woman.

Is one of them my soulmate?

Deborah looks up and brightens, blowing me a perky kiss. I wave back stiffly, wondering if I should avoid her.

Doggedly, I proceed to work.

"I can only guarantee you a long adventure with every possibility of going astray and never reaching the goal. But one thing is certain: the very search will help you grow. I can guarantee only growth."
- "Dang Dang Doko Dang" - Osho

Chapter Three: JESUS GROVE

"You're going to New York."

Vidya speaks in her cheerful, no-nonsense manner.

She is a top mom.

One does not argue with Vidya.

The charming lilt of her white South African accent is irresistible anyway.

Vidya rests on the floor against a wood-paneled wall, surrounded by pillows, her long-boned frame hunched over a clipboard.

Her sharp, angular features emanate aliveness.

Her long sandy hair splays out like a lion's mane.

We're sitting in Jesus Grove, Sheela's enclave, and it is a privilege, and a test, to be here, especially here in the sacrosanct confines of Sheela's bedroom, which combines the features of nursery, zoo, and galactic command center, even at this late night hour.

The crowded room buzzes.

Sheela stands by another wall, sternly lecturing someone, barking orders across the room, and playfully giggling as she tries on a new dress. She displays an amazing power of concentration while she multi-tasks.

Many disciples demonstrate the same alertness and fierce devotion to Bhagwan as does Sheela, but he's chosen her for his spokesperson because she will say anything. His objective: publicity.

Bhagwan cares not if his media image appears good or bad, so long as people get to know of him; then those who resonate with him will come. He also maintains that a high media profile will deflect violence away from us.

Vidya taps her clipboard with a pencil.

"What's in New York?" I ask, unable to envision myself in the Big Apple, and feeling reticent about this idea.

"Homeless people," Vidya responds crisply. "You'll be recruiting homeless people to come live at the ranch. For our 'Share-a-Home' program."

This is weirdness, I'm thinking.

Across the room, Sheela stops and shoots me a look, as if to say that I have no name, no choice. Vidya rivets her stare on me. She and Sheela are sending me to New York. Period. They're unconcerned that my presence will be missed by my overworked undercover cohorts. And I am not as indispensable as I thought.

Foolishly, I protest, "Why me?"

My question is genuine. I am a nobody.

"Rajesh love, you lived in New York," chastens Vidya.

A rush of memories. And yes, two years ago, I was Joe New York. The west side of Greenwich Village. The apartment with orange curtains. The meditation center. The parade of available women. Vidya's right. New York still flows

somewhere in my blood.

I surrender.

"Okay, cool. Send me."

I look Vidya straight in the eyes. Suddenly I am prepared to go, anywhere, into the unknown. I feel the first inkling of that glow that comes with saying yes to the unexpected. Another circus adventure. Not that I am without trepidation, but I am willing to go for it anyway.

Courage is not fearlessness.

No one is fearless, underneath it all.

True courage is proceeding despite your fear.

"You'll be going with Ankie," says Vidya with a faint grin. Ankie is an alluring Norwegian woman I've long admired from afar. A trip to New York with her sounds like a fine idea. I'm liking this more every minute.

But I remain poker-faced, digesting Vidya's instructions as to how Ankie and I will act as co-coordinators on the trip; how the other four guys, all men, will assist; how we'll go to the Bowery, and to Harlem; how we'll rent Trailways buses and bring the homeless back across country to the ranch.

It's a harebrained scheme. For what?

Didn't they do this at Jonestown?

"Vidya? What's happening? This is off the wall."

She chuckles at my honesty. She's always been kind to me- I'm not sure why, but I count my blessings. Respect, boy. Although we disciples allude in jest to the ranch power structure as the 'hierarchy that doesn't exist,' there exists a definite pecking order. If you find favor with the moms, you're lucky, as they rule their flock with a compassionate iron hand.

Vidya ignores my query as to the precise nature of this Share-a-Home enterprise.

She gaily nods my dismissal.

"And Rajesh," she adds, as I rise to leave, "keep your mouth shut, please."

All she needs is my nod of understanding.

We are already deep in the camaraderie of secrecy.

Morning.

I'm purposely late to work, stopping for a cappuccino. Deborah steps from the restaurant as I enter, but she walks right past me, preoccupied. I let her pass by without speaking.

Maybe she's ignoring me because I've been scarce.

No matter.

What I need now is caffeine.

The coffee counter, spotless.

I brag to Priya, my friend from New York, that I'm taking a trip off the ranch. Preparing the espresso machine, she guesses I'm going to New York, and I can't suppress a smile.

Priya and I have a New York history.

Before coming to the ranch, she and I lived in her apartment on a calm West Village street. So quiet lay our little niche, its orange curtains fluttering in the breeze, you were hardly cognizant of the big city. We made love and smelled the flowers and strolled by the Hudson River; Priya is over a decade my senior, but older women possess a depth of experience, a capacity to melt, that most young hard bodies lack.

Our life together was absolutely frenetic too, as I helped her direct the New York Rajneesh Meditation Center; we worked like crazed maniacs, orchestrating groups, staging events, leading meditations, staying up all night swallowing too many cappuccinos while we composed flyers and wrote newsletters.

We also commenced co-authoring a book. In a moment of inspiration, Priya entitled our literary experiment: "A Most Divine Love Affair, But It's Tricky."

Priya is a great poet, and one of the most aware people I know.

Years ago she wrote, or received, as she says, a masterpiece poem about the sun writing the Chinese language on the water.

She has a penchant for writing book titles- not books- just titles.

Her favorite: "The Illusion of Closeness, or, The Illusion of Distance."

Our co-creation, however, advanced beyond the title stage.

We wrote in parallel processing mode.

She'd write one chapter.

I'd write the next.

Our dual-viewpoint narrative told the story of our love-hate boy-girl relationship. The storyline developed spontaneously from whatever transpired between us, from life itself. Our basic metaphor was war. My nights, and the book, seethed with war dreams.

Priya coined the term: "targeting"- to describe how we are pulled off center by our unconscious evaluation of every passerby as a potential sexual conquest.

I coined the term: "necro"- to describe my preoccupation with death and negative, repugnant, nauseating things.

We strove to express every detail of the relationship battle between two sannyasins, often remarking, "God is in the details." But the real theme of our book addressed the infinite mystery of being in love with Bhagwan. The true challenge: to depict the connection between master and disciple.

Write on- we did, but, as our title said, it was tricky.

The wordsmithing.

How to describe the peace- the bliss, the peaks that we find in Bhagwan's presence- to those yet unacquainted with such experiences? How to demonstrate the catalytic nature of this little man who calls himself a nothingness, and mostly just sits in his room? How to explain why some of us must go with the irrational when our hearts are uncontrollably ripped open?

You write, with the mind, about what the mind cannot touch or comprehend.

You try to express that which you barely glimpse.

You speak about what can't be spoken.

You wrestle with foreign ideas.

There is no equivalent word for "guru" in English, no reverence in our western culture for the master, no awareness of the intangible heart to heart transmission that flows from master to disciple.

Can you demonstrate Bhagwan's innocence and beauty to someone who sees him only through their own lens of power and ambition? If a master is a perfect mirror, the greedy will see only greed in him.

How to explain that the world is only what our minds make of it? Or that Bhagwan opens a door to somewhere that's nowhere, the void we call God? It's hopeless, but Priya and I nevertheless tackled these literary tasks together. Our mutual writing effort mushroomed into a monster whose frankness and honesty scared even its authors.

"Fucking intense!" She'd mutter in her deep growl, electric typewriter keys flying. Priya types a zillion words per minute.

Our book came to life in New York, but it died later in the Pacific Ocean. It was too impossible to describe Bhagwan, forget the couplehood bullshit and the disciplehood trip.

If you think Bhagwan is a charismatic leader, and that we are a cult-well, then you better go with that. But to me, "cult" is another fear-inspiring brand name, a media label intended to demonize any group whose ideas differ. In the hands of the newspeak propagandists, the word "cult" has suffered the same death as the word "radical," which originally meant one who gets to the root of things.

In the restaurant kitchen, the dishes clanking.

The jet-like roar of the cappuccino milk being frothed.

Priya says, "I'm jealous you're going to New York. You and your secrecy. You could tell me why you're going, you know."

"I'm sure you'll hear the story from the grapevine soon. But I'm going to indulge in my illusion of power, my tyranny of secrecy, and not divulge the secret. I'll let you suffer a while longer."

"Ha! I already know you're going to recruit homeless people! How divine... the gossip is moving faster than you are."

Damn. She tricked me.

Laughing, Priya hands me my cappuccino, and says, in her low voice stage whisper, "How silly we are."

I glance about the restaurant, despising my competitiveness, hating that she put one over on me.

Damn this society that taught me to compete on every little issue.

Or is it just testosterone?

"Speaking of gossip, my dear," Priya says, "there's still a lot of talk about the AIDS rule. Are you using your condoms faithfully, beloved Swami?"

"Oh yes. I can live with the condoms. But the surgical gloves. They're so disgusting. Who wants to be touched..."

"I know," she cringes.

"It's the kissing," I moan, "and the oral sex that I miss."

Priya snaps her fingers and sings, to the tune of Elvis' Heartbreak Hotel, "There'll be no kissing here... no oral sex tonight..."

"Alright alright, don't rub it in. Pardon the expression."

"You'd better stick to the rules, Rajesh. No one's sure yet how the virus transfers."

"I know. Gag me with a trout."

"Suffer, beloved Swami. Monogamy is in. Promiscuity is out. Too bad for a crazed maniac whore like you."

"Oh well, you've got to say yes to it all."

"That's right honey."

I take a seat, resenting the AIDS curse, and nursing my caffeine fix till I feel speedy and cheerful.

I should zip upstairs and visit Deborah.

We only slept together once.

It's not that serious.

Maybe she didn't notice me in the doorway.

I'll stop by for a chat.

"Hey! It's the Whiteboy!" she hums, looking up from her desk.

I mimic a macho cowboy, hitching up my trousers, and drawl out the words, "Yer lookin' good, babe."

"Well Swami," she purrs, "I was an exotic dancer once, you know."

I switch roles, into a tight-lipped queen, my hands on my hips.

"Well Ma, I bet you were a hot little number on the stage, with those nice tits of yours. Getting those poor men excited. Shame on you."

She blushes.

Compliments are hard to take.

Didn't I hear the master say never to trust anyone who flatters you?

Compliments are just the icing on the flattery cake.

"Hey," I ask, "what were you reading- that morning when I saw you on the porch? Let me guess. Something weighty, like 'Thus Spake Zarathustra?'"

"No. It was a Louis L'Amour novel."

Hmm.

A cowboy romance.

Not the highbrow stuff I expected, although Louis L'Amour books will surprise you with their depth and insight.

"Why," she says, "do you ask?"

"Oh, just curious."

"So," she cocks her head, "I haven't seen you around. What've you been up to?"

"Just working hard."

"Working hard on what?"

"Oh, the usual. Widgets and wires. But I'm leaving for New York soon. On this Share-a-Home thing. Have you heard about it? I wonder who dreamed up this idea. It's totally out there. But I'm excited. I get to escape from the ranch for a while."

She looks down, quiet.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Oh, nothing. I've just got to get this paperwork done. I'm awfully busy nowadays too. Hope you have a good time in New York."

"Alright then, see you later."

In the spy room with Julian and Michel.

We all have a lot of nicknames.

Michel is also called Billy.

Julian and I can't remember why we chose the name Billy, but I liken Michel to the character of Billy Budd, with his martyr-like innocence. We also call Michel "The Animal," as he eats unaccountably huge quantities of food at a single sitting.

Billy looks at me, says, "Hey peckerhead, you get to go to New York. You lucky dog. You suck Velveeta."

There is a certain mystique in Edison temple around the word "Velveeta," in the way that cliques of boys adopt obscure expressions as private jokes. No one knows why the words take on special meaning- it's just a feeling. Velveeta works well when the conversation turns to cheese. It connotes density, plastic, constipation, and the impact of global dehumanization.

"Yeah," says Jules, "the Whiteboy's splitting on us, and going to do his thing in the big city."

Julian pushes me, street gang style, shouting, "Dill!"

In his decidedly English English, rather than American English, "dill" is a derogatory term. Like "dis", only it's a noun, or a pickle,

I make loud jungle noises and yell "wet monkey love," another imagery-rich nonsensical expression.

Ripping off my Motorola beeper, I swing it in Julian's face. I am thrilled at the prospect of a vacation from his dominion. He's my brother, but tethered to his yoke of directives via my status-dripping beeper, I am a slave. The beeper, like a gun on the hip, signifies power and responsibility, but it exacts its price.

"I'm going to miss you guys like a big dog. Let's chant the dog mantra-

one more time before I go."

We all chime in unison: "Big dog, happy dog, lucky dog, dog."

The dog mantra was invented years ago by a friend of mine to pacify attacking canines. Chanting the dog mantra convinces the ferocious creatures that there's nothing to fear, and they relax. Dogs are like humans- when they're afraid, they attack. I believe the author of the dog mantra also invented "wet monkey love."

"Oh," I say, "I've got to tell you all this one. The last time I went to Portland. I'm on the street, and this grody stinking drunk hustles me for a quarter. I give him a dollar, and instead of saying thanks, his sticks his filthy face right up into mine and gurgles 'Ah'm gonna kick yo' fawkin' ass!'"

I distort my face and slur the words as I act it out, and the boys laugh out loud, twisting up their mouths and repeating, "Ah'm gonna kick yo' fawkin' ass."

"So," I say, looking at Julian, "you're gonna miss me when I'm gone. What's this?"

I point to a small box of wires and components taking shape on Michel's desk.

"Oh," says Jules, glancing at Michel, who remains mute, "just another Billy Box."

"Billy Box" is the name we've coined for Michel's electronic creations, which are usually housed in small metal boxes acquired from "The Shack." Obviously I am not destined to know this Billy Box's purpose in life.

"Alright then," I say to Julian, "you got a bunch of impossible missions lined up while I'm gone?"

"Oh, little of this, little of that," he says.

"That's all you ever say, dill," I retort. "Ah'm gonna kick yo' fawkin' ass!"

But I don't expect Julian to tell me everything, as we operate on a need-to-know basis, like any intelligence organization; you receive only the information you need to get the job done, nothing more.

New York City, here I come.

The whoosh of the airplane's canned air ventilation system.

Crowded aisle.

Hand luggage being stowed.

I settle into the cramped, blue plastic seat next to Ankie, the woman with whom I'm co-coordinating the trip. She bustles with travel details, an organizer par excellence.

Ankie wears a cardinal red matching skirt and waistcoat, and as she peels down to a sleeveless top, she is all bare arms and legs and curvaceous Scandinavian seduction-without being actually seductive.

Scandinavian women are so innately sexual, that they're not. But they are, and Ankie is a joy to look at, with all that flaxen hair tucked around her elfen ears, and the rosy blush of her complexion.

After a scotch and soda for the Whiteboy, and a Bloody Mary for the white girl, life is good.

Ankie pries merrily into my world.

"How did you find Bhagwan?"

"You mean, how did he find me?"

"Whatever you call it," she grins.

"Well, let's see... it was 1978. What year is it now? 1984? God, I've been on the ranch too long. I can barely remember what year it is."

"Does it matter?"

"No. It just means I'm 35 years old, or six years old in sannyas years. And 1984 is the year of George Orwell's famous book. Thank God a few people like Orwell have the courage to tell it like it is."

"But you were going to tell me how you found Bhagwan."

"Oh yeah. I found him through one of his books. I remember- it was a regular morning in San Francisco. One of those fresh cool mornings. I was sitting at the kitchen table, with my usual breakfast, a cup of french roast and a Camel straight."

Ankie watches me check my shirt pocket for cigarettes.

I never really forget them.

"I'd woken up," I continue, "from this odd sexual dream, where I was lying upside down in a collapsed yoga shoulder stand, completely full of the most powerful orgasmic ecstasy I'd ever felt. But I'd had no sex partner in the dream. I felt rejuvenated by the dream. Not my usual foggy morning depression."

Glancing at Ankie's bare legs- she has great legs- I think about the weird sexual dream. Is that experience available without a partner? It wasn't the standard sedation following the sneeze of masturbation.

"But the book?" says Ankie.

"Right. I always get distracted talking about sex. The book. Someone in the house had left it on the kitchen table. It was 'The Book of the Secrets, Volume One,' the one with that fierce picture of Bhagwan's face on the cover. I'd been attracted to the book, but avoiding it. Not because I'd heard that sannyasins were orange crazies who did screaming meditations, but because of his face on the cover. His eyes, I guess."

I pause, going back over it inside.

I can't have completely revolutionized my life over one book.

"So... the book?" says Ankie, running her full lips around the edge of her plastic glass, licking her vodka and tomato juice. She is an intelligent

well-educated person, from a hyper-civilized country, and even with my ranging conversation, she listens attentively.

She smiles seductively.

Our knees touch, stay touching.

I stare at her legs again.

You don't see bare legs much on the ranch.

Most of the ranch women wear jeans.

"The book," I say. "I made it through two paragraphs, and something happened. I don't know- suddenly I was exploding. Falling apart. Because someone knew me so well. Someone was speaking the truth, my truth, so precisely. It was like I was emptied out, replaced by a sort of angelic light. Or something. Like love itself. Whatever it was-I was shaking uncontrollably, the tears were pouring, and the bliss kept raining down through me. I cried for a long, long time. I guess you could say, in the regular world's terms, that I had a religious conversion experience."

"And then?"

"I knew I had to find the man who wrote those words. A few nights later, I knocked on the door of the Rajneesh Meditation Center on San Francisco's 24th Street, with most of my worldly possessions on my back. They took me in."

"Just like that?"

"Almost, yeah. A small Japanese woman came to the door and peeked out at me. I said, 'You don't know it, but I'm supposed to be staying here.' She told me to wait a minute, went upstairs, and said to the twenty house members, 'There's this crazy guy downstairs. And I'm afraid if we let him in, he'll never leave.' They voted on it, and let me in. And the 'little Japanese woman- you know her, it was Veera who's on the ranch now- she was right. From that very evening, I stayed for more than a year. Then I went to India in 1979."

"Did they let you live at the center in San Francisco without being a sannyasin?"

"For a day or two, but then I wrote away for sannyas through the mail and dyed all my clothes orange immediately. RIT dye, by the box. I was ready. I'd tried everything else. But I always thought it was kind of second-rate, to be a mail order disciple. Like finding a career in electronics on a matchbook cover."

I listen to the roar and whine of the aircraft.

A bass and a treble. A wow and a flutter.

It's kind of a song in itself.

Ankie interrupts my reverie.

Women are like little children, endlessly full of questions.

"What'd you do," she asks, "while you lived at the center?"

"I handled the book and tape orders. Listened to his tapes constantly. Read a lot of his books. Worked a regular job to save money for India. And I did dynamic meditation every day at six in the morning. I had a lot of insanity

to throw out. My addictions, my negativity, my rage at women, my fear of men and their revolting brutality. So much baggage. Seems like it's all still around."

"It takes time," Ankie says, "...slowly, slowly. But Bhagwan works in mysterious ways."

"And he saved my life. I'd have died of a cocaine overdose without dynamic meditation. My mother knows Bhagwan saved my life. She knows about my mood swings- they're just like hers- and she knows I live on the edge. But it's really meditation that I found, not so much him. Shit. I'm talking too much about myself."

"No. That's a good story."

"But everybody's got good stories. I hear somebody's making a book- a collection of ways that we found him."

"He's got a lot of methods," she muses.

"Yeah. When I passed my eyes over his words- they're just marks on paper- a miracle happened. That's mighty strange. Some intangible link. I think we'll design instruments to measure it someday. But then again, the human heart works right well already. I know one woman who first saw his face in dreams, before she'd ever seen him in real life. That's even more mysterious, if you think about it."

"Hmm," Ankie murmurs.

She lays her hand gently on mine atop the blue plastic armrest.

I stare out the window.

I adore flying in airplanes, but I can't believe how much the wings on this thing wobble. The grim reaper, just a short circuit away. How useful is electrical redundancy up here at 30,000 feet, when there's a fire, or an engine flame-out?

This metal clunker has the aerodynamic properties of a stone.

No propulsion, no lift.

Leonardo! Mr. da Vinci?

Can't we make something that flies effectively but safely?

Something lighter, with the new graphite materials?

A plane whose wings flap like a bird?

I read that a bird's bones are hollow. Maybe that's the secret.

Ankie's warm hand squeezing mine brings me back to my body.

She says, "I know some people too- that saw Bhagwan first in dreams. Funny, that. It'll be an interesting book- about the ways we all found Bhagwan. But you should write a book about the ranch."

"Are you kidding? I'm too busy making history to record it. Besides, I'll die with the secrets I know, honey."

She laughs.

I think she likes the way I say "honey" in my southern drawl.

And she knows I know things.

"What," she asks, "were you thinking, a minute ago? When we were listening to the noise of the aeroplane?"

Women NEVER stop asking questions.

"Oh... I was thinking about death, and how airplanes could be safer. Science is strange. You know, if you were real huge, so the earth was the size of an electron, and you tried to interpret the changing cloud patterns, you'd go nuts trying to describe them mathematically. I wonder if our atmosphere is a good model for the electron's charge fluctuations? Seems like physicists keep making things more complex, rather than simpler. Each new particle discovery spawns a whole new branch of science. It's ridiculous."

Ankie stares at me. She has very blue, almost perfectly royal blue, eyes. It occurs to me: she thinks it's me, not the physicists, who's ridiculous.

"Science," she says, "is just the mind, I think. Just the logical aspect of the mind, Whiteboy. There's no harm in it."

"True," I say, "and science now explains Bhagwan. Well, sort of. I think he's like a black hole in space, with our minds collapsing into his nothingness. Like neutrinos disappearing from the spacetime continuum into a gravitational vortex."

"What crazy thoughts you have, Whiteboy," she chuckles, leaning across the armrest towards me. Our eyes close, and we skim cheeks, touch nose-tips, entwine fingers. In the distance, a small voice, "This is your Captain speaking..."

Arranging a brief life in New York.

Confronting the long stairs up to a local sannyasin's apartment, Ankie and I allot the heavy luggage to our comrades. She is a mom, the resident damsel. And I am the resident wimp, unable to lift much, being the skinniest man in the world and operating with a damaged liver from the hepatitis B that I suffered in India. I've never been the same, after turning that sulphurous jaundiced yellow and lying on my back for two months, desperate enough to read "The World According to Garp" twice.

But our guys are strong and enthusiastic- they carry the bags upstairs with ease, and we soon settle into our borrowed quarters.

Hit the street.

The mayhem of the Bowery.

It is unseasonably hot today.

The sticky pavement teems with unconventional life forms.

Homelessness intrigues me.

I've enforced homelessness on myself at times, to understand it. Eating out of trash cans, sleeping in doorways, hustling for quarters- it's not easy. The homeless are often more hurt and disenfranchised than lazy. Now I always give them spare change. I know how it feels- how debilitating the deprivation cycle can be. And I listen to them- they're neglected, need to talk. It is difficult to get beyond their rough and tumble exterior, but I usually find that under the grime and alcohol stench lies a sensitive person with a warm heart.

This subspecies of creatures defies explanation.

They refuse to conform to society's rules and willingly suffer the consequences; they allow their ugliness to surface; they manifest their power by saying no. I love the way they randomly spout relevant truths, like the town fools of old. But the town fools were valued for their insight.

And the homeless harbor fascinating personal histories; more than a few possess classically educated minds, and if you hang around, you can catch them discussing literature or global politics while they wait for Godot.

Today, though, it's more of a rodeo than a rap session.

We're rounding them up, for a trip to the promised land.

They're yellow, red, black, white, brown.

They smell bad and talk dirty.

They're crotchety and cross, bilious and barbarous.

Drunks on medication, and junkies on smack.

A dog on Valium, and a drag queen with a pet chicken.

A scruffy hag, willful and toothless, smoking a pipe.

One fatuous, drooling drifter repeatedly launches into a Hamlet soliloquy, never getting past "...that is the question," while another rascal instigates a quarrel.

We sannyasins- we're used to chaos- but we seldom proselytize in public. We're as defensive as anyone about our beliefs, but getting out to pound the pavement and preach the word is not our style. Not my style, anyway. Yet, I slip into the evangelist role, and we're all enjoying the Pied Piper game. We get buses scheduled, a list of names, and set a departure date two days hence.

I'm still unclear why we're recruiting this motley conglomeration.

Our first night in New York.

Ankie and I share a bedroom, while our companions bed down in old sleeping bags on the hard floor in the next room. The door won't shut all the way, but lack of privacy is nothing new.

I shower first, stretch out naked on my back atop the luxury queen-sized mattress.

The pink bedspread feels cool on my skin.

I set a pack of condoms on the floor within arm's reach.

Ankie emerges from the bathroom, wrapped in an orange towel splotched with fiery red flowers. The towel flies across the room. It's almost camp, how

pretty she is in the nude, the Scandinavian model in the magazine.

She strikes a pose, one hand behind her head, the other poised over her pubic hair.

Slowly she turns round, raising up on tiptoe, presenting her rump to me as she stares over her shoulder.

Two animals, watching each other.

I sniff the air, her shower clean dampness.

She romps around the room, does an impromptu chain of pirouettes and a glissade up to the bed, hurling herself down on top me. I'm laughing at her antics, feeling secure under the welcome weight of her softness.

It's magical, this elation that blooms in the initial attraction to someone, before the phantoms of entanglement rear their ugly heads, and the horrible truth of who you are boils to the surface. Oh, that these honeymoons could last. Goddamn romance- it's a carrot on a stick, leading you into the real karmic hard labor of relationship.

We decide to follow the rules.

But no gloves, please.

I roll her onto her back.

We don't kiss, but I'm licking her everywhere I can legally lick. She has luscious shoulders, and armpits, and breasts. I love this whole part of the body where the heart chakra energy circulates. I make circles on the aureoles of each nipple, pressing them inward, hard.

She explores me with her hands, active, like the strong verbs they taught you to use in English class, teasing my thing till it's erect and firm, her touch feathery but confident along its engorged venous surface.

I turn around.

My tongue slides deliberately down her thighs, behind her knees, down to the sensitive spaces between her toes. If you do it right, you can drive some women crazy just by licking between their toes.

Ankie giggles, enjoying it, but she's too energetic- she wants more. She reaches for a condom, pushes me down, rips open the foil wrapper, and deftly rolls the latex sheath onto my erection. I love a woman who takes control.

But she flops beside me on her stomach, legs spread apart, inviting me to take her from behind. Women are such a magnificent blend of aggression and surrender. The dark cleft between her buttocks, speckled with tiny droplets of moisture, lies waiting.

I straddle her mouth-watering white nakedness, and slip inside her.

Short and long, I alternate strokes, taking my time.

Shallow, to excite her.

And deep, to fill her up.

Pressed into the mattress, she stretches back to hold my hand.

Her tits spread out from underneath her.

Graceful curves on the pink bedspread.

The slap of my pelvis hitting her buttocks.

Oh! It's too much... too beautiful...I'm going to come.

I back off.

She growls, gritting her teeth.

I pump, piecemeal, sporadically changing velocity.

She can't stand the delays.

She shrieks with impatience, wanting it hard.

Her back muscles ripple, glistening with sweat.

I speed up, burrowing inside her, jabbing, gouging, boring, drilling, long-dicking her until her knuckles are white from clenching the pillow and her elbows are digging into the mattress and she's thrusting her ass up into me and the slurping sound of her pussy is flooding the room and she's yelling out loud- I must be hitting her g-spot just right- she's wriggling beneath me like a savage warrior in the throes of a fight to the death with her legs flailing and I let it go right as she explodes.

Exhaling a loud sigh in unison, we go limp and collapse into a sweaty heap all gasping and silly and emptied out. As our breathing slows to normal, I slide off to her side and gather her into my arms.

Blessed for a moment, going nowhere.

We lie together in silence.

Faint shouts and honking horns echo in the streets below.

"You're wonderful," I say quietly. "I don't think we missed anything by following the AIDS rules. We didn't kiss, and we didn't... stoop to forbidden oral pleasures."

"I know," she reflects, "but I still really like kissing. And sucking those things you guys have. You know, there's something that happens in the back of your throat after a while when you do that. This delicious taste and feeling."

"I've read about that. In a book on Tantric sex. They said it's a chemical change-some kind of nectar that comes from exchanging negative and positive fluids."

"Have you ever tried it- sucking a cock?" she asks.

"Me? Not in this lifetime, honey."

"But you seem so open-minded. You talk like you've done everything."

"That's just my desperate need for recognition. But I'm all talk. I did try a few things with guys, but I had to force myself. It just wasn't me. I didn't feel any chemistry with them. No, I fear I'm an old-fashioned macho heterosexual- hopelessly in love with beautiful women- like you."

She chuckles, pulling me closer into her warmth.

My body shakes with her laughter.

"Did you know," I say, "that my legal last name is Gaye? I've been such a misfit all my life- I feel like I suffer the stigma of being gay even though I'm not. When I was little, because of my name, I was kidded about being gay-

even before I knew what it meant. But it's you women that drive me crazy. Sometimes I wish I wasn't so obsessed."

"I think you're fine just the way you are."

"And so are you, lovely. I'm lucky to be with such a gorgeous woman."

"And I'm lucky to be with such an honest man."

In the morning, a crabby chill of jealousy issues from our fellow sannyasins.

The sky above Harlem, overcast.

The air dense with moisture.

The smell of warm asphalt.

Between the tides of people, ebbing and flowing through the streets, I feel a momentary emptiness, as if I've stepped into the aftermath of a war.

The grey sky turns everything grey.

We don't find many street people in this community wanting to forsake their home turf. Their world is hauntingly unpretentious, and real; in ways it's more real than the suburbs where I grew up, and I suddenly feel stupid for suggesting they come with us. They live a stark, but sometimes grand life, and their happiness shines as bright as anyone's when it does.

Who am I to say where they should live?

Damn, I'll stay here, with the dark-eyed senioritas.

But a few restless, rank transients prove interested in nirvana, and we arrange to retrieve them later.

Back to the Bowery.

After more hustling and cajoling, and trying to marshal the ranks of churlish incorrigibles into appearing on schedule, we await the arrival of our first bus.

Suddenly, I'm thrown up against a car, under attack by a one-armed Spaniard.

Splattered with tattoos and smelling of booze, he's short and stocky, built like a bull, and raging at the prospect of losing his brother to a bunch of rubio freaks. A vice grip from one very powerful arm, on mine. A phalanx of Bowery recalcitrants forms behind him.

This is not good for the Whiteboy, who is no pugilist.

His friends are down the street.

They're oblivious to his predicament.

Something must be done.

I summon all my inner strength.

My voice.

A deep "Ha!" from my belly breaks his grip. And with a quick snap of the forearm, I am free, dancing backwards down the sidewalk, yelling at him, "I understand you don't want to lose your hermano. And I'm out of here!"

I fly along the cement and round the corner.

It is best to avoid violence.

Survival is good.

To be chickenshit is good.

I don't need a medal.

The man who attacked me- I'm sure he carried a knife.

There's my friend the grim reaper again.

Am I ready to die for Bhagwan?

Not in the Bowery, lacerated and pulverized by an ornery drunken sailor, that's for sure. And I refuse to venture down to that section of street again, not where the one-armed man stepped over my line. I'm splitting. Forget working on the bus-loading phase of this operation. My friends concur that violence is not to be risked, and I disappear into New York's streets.

Evening.

At the apartment, the ranch is on the phone.

There's political dissension among our ranks over Ankie and I having all the fun, getting the best room, doing only the easy jobs. It's all a broil and I'm taking a plane right back to the ranch. This is good, as I've been secretly dreading the possibility of spending three days driving cross country on a Trailways bus with a bunch of raucous, stinking loony tunes.

Goodbye Ankie. It's been a great weekend.

Goodbye New York. Hope I never see you again.

Hello ranch. It's good to see you again.

It is a relief, to be back.

Even with the constant tension of my onerous covert life, the ranch is heaven compared to Nueva Yorka.

I hear that teams of sanniyasins, similar to my New York pilot group, are scouring a dozen American cities. From Seattle to Atlanta, the homeless pour in, each busload another permutation of strangeness.

Our new denizens are fed separately.

Rumors say their beer is spiked with tranquilizers.

Despite considerable grooming and fumigation, many don't fare well, run out of their medications, get homesick, go crazier. Some irascibles wander off the ranch and disappear. A few drop their querulous curmudgeon facades and unfold rapidly into productive citizens. One of them is reading every Bhagwan book he can find.

I close off a corner of my heart, and restrain my desire to hang out with these wackos, afraid they'll discover my identity as the Minister of Information.

For the first time in my life, I vote.

I never saw the point in voting, in choosing one dishonest politician over another dishonest politician, but the moms suggest that everyone on the ranch participate, so I cast my ballot in a local election.

After the voting, I hear a rumor that the homeless were recruited to pad the numbers and sway the election in our favor. That makes no sense though, because they can't vote legally for six months, and they just got here.

I didn't notice whether they went to the polls.

At the downstairs bulletin board in Zarathustra, I'm reading an article clipped from "The Oregonian," Portland's principal newspaper. The Rajneeshees, as we're called in the media, stand accused of a mass poisoning in the Dalles. Seven hundred salmonella victims- no deaths, but numerous people hospitalized. The salmonella was spread around in salad bars.

This sounds too close to home.

Much of the biological warfare data I gathered- it concerned salmonella. Upstairs, in the spy room, I quiz Julian about the poisoning.

He decries the newspaper's accusation as an attempt to defame us.

But he's basically disinterested.

He's making other plans.

"You're going to Portland," he says.

"But I just got back from New York less than a week ago."

"You're going to Portland."

Julian can be very persistent.

And very repetitive.

He leans on me heavily.

"You're going to Portland. And you've been back now for several weeks. You always exaggerate, Whiteboy. You're a drama queen."

He's right.

Seeing no escape, I abdicate my position.

"Okay. Let me have it."

He turns warm and confidential.

"I need a job done. Easy job. Piece of piss, as we say in England. Just go and gather what you can about arson. I got word somebody's maybe going to try something on us. I want to be prepared. Nothing fancy. Just see what you can find."

"Well, that's easy. Is that all?"

"Oh... check your mailbox," he adds.

"Anything in particular you looking for? Velveeta? Wet monkey love? The ten thousand things... all the distractions that Buddha said life is made of?"

The Buddha's ego wasn't just gone, you know. He was well gone. Nirvana means 'cessation of the flame.'

"Just check your mailbox."

"Okay, mein herr. Der Fuhrer's wish is my command."

"And Whiteboy, see Savita before you go. She has car keys for you."

"Okay," I answer, heading out the door.

"And Whiteboy?"

"Yeah?" I stop, turning back in the doorway.

"Don't you be going for no action with Savita."

He cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Yeah right, Jules. You're just jealous cause I get ten thousand times more girls than you do. The ten thousand chicks. Adios, amigo."

I set out to walk the muddy quarter mile from Zarathustra to the mall, leaving La Noche for Michel in my absence, and ruminating over Julian's remark about Savita, who's my favorite of the top moms, the only one I find attractive.

On the road, a car stops beside me.

It's Nikhilananda, one of the ranch taxi drivers, offering me a lift.

I'd rather walk, but Nikhilananda is fun, so I hop in.

Nik, as we call him, is one of the many well-educated sannyasins- he's a history professor- who enjoys doing simple work on the ranch; we have physicists driving dump trucks, engineers scrubbing toilets. Nik is a relentless optimist, and will fool you with his keen sardonic wit. We joke, during the short ride, about the marvelous aberrancies and incongruities of life on the ranch.

The upstairs mall.

Savita reclines on a couch, one willowy arm cocked behind her head, long downy legs dangling. Next to only Sheela in power, Savita handles the ranch money, which is very sexy. Elegant and proper, she's another one with that charming English accent that disarms me. She has a handsome and dashing boyfriend, but I can enjoy the view.

Savita smiling, capricious.

"It's the Whiteboy. I have some car keys for you."

She's so affable, at least with with me, and I appreciate her sophisticated humor. Her features are a tad keen, but there's still a porcelain cameo sweetheart something to her countenance, and when she laughs her narrow eyes shine bright, and her lips curl into a divinely mischievous sneer.

I wonder what it takes to wield the power she does.

As she passes me keys to another unmarked Oldsmobile, she turns serious.

"Rajesh, love, can you check your mailbox?"

I am melting under her fluid accent.

"Sure, lovely. My pleasure."

And the Whiteboy skedaddles.

A wave at Deborah, whose desk resides nearby.
She's busy with a knot of lesser moms, and doesn't see me.
I doubt that I'm important to her anymore anyway.
Maybe I never was.
Just because you sleep with someone once...

Off to Portland.

Leaving the ranch, in another gray-green Oldsmobile, an early snowfall turns the woods into a sleigh bell wonderland. I am in awe of the white fairy tale scene unfolding around me, but the temperature is dropping fast, and by the time I reach the checkpoint at the top of the ranch, the road is dangerously slick. The Security guards flag me down, strongly recommending I go back to put chains on my tires.

I disregard their warning, and press on.

The road gets worse.

I fight to stay in control.

Rounding a bend I miscalculate my speed, veering wildly across the road to a crunching stop, part way in the ditch, part way up the embankment.

Wheels spinning and whining, gouging down through snow and ice and frozen mud. No way. Vexed, I climb out into the whirling whiteness.

I'm sweating hard, and my whole torso is sopping wet by the time I dig myself free by hand, and the snow still pours down heavily.

I should turn back.

But the information Julian requested- it could be vital.

Resolute, I push on, coaxing the car gingerly through miles of treacherous curves, then down the long stretch of highway to Portland. It takes hours, and when I finally reach my destination, my nerves are shot.

I park the Oldsmobile and feed the meter.

Mushing through the snow to the library, I practice memorizing license plates as the cars pass by me.

You have to be alert.

If the same car reappears too often, you're being followed.

The library is easy. Arson is easy.

One compendium on the forensics of arson has it all.

Skimming chapters, as I photocopy the whole book, I'm in awe of the pyrotechnical strategies which humanity has devised. From a simple candle and gasoline formula, to the most exotic incendiary gels, there are lots of ways to start a fire. With remote control detonation, using coded radio frequency transmission, you can enkindle your conflagration from miles away with the simple touch of a button. And for every cunning method of initiating a blaze,

there's an even trickier chemical technique to detect its cause.

I tell you, God is in the details.

The mail.

For security reasons, I usually ride the bus to my mail drop, but today there may be a lot of items, so I take the Olds, swerving on icy streets. I retrieve my packages, and in a fast food joint parking lot, engine running to keep the heater on, I have a little Christmas morning opening boxes on the front passenger seat.

Books:

"How to Launder Money."

"New Identity in the U.S."

"The Paper Trip, Vols. I and II."

"Complete Guide to Lockpicking."

"How to Use Professional Lockpicking Tools."

"Illegal Entries."

"Boobytraps."

"Kitchen Improvised Plastic Explosives."

"The CIA Flaps and Seals Manual."

Catchy title.

Flaps and seals?

I imagine some seals in the antarctic, flapping around in the icy shallows of a cove. A quick glance at the manual reveals methods for opening and re-sealing envelopes, undetected.

Two lockpicking tool kits.

One for Julian and one for Michel. I want one too.

What are they up to? Goddamn secrecy.

A developing kit for the miniature Minox spy camera.

Maybe I'll get to learn more photography.

I'm acquiring so many new skills, broadening my horizon, living at the ranch.

Last item.

Four small, steel, pyramid-shaped widgets with sharp points, designed to administer flat tires. They look like the jacks I played with as a kid. Or little metal stars. Technically, thanks to Buckminster Fuller, one of our greatest contemporary scientific minds, expanding on the work of Pythagoras, we know that stable equilateral triangles combine tensile and compressive forces to create structural strength in a tetrahedron. But I guess the Egyptians had already figured that out when they built the pyramids.

On the outskirts of town, I disregard my intuition which urges me to get back to the ranch by nightfall, stopping instead at a small used bookstore.

Jingling bells, as I step in the door. An unusual character lurks behind the cash register. A calico cat snoozes on the counter. I wander through a maze of small, crowded rooms, with overflowing shelves rising to the ceiling, and

piles of comics on the floor.

The smell of old magazines.

Interesting selection of printed matter.

Stacks upon stacks of "Soldier of Fortune," and assorted other men's publications: "Firearms," "Guns 'n Ammo," "Combat Artillery." Juicy articles about covert operations, surveillance, guerrilla tactics, fancy weapons. Julian will love this sick crap.

I choose a dozen magazines, and keep browsing.

Here's the usual UFO book.

The standard aliens-at-Roswell story.

I am convinced that alien species exist- the mathematical probabilities are almost certain- but I think the Air Force cover-ups are a cover-up. The UFO societies themselves, supposedly fighting to uncover the truth, are run by planted government agents. The whole alien affair is a scare tactic, designed to conceal the government's advanced military aircraft research.

I put Roswell back on the shelf, where it belongs.

The store's calico cat wanders in, sidles up and rubs my leg, tail waving in the air. I greet him in my falsetto kitty voice. He looks up, wide-eyed, surprised that I speak cat. All cats understand English- every word- they just don't let on, but they're shocked when a human uses their native tongue.

I love cats, but I'm allergic to them, so I resist petting him.

Oh. A book on poor old Nikola Tesla.

It's well known that the U.S. government stole all of Tesla's patents. His wireless system would have provided free electricity to the whole world. He died brokenhearted because J.P. Morgan promoted Edison instead, whose metered system of distribution could be turned into the General Electric power monopoly.

We should have named our ranch temple "Tesla" instead of Edison.

"Tesla Temple." I like the alliteration.

Bouncier than the assonance of "Edison Temple."

What's this?

The Pentagon's black magic psychic attack experiments.

So what else is new?

The building's shaped like a pentagon, the black magic symbol, isn't it?

If there's any inquiry in progress on earth, you can bet the military is studying the subject's application to warfare. A good reason to meditate. Meditation keeps your aura strong, so the astral bed bugs won't bite.

But enough information, or disinformation.

It's time to go.

The drive home, excruciating in the darkness through snow and ice.

Stuck again.

Laboriously I dig myself out again, freezing and wet, shouting vile imprecations at the smooth tires which spin, and spin.

I am utterly exhausted by the time I reach home base at Zarathustra.
A strong cup of tea revitalizes me.

I head for the spy room, making chimpanzee noises and chanting "wet monkey love" in the empty Edison hallway.

I'm anxious to find Jules. He'll love these magazines.

But the spy sanctuary is empty- it is late. I leave the new swag for him to discover in the morning. He'll arrive before me. I can't get to work on time anymore.

Leaving Edison, my radar alarm bells go off.

Sensory alert.

A new woman.

At a video duplication station, working late, stands a petite blond with a cute ski-slope nose and intense blue eyes. I've seen her around- the ranch is a small world- but only from a distance.

She seems quite familiar.

Maybe we met in Poona.

Emboldened by the fresh caffeine buzz, I introduce myself.

"Hi, Ma. I'm Rajesh. But everybody calls me Whiteboy."

"Hello Whiteboy, I'm Mary," she says, glancing quickly away.

I can't help staring at the ideal breasts showing under her sweater.

"Were you in the ashram in Poona?" I ask.

"Yes."

"That must be where I've seen you. Did we ever meet then? I was there in 1979 and 1980."

"No, I don't think we've met."

"Where are you from?"

"New York. Upstate."

"Oh? I lived in the Big Apple for a while. So- I see you've been transferred to Edison. Welcome to the temple of wackos."

"There do seem to be a lot of crazy guys working in this department."

"And I'm the craziest."

"I've heard about you," she says cautiously. "They say you make a lot of weird noises in the halls."

"It's true. Hey, I think Magdalena cafeteria is still serving. Would you like to go to dinner? I've got a car. I could save you waiting in the snow for a bus..."

"No, thanks. I'm going to stay here and work."

"Well, nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you."

I take a risk, and give her a hug.

Hugging is common in the sannyasin community.

She's stiff in my arms, standing very still.

I resist my inclination to pull away quickly.

I hold her for a little longer than I should.

She inhales deeply, relaxes, and I am suddenly melting into this person and feeling my hard edges turn to mush as her whole body falls into mine. We stand for a long time, merging, and I leave her with a wordless smile.

Late night.

My beeper tears me from seriously needed sleep.

Vidya. Report to her at Jesus Grove.

I run the shower longer than the allotted water-saving three minutes, trying to wash away the waxy, depleted feel of the skin on my face.

Water, wake me up fast.

At least my hair dries quickly.

For years I wore long hair and a beard, but since becoming a spy, I've taken on the short-haired, clean-shaven look. Anything to keep a low profile. Cutting my hair also reminded me that I am not my hair.

"You're going to Seattle," says Vidya.

"But I just got back from Portland. And from New York. What's in Seattle?"

Vidya's words, direct: "There's a plot to kill Bhagwan. Some of the first Share-a-Home residents from Seattle. A religious group. Black militant guys. Their leader is called 'The Father.' We have a tape of them making a plan to shoot the master. You're going to go find out who these people are. And where they live."

"Me?"

This doesn't sound like a job for the Whiteboy.

I am way out of my league here.

These is real-life stuff.

But I'm going, along with Sudha, an African-American lady of high stature in the ashram "hierarchy that does not exist." Sudha is a group leader, and her talents as a healer are well-respected. It's a gift to be her partner. And, I am terrified of encountering a gang of murderers.

Morning.

Julian and Michel and I review an audio tape captured by one of the original six pay-phones that we tapped. Good thing we bugged those phones. The conversation occurs between one of the gang members posing as a Share-a-Home resident on the ranch, and a fellow gang member in a phone booth in Seattle.

The infiltrators, impressed with our heavy steel armaments and the bulletproof windows on Bhagwan's Rolls-Royces, observe that on festival days Bhagwan rolls down his window. They want to schedule the hit on a celebration

day.

They don't sound like professionals. The guy in Seattle can't get his signals straight with the one on the ranch about their next call. Finally, in desperation, the fellow on the ranch yells, "Well forget that, we'll call you!" Their bungling: a comedy of errors; we're all howling, "Forget that! We'll call you!"

"This is more fun than a Velveeta sandwich," says Michel.

Julian switches gears, cheerfully asks Michel, "Billy! How's my detonators coming?"

The unidentified circuits on Michel's desk...

Detonators?

I'm about to leave for Jesus Grove, to receive my final Seattle instructions, when Julian says, "Whiteboy, before you go, I need everything you got on pipe bombs."

I wonder. With all his warmongering fantasies, Jules still acts like a kid asking the librarian for a book known to contain dirty words. It's hard to take him seriously. But pipe bombs?

"Well, let's see, Jules," I say, fishing through the locked metal boxes which house our library, "you've got a lot of our volumes, but in the ones here, the pipe bombs are between the wet monkeys and the Velveeta."

From the tightly packed lockbox I extricate three books: "The Anarchist's Cookbook," "The Poor Man's James Bond," and a U.S. military explosives handbook.

Handing them to Julian, I say, "The most information on pipe bombs is in the James Bond book."

"Cheers, Whiteboy. Ciao," sings Julian.

"See you when I see you, Whiteboy," chimes Michel.

In the doorway, I turn back, asking Julian, "What're you going to blow up with your detonators and pipe bombs, Mr. 007?"

"Oh, little of this, little of that," replies Julian.

He suddenly looks like Mephistopheles to me, with his impeccable moustache and satanic grin.

"How," I say, "can a diabolical sicko like you be so lovable?" shaking my head as I close the door. I hear them shouting "Forget that! We'll call you!" as I head down the hall.

This is getting weird.

It's one thing to educate ourselves by reading about this stuff, but to be actually building detonators, and pipe bombs...

At Jesus Grove, Vidya heaps encouragement on me and Sudha, my partner on this Seattle journey. The money mom, Savita, appears at the last moment, smiling impishly, and furnishes us with car keys and an envelope containing \$2000 in cash.

I feel shaky about this.

But the master is in danger. I have no choice.

Leaving the ranch, melting snow turns the dirt roads to brown soup.

On the highway to Portland, passing trucks spatter long arcs of muddy ice across our windshield. Snow, so spectacular in the beginning, so nasty in the end.

At the Portland airport, a helicopter thumps overhead.

Sudha and I deposit our ranch vehicle in the long term car park.

On foot, we locate a mom and pop car rental business. The unshaven clerk's milky eyes point in different directions. He keeps scratching his head. With much finagling, we rent a car; miraculous- we have no credit cards. All that's available: a huge white, Sixties Cadillac, with serious fins.

In Seattle, we have the name of a street and the name of a store.

Somehow Vidya has tracked the pay-phone, maybe through Pacific Telephone.

Before purchasing a map, we find the phone booth, as if drawn there by the magnet of intuition. Sure enough, at 6 p.m., three African-American men, all wearing baseball caps, converge upon the phone booth from different directions.

In the Cadillac, engine running, heater on, we watch from a nearby parking lot, amazed that we've located our quarry so easily.

They receive a call.

It must be the gang on the ranch.

Brief conversation. They hang up, make another call.

The wheels of chicanery turn in my head- I see that my mission includes tapping that phone booth, to find the second call's destination. Probably the leader of their group.

Maybe we can track them now to their hideout. But their second call lasts only a few seconds and they disappear round the corner too quickly to be followed. We'll have to be better prepared for a chase tomorrow.

We check into a hotel.

A comfortable room with gauzy curtains and two firm beds.

Sudha is a good-looking woman- but I imagine she has a lover already, and even if not, I am too tense and preoccupied with our mission to consider approaching her.

Dinner in the hotel restaurant.

I order steak, for the novelty.

It tastes horrible.

Years of vegetarianism have altered my cells biochemically, and the scalded flesh of the sacred cow makes me retch.

But the apple pie is great.

Sudha is fun.

She has a big heart, and a big love for the master, which translates into a big love for herself. She spins engaging tales of her role as leader of the Tantra group, in which participants explore their sexuality as a path to

meditation. I keep noticing the splendid downy coffee-brown skin of her forearms as she wields her knife and fork, and I wonder why there aren't more African-American people around Bhagwan.

But I'd feel stupid asking her opinion.

Morning.

On the phone to Michel at the ranch, "Yo Billy!"

"Whiteboy! Forget that, we'll call you," he says, making fun of the gang's mix-up.

"No, listen Billy, this is serious. I've got to bug a pay-phone here. Help me out. You're the Minister of Technology. Tell me everything I'll need."

I jot it down: transmitter mic, power supply, batteries, receiver, headphones.

"Okay. Got it."

"So," Michel says, "how's your mission going?"

"Piece of cake. Yeah right. Actually, I'm shaking in my boots with fear. We've made contact with the gang. This is heavy shit. I hope I live to tell the tale. But I'd better run. I've got a lot to do. Thanks. Later."

At "The Shack," some of the parts I need are out of stock. By the time we find them elsewhere, and acquire a rudimentary set of hand tools, it's almost 6 p.m.- the bugging will have to wait. We watch again from the parking lot, hunched down in the big white Caddy, with collars up, like private detectives.

Same routine.

Same three guys with baseball caps.

Same two phone calls.

This time, when they hurry around the corner after the calls, I punch the Cadillac into action, turning left in time to catch them pulling away from the curb in a beat-up yellow Nova.

I struggle to stay on their tail.

They drive like crazed maniacs.

The rush hour streets are hectic.

They dissolve into traffic.

The classic car chase- not as easy as it looks on TV.

Evening.

For hours we drive around in the cold, scoping out different neighborhoods, searching for the beat-up yellow Nova. The houses that line Seattle's dark streets look warm and cozy, windows aglow with muted incandescent light. We speculate about the families inside, snug against the winter. How ordinary their lives must be compared to ours. I feel a closeness with Sudha. We joke nervously about what the gang would do if they caught us tailing them. I keep seeing myself stuffed in a trash can with my arms and legs hacked off.

I sleep erratically, dreaming of jet planes crashing, flaming wreckage, and billowing black smoke.

I used to keep dream journals, before taking sannyas, but I tossed them out when I found Bhagwan. All the black and white composition notebooks: too much weight to carry around; now I want to drop my dreams, both sleeping and waking, and live here in the moment.

I used to study astrology too, the little-known but accurate sidereal system.

But in the upheaval of meeting a master, I decided that practicing astrology was like reading the road map instead of going on the vacation, and I left the prognostication to those stargazers obsessed with the future. I still dabble with the ideas, but they're useless, like ideas are.

Bhagwan has spoken at length on the occult: astrology, auras, astral projection, all of it. But he advocates a detour around the psychic phenomena road; they're not needed to reach enlightenment. Cut to the chase and simply meditate, he says.

After a hotel breakfast of pancakes and syrup- no dead animal carnage please- I am trembling and sweating under my coat as I assemble my tools and electronic apparatus in the phone booth. I feel almost naked. What I'm doing... it's blatantly illegal.

But damn.

The phone's mouthpiece is screwed on too tight. It won't budge.

I phone Michel again.

"Hey Billy."

"Hey peckerhead," he chuckles, "it's you again. Did you get that phone job done? Oh, before I forget- Jules sends his love."

"Cheers. Tell him thanks. But- help! I can't get the goddamn mouthpiece off this phone."

"Oh yeah," he says, "the tool to remove the mouthpiece. Very expensive. It's a special widget. With a strap that clutches the plastic tight. I don't know where you can buy it. The phone company guys all have them. Sorry. I forgot to mention it."

"No matter," I say, "we'll just see what else happens."

"Okay Whiteboy. Good luck. I can't stay on the phone. My beeper's going off. See you."

Michel's voice trails away.

Well shit.

At 6 p.m., when our quarries arrive once more from different directions, we watch from the Cadillac. But they're acting funny, tipping their baseball caps, signaling one another.

We've been spotted.

They're watching us watching them.

Not good.

Rather than remain sitting ducks, in our conspicuous white American behemoth, we flee on foot across the parking lot, scurry around the block, and

slip into a diner down the street. Through the window beside our booth, my 35mm SLR clicks away.

Sudha and I barely sample a sip of the rotgut diner coffee before their phone calls are finished. They hustle round the corner. We leave too much money on the table- no time to get change- and rush from the diner to the parking lot.

Hop in the Caddy.

Launch into rush hour traffic, big V-8 roaring.

This time I am going for the car chase- I'm Top Gun, hot on a MIG's trail.

Bogey at nine-o'clock.

Tires skidding as I bank ninety degrees left.

Shit! Their Nova is nowhere in sight.

Lost 'em. They must've jammed my radar.

No, wait.

Around the next corner. Yes! They're back on my heads-up-display.

The street feeds into a freeway.

They're speeding way ahead.

I accelerate.

There, the last three numbers of their license plate.

Sudha scrambles in her purse for a pen and paper.

Changing lanes. Course correction.

Shit!

They're pointing back at us.

They see we're following them.

They've got me in missile lock.

Are they going to let us catch up?

Get a closer look at us?

No. They change lanes again, taking an exit.

I'll never get across all these lanes in time.

Mission failure. Abort.

Bogey still at large.

We fly back to the hotel.

On the phone to the ranch, psychotic with excitement, I tell Vidya that the gang knows we're following them. She holds her hand over the phone, then comes back on the line, "Rajesh? You guys come home. Now. Come back to the ranch. Now."

We do not need persuading.

Goodbye Seattle.

Hello ranch.

Good old Zarathustra.

I'm standing beside Julian, reading another "Oregonian" newspaper article on the bulletin board. The text describes an arson attempt on a government

building in the Dalles, insinuating that the Rajneeshees started the fire. The method used in the arson was the first one in the book I copied for Julian- the candle and gasoline formula.

This doesn't look good.

Not a coincidence.

It had to be us.

This is not a case of the Oregonian aiming to sully our reputation.

I point at the article and nudge Julian.

"Yeah," he says, "those media assholes blame everything that ever happens around here on us. We should sue them for libel and slander."

I glance skeptically at him.

He looks away, muttering quickly, "I got things to take care of. See you later."

I re-read the article.

The fire was apparently meant to destroy legal records, many of which pertain to Rajneeshee land use cases. But as an arson it failed. The windows were left shut.

No air, no fire.

Science 101.

It's good that we are unprofessional.

Maybe that will save us.

But trying to burn down buildings- this is terrorism, plain and simple.

"If you become aware and alert, meditative, then sex can be transformed into love. And if your meditateness becomes total, absolute, love can be transformed into compassion. Sex is the seed, love is the flower, and compassion is the fragrance."

- "Zen: Zest, Zip, Zap, and Zing" - Osho

Chapter Four: ZARATHUSTRA

"You're not married, are you?" Vidya enquires.

She knows I'm not.

I sit slumped in an overstuffed chair.

She towers over me.

Her voice, as if reciting a monologue.

"There aren't many single American men left on the ranch..."

She hands me a photograph.

A rotund Indian woman, some years my elder.

"You know this woman, don't you?" Vidya presses me.

I stare dumbly at the picture.

Ill at ease, I mumble, "Not really."

I've seen the woman before, around the ranch, and I remember her from India. She's an old-time sannyasin who's been with Bhagwan a long time. She shines with love for him, but no, I don't know her.

Vidya and I are upstairs in the building named Socrates.

The decor is sparse.

The blinds drawn.

The atmosphere serious.

Up here, in the area dedicated to solving Immigration and Naturalization Services problems, I am out of my element. The INS, not my province.

"So..." Vidya continues her play-act routine, "this is Sheela's friend, Hansa. She needs a husband. And you're in love with this woman, and you want to marry her?"

"Well, yeah, I guess."

Damn.

I forgot this could happen.

At least it could be an awesome babe.

My spouse-to-be looks like a sweet soul, but definitely not my style romantically. Sheela appears from nowhere.

"Whiteboy! Thank you for asking my friend to marry you. Hansa needs you badly. You already love her, don't you?"

"Well, sure Sheela."

I try to show some enthusiasm.

But I am devastated.

No one has specifically told me to get married.

Not directly.

However, it is obvious that I am getting married, to subvert the INS' immigration laws, to allow another foreign disciple the chance to remain in the U.S. with Bhagwan.

I let myself feel it: what if man-made laws forced me to leave the master?

This marriage, a love of a different kind.

I am helping another person stay with the one who's transformed her life.

What's wrong with that?

It's a question of values- spiritual goals versus national boundaries.

Which is a higher value, love or the law?

Love wins.

Sheela repeats, "Thank you, Whiteboy," and departs swiftly.

She never addresses me as Rajesh. Only Whiteboy. I don't think she remembers my sannyasin name anymore.

Oh well. Surrender is the name of the game.

At least I can continue with my James Bond lifestyle at the ranch.

Vidya says, "You and your wife Hansa will be moving to New York for a while."

Damn.

Vidya sees my dismay, but it doesn't matter.

She elaborates, "You'll need to establish a paper record of your relationship with Hansa. You know, rent receipts and phone bills in both your names. That sort of thing. But before you go, we're going to train you to deal with the INS."

My daytime hours pass behind closed doors upstairs at Socrates.

Hansa, my new mate, painfully shy and reserved, possesses an obstinate strength and a kind heart. We construct a fable: how we met, the progress of our love affair. We memorize each other's life history, learn the other's likes and dislikes, down to the toothbrush color, the brand of soap. It's the details. We get along well, considering we have little in common.

Our story well-rehearsed, Hansa and I endure hours of grueling mock interviews, interrogated by ranch moms role-playing as INS investigators. Hansa is an established ashram figure, and the INS is now aggressively investigating disciples' marriages. The preparations are essential.

This is not fun.

Evening.

After a day of ruthless third degree grilling, I pass through Edison temple, looking for a hug with that new woman, Mary.

But the area's deserted.

The lights are dim.

Air conditioners hum.

Video monitors, quietly duplicating Bhagwan's discourses, flicker with his image. His hands are so beautiful.

I turn a corner.

In an instant, I confront two faces on a TV screen. Before I have time to think, the faces register as killers- maybe perpetrators of a violent hate crime in the outside world. No, wait. They are the ranch spokespersons, two of Sheela's most powerful moms. On a recorded newscast, they're denying any Rajneeshee involvement in the Dalles poisoning and the arson.

I know they are lying.

I knew it in that first instant when I saw them.

Before I had time to think, before I had time to recognize their faces.

Their protestations are bogus. Their refutations are bunk.

A light goes on.

It's true: I am working for terrorists.

Supporting acts of religious terrorism.

I am a terrorist myself.

I'm getting out of here right now.

Away from these crazed maniacs.

I break out sweating.

I'm going home to pack.

My roommate is not at home. I pray that she's spending the night with her boyfriend, so I can escape undetected. I lock the door, take stock of my situation. The sum total of my possessions is not much: a pile of clothes, a few framed photo pictures of Bhagwan, a stack of his books, my aircraft pictures.

I glance at the slick Russian MIG-25, portrayed in silhouette in a grainy sepia print beside my bed. The war persists. The ranch reminds me of the Russian military, where the job gets done exceptionally well, though implemented with limited expertise and elementary components for ten percent the usual cost. The MIG-25, once the fastest jet in the world, was built with vacuum tubes and steel, no transistors or titanium like its competitors.

But to hell with the ranch and its efficiency.

I'm out of here.

Damn- my suitcase is too small, even for these scant few items.

I'll leave the books behind.

Who needs words?

Shit.

What am I doing?

Where will I go?

I don't even have enough money to get a plane ticket out of Portland.

How will I survive?

I'll end up destitute, another impoverished penniless wretch.

I'll probably never see Bhagwan again if I leave.

I collapse on the bed in frustration.

Curl up in the foetal position.

Hug my pillow.

Burst into tears.
I can't leave.
I'm in too deep.
I can't face life without being near Bhagwan.

The days are long, fatiguing.
Hours of preparing for the INS interview.
The nights become long too.
There's the table job.

Michel, at Julian's instruction, has created a table that listens with electronic ears. Our objective: clandestinely record the conversations of a group of wealthy sannyasins from Hollywood. This clique of high-society types made their money building shopping malls. Their sizeable financial contributions to the ranch afford them special privileges, such as their own reserved table in the ranch restaurant.

Soon we'll secretly swap Michel's wired table into their allotted spot, and Sheela will receive taped conversations of "Hollywood," as we call them.

Electricity is such magic.
We forget how extraordinary it is.

When we watch a Hollywood movie, it's only the electrical action of photons on a screen that we witness, yet complex physical, emotional, mental, and even religious events occur within us. Think of it- mere pixels of light, switching on and off- somehow precipitate an entire chain of experience. Or is it just a dream?

Hooray for Hollywood.

The illusion of glamour. The mystique of the Hollywood actors. The legends, spun from webs of stardust.

The Theosophists must be right: glamour is the core of the dark side on earth.

We worship these Hollywood stars as national heroes.

We project a perverted sex-symbol sainthood onto them.

We suck up gossip about their private lives, because we have no lives of our own.

We live vicariously, devaluing ourselves in comparison to these mythical creatures.

Am I alone in my distaste for this hero-worship, to which I'm as addicted as anyone? Shit, I'm the first in line for the magazine with Marilyn Monroe's cleavage on the cover.

And the children's version of Hollywood: the Disney cartoons- preparing

kids for lives of violence. Doesn't the violence in these children's productions- not to mention the proliferating murderous gunfire in the adult programming- lay the foundation for violence in the streets? Oh no. We have scientific studies from prestigious universities, with their statistical-stochastic correlation coefficient median-mode double-talk, that prove otherwise. And I still love cartoons myself.

How did I get stuck in this mass of conflicting forces called a personality?

Trapped, in my own private Hollywood.

To Michel and I, the ranch Hollywood crowd seem innocuous.

But somehow, they're the enemy.

Sheela considers them a threat.

Julian insists vehemently that they're dodgy, that they don't have the master's well-being in mind.

The table.

Just a regular round steel table, painted white, with tubular steel legs and cross-struts underneath, and a wide-mouthed cylindrical steel center support. It looks like any piece of indoor-outdoor furniture.

Ingenious, Michel's solution.

He's mounted four miniature microphones in the ends of the cross-struts on the underside of the table, behind tiny holes drilled in the table's rolled edge. The mic wires lead through the struts and into the central support piece, which houses an RF transmitter, an amplifier-mixer circuit, and a power supply of rechargeable NiCad batteries.

Hooray for The Shack.

We have to install and test this marvel, but the ranch restaurant is only vacant from 3:30 a.m. to 5:30 a.m.

In the wee hours, we smuggle the rigged table from its birthplace in Zarathustra; it's heavy and unwieldy as we lug it down the fire escape.

Our boots slip on the icy metal steps.

When we've hefted the cumbersome critter into the borrowed Edison van, I look up into the night.

Zarathustra stands solid and dark.

In Nietzsche's book, Zarathustra told his disciples to beware of him after he was dead, meaning they should pursue their own inner experience, rather than dwell on the memory of the master.

The master is, after all, just a key to the door.

If you see the well gone Buddha on the road, kill him.

We've been furnished keys to the restaurant.

Our alibi: we're improving the music sound system.

Security will surely come check us out.

The inadvertent interference of one agency with another.

Minister against Minister.

In the restaurant, an eerie hush, broken at random by the clunk of the kitchen's ice-maker. In my sleep-deprived state, I feel vulnerable in such a well-lit environment. While we work, our reflections dance in the picture windows, as if we aren't alone.

Michel sits outside the restaurant in the freezing night, in our beloved Toyota pickup, La Noche. And Behold! Over his receiver, plugged into one of La Noche's antennas, he can hear me chanting the dog mantra from the table inside.

"Big dog, happy dog, lucky dog, dog."

He calls back on our handheld radio, "Copy your transmission, peckerhead."

Upstairs in an attic corridor, housed in a locked box, we install a permanent receiving station, powered by good old AC. We'll run the system's recorder in extended mode when we are alerted that "Hollywood" is at their enhanced table.

It's outrageous. The pattern of sonic vibration that's a conversation, transduced into electromagnetic waves, propagates invisibly through the building to a metal wire, and becomes reproducible as magnetized particles on tape. All this, without the original speaker knowing it.

Thomas Edison, your legacy...

Alert!

Flashlight at the door!

The Security guard is unfortunately chatty.

It's a challenge, in my foggy state, to distract him, but the Minister prevails.

The real challenge of the table job, however, lies in human endurance. The transmitter inside the table needs almost daily re-charging, necessitating Michel and I staying up many nights till 5 a.m., waiting through the battery's hour-long charging cycle.

We're pouring a lot of effort into this surveillance of our fellow citizens.

It's us against the government, but us against us, too?

Fuck this disciplehood.

It'd be easier to remain a sleepwalker.

I should rejoin the rule-following crowd.

They sleepwalk. We sleep less.

Sleep deprivation: they used it in Nazi Germany to induce insanity.

Are Sheela and the gang consciously aware of what they're doing?

Is this brainwashing? Negative reinforcement? Exploitation?

Is it different from the conditioning that separates Republicans from Democrats, or Catholics from Protestants?

Stop asking questions.

Long days and dragged-out nights of tabledom.

My only recreation, hugging Mary, the new Edison woman.

Her petite, perfectly proportioned body fits right into mine.
I love the merging when we fall together.
I still don't find many words with her- the hugging is ample reward.

Another jumbo jet.

My Indian fiance and I are off to New York.

I swore to myself when I was twelve: I'll never get married.

But this is not a marriage; this is a contractual paper reality.

We rent an apartment, on the upper West Side, 93rd St.

Our new quarters, one shade above filthy.

Faded yellow wallpaper.

Cracked ceilings.

Haphazard, zany layout. No wall runs parallel to another.

The kitchenette and bathroom are obviously afterthoughts- the ugliest refrigerator on the planet essentially occupies, and dominates, the living room; the bathroom arrangement of fixtures- cumbersome- you have to drape the left side of your thorax over the sink to sit on the toilet; the bedroom is cramped; the stand-up closet, dilapidated; the curtains, drab.

Grody to the max.

God, it's a single-sized Murphy bed.

Thought I'd seen the last of these.

One bed.

Two people.

Too small.

It will have to do,

I sleep cramped and stiff with my nominal wife, keeping to my side of the mattress. I infer from her coyness that her boyfriend has given her free license to do whatever; she is moderately willing- I am decidedly not. Occasionally we cuddle.

I like to stay home. She likes to go out.

I am fastidious. She is disorderly.

I am extravagant. She is parsimonious.

I am scrawny. She is stout.

But she cooks great Indian meals.

That's mostly what we eat.

A glitch.

I make the error of informing my family that I'm in New York. They're not far away in Virginia and naturally want to see their wayward prodigal son. How to explain this woman I'm with? Hansa is obviously an unsuitable romantic match

for me.

I could leave Hansa in New York, visit my family in Virginia, commit the lie of omission, then return to my task. No way. Hansa is too bashful and timid to be left alone in New York.

A different lie- I could pretend that Hansa is a girlfriend, take her to Virginia with me, but not mention our marriage.

Or, yet another variation- I could include my family as part of the marriage ritual. I can't tell them outright that I'm marrying Hansa to succor her immigration needs. Flagrant law-breaking will flip my parents out. They're regular law-abiding citizens.

I hate this secrecy.

I hate the secrecy in families.

I used to hear things from one family member that I wasn't supposed to tell another. At the end of my teenage years, I finally told my family: if it's a secret, I don't want to hear it. And here I am harboring massive secrets from them. In the name of love.

I decide to involve them in the marriage.

That will be closer to the truth than the other options.

Off to Virginia.

My parents' apartment.

The members of my family, who've assembled to meet Hansa, are an unlikely mix of creatures.

My mother seems taller than she is, because she's slender and elegant, and the rest of the family is short, except for me- I'm blessed with average height.

My mom has an expressive mouth that slips from the sweetest smile to the nastiest grimace. She wears conservative fashionable clothes, follows convention, and she's finished the apartment with decorum and taste; she studied interior design when she was young. There's a superb painting by her- a Hopperish city scape- somewhere in the stacks of artwork my family generates.

My dad, a small gnomish creature with white mutton-chop whiskers, looks like he escaped from a Tolkein novel. A painter and a poet, eccentric but adorable, he's an atrocious dresser, jumbling plaids and paisleys with stripes, and a battered sea-captain hat. He jokes constantly, has a knack for puns, and is useless in the business world.

My mother has never forgiven my dad for not being a successful professional, but he charges along his merry pollyanna way. Most of his copious laughter is genuine.

My sister, six years my elder, also a closet poet, is in one of her chubby phases, in stark contrast to my rail-like thinness; but she is a dynamo of jovial energy, perennially busy with lunches, workshops, movies, lectures.

As young siblings, I was the normal one, a shy and studious nerd, the perfect student with excellent grades and exemplary conduct, while my sister

was the rule-breaking wild one with rebellious boyfriends, fast cars, and plenty of booze. Now our roles have reversed: I am the fringe misfit, who wanders from the straight and narrow, while she studies orthodox things like sociology.

My niece, who is nine years old, bubbles tirelessly, a sunny little elf.

Although my family is a menagerie of disparate types, they love me with relentless devotion, and despite the noticeable incongruity of my current liaison, they extend my bride-to-be a heartwarming reception, welcoming her into the fold.

Hansa reels, overwhelmed with guilt, when my mother gives her a diamond ring.

I tell her to take it.

Enjoy it.

City Hall.

Wedding bells are ringing.

The barren bigness of the rooms of officialdom.

The colorful American flag. The Virginia state flag, portraying a prostrate tyrant, overcome on a blue background. The Justice of the Peace, the overseer, tall, stately, and good-natured in his black robe.

The couple, Hansa and Rajesh, wear red clothes and malas.

The family, decked out in traditional regalia.

Strange that it's 1984, George Orwell's red letter year.

My mother coddles Hansa worshipfully, because this woman is bringing her baby boy happiness, stability, and all that good stuff marriage is supposed to deliver.

My dad beams like a lighthouse, proud and silly, making absurd jokes.

Today my sister is part robin, clucking over my niece, trying in vain to stop the young ball of energy from fidgeting.

It is fun, although it's a sham.

Maybe this was a bad choice. Too late now.

I do.

We say it.

Everyone laughing and hugging.

The Justice of the Peace smiling.

My mom shedding tears.

The American dream materializes. But it's not what it seems.

We have a reception dinner at Stanley Stegmeyer's restaurant.

I like the ambience in this labyrinth of primary colors and diverse

architectural forms, each room a kid's heaven hodgepodge of Pythagorean solids. It's a new phenomenon to me, having been so long segregated from the outside world.

My mom, a thoughtful gift-giver, sneakily produces a Polaroid Instamatic camera from her purse.

We have fun snapping pix.

My old friends from the pre-Bhagwan era can't quite gestalt Hansa as my running mate for life. She seems too sedate for me. But I leave them guessing. A former girlfriend, who's become a born-again Christian, asks me, "So what is the philosophy of this group you've joined?"

"Well, people want a concrete definition, but it's hard to explain. We have no actual philosophy. We're not a religion. We're just gathered around someone who's become enlightened. Like Buddha or Jesus"

"Jesus," she says, "is not like Buddha."

"Maybe, but the Buddha's lineage has produced many more buddhas. I don't see Christianity producing any more like Jesus."

"We don't need but one Jesus."

It's ironic.

I grew up in the Episcopal church, but it never seemed true; everyone said one thing, and did another. Now, thanks to Bhagwan, Jesus feels like a real presence to me.

Bhagwan has spoken at length on Jesus and his teachings, portraying Jesus as a great master, but also emphasizing the difference between a master, and the edifice that grows up around him or her. And though to me it's the same God coming through both Buddha and Jesus- the same light shining through two different windows- I sense this conversation with my friend is heading into dire straights.

"Alright then," I say, "we'll have to agree to disagree on this one."

"No problem," she replies, "but I still don't get what you guys do. Aren't there any laws you live by?"

"No. Bhagwan discourages us from formulating a code of conduct. He says that as we go deeper inside ourselves, goodness arises naturally. Meditation is the one thing he consistently endorses."

"Then, there's nothing you follow, like the Ten Commandments?"

"Not really. I mean, at the ranch, in the buildings we don't smoke, and we eat only vegetarian food. But outside the commune, you eat what you want. And there are three rules to being a sannyasin. You have to change your name, wear red clothes, and keep this locket with the master's picture around your neck. Except when you sleep. But some people sleep wearing them."

I hold out my mala for my friend to examine.

"He looks like Isaac Hayes," she says.

"Hmm. You're right."

"Well your three rules seem simple enough."

"Yeah right. Deceptively simple. But try it sometime. It upsets your whole world. Imagine asking your mother to call you by some obscure Sanskrit name. Or trying to apply for a job with this thing around your neck. The whole system is designed to challenge your concept of who you are, to shake up your identity."

"What's the point in that? Aren't you trying to become peaceful?"

"The basic idea is that who we are is the sum total of our conditionings. So by stripping that stuff away, we become empty vessels, and God has room to enter. Peace is already there, but it's beneath who we think we are and has to be uncovered. It's like becoming nothing, so that something bigger can come through."

"Hmm," she says, "you always were totally weird."

"Yeah, that part hasn't changed."

"Are you sure this guy Bhagwan isn't the devil?"

"He's both God and the devil."

Both-And.

The opposite of Either-Or.

A few of my former friends ignore me now.

They chalk me up as a new age space case.

They don't grasp that the quest leads you into unusual places.

I figure if they can't go beyond their notions of what I should be, they're not worth having as friends anyway; if they're embarrassed by my appearance, or by my ideas, who needs them?

I do persist in trying to explain Bhagwan. But logic breaks down.

In fact, in a logical sense, Bhagwan is useless. He says so.

He's purposefully inconsistent, always telling the truth of this moment, but then contradicting it later.

He even admits that he lies to us- he'll do whatever it takes to break down our conditioned beliefs; he often scoffs at the difference between truth and lies, knowing that the only real truth is the truth that can't be spoken.

You can never second guess the master.

The incongruities he presents will drive you mad.

Today, Bhagwan will say that love relationships are the only viable path to self-discovery, that you have to love one person before you can love the whole cosmos. Tomorrow, he'll insist that only through aloneness will we find the light. Both perspectives will make sense, but not simultaneously. Thus we're left with only paradoxes- like life itself- and we need to find the answers for ourselves.

But it's not really answers that we seek- it's the state of being, wherein questions lose relevance, that is the goal.

Our current goal is to fill our stomachs.

There is this odd thing which occurs in restaurants.

My family, except for my mom, has this unrecognized disease which I call

menu-itis. They can't translate restaurant menus into words. Maybe it's because they're such visual people.

My father points to the vast, plastic-laminated page of dinner entrees, and says, "I'll have the Greek."

The waitress double-takes, scratches her head with her pencil, asks politely, "The Greek WHAT, Sir?"

You know the rest.

My sister's turn to order. She speaks directly to the waitress, without referring to any item on the menu, and asks if she can have it with fries instead of a salad.

The waitress, suppressing a smirk, says, "Can you have WHAT with fries instead of a salad, Ma'am?"

You get the idea.

I can't explain the aura of insanity that materializes around my family when we gather as a group. The madness most often manifests as hysterical laughing fits in inappropriate public places. My niece doesn't know what she's laughing at- it doesn't matter to her still fresh Buddha-like mind; divine creature, she calls us "the Gay Posse."

Fortunately, the laugh bug doesn't strike in the course of this social event.

It's curious enough already, with the duplicitous premise upon which it's founded.

Back to the big city.

To bolster the paper reality, I find a dead job, repairing microcassette recorders for a big shop in mid-town.

It is boring, ashen.

The electronic density and workmanship of the small recording devices astounds me, but they're virtually unserviceable hunks of junk. When you open the little beasts, all the component subassemblies spring apart like a jack-in-the-box, and re-assembling them is a chore suited to only the severest of masochists.

I christen these little wonders: "chimpltech."

My boss, Stan, towers tall and large, with a squarish jowly face and an incongruous button nose. He wears his longish black hair plastered down flat and shiny. Stan has the ability to flatter the customer, the power of ingratiation, as every service manager needs.

Desperate for diversity, I revamp the shop's service order forms.

Stan likes the term "chimpltech," because he is smart enough to know that the products we purvey are old technology, fed to the public in incremental

stages, each mandatory upgrade costing more dearly than the last.

Oh, Thomas Edison.

Stan could care less about dead genius inventors. He is happy to be gouging the public at megabucks per hour for services rendered. But Stan's jocund personality does not diminish my overall sense of isolation among Manhattan's sour-faced crowds.

I need a woman.

I resort to pornography.

Forty-Second Street.

The night, a cold blaze of lights.

The world's gutter.

I am drawn to the worst of the worst.

Sex shops.

Life-size plastic blow-up dolls hang in the windows.

They look like beach toys.

Multicolored dildoes and vibrators line up at attention behind glass, little tin soldiers with kitchen appliance attachments. I never mess with them, and ignore a yen to buy a souvenir.

Video arcades.

TV screens shimmer with near-naked nubile, flaunting their pasties, popping their g-strings.

Recordings of women sobbing in imitation ecstasy.

I am Ulysses, passing by in his wooden ship, taunted by sirens. I decline their mythical invitations to die for the sake of sex. Or am I already dead?

X-rated theaters, old stone facades plastered with pink and violet neon babes.

Live sex shows. Stogey-chewing barkers, hawking the skin trade wares.

It's all here.

The mirage of prowess.

I go into a dirty book shop.

Browsing the greeting card rack first, I pick up one showing a woman dressed as a French maid, hiking up her skirt, raising one leg high before a mirror. The caption inside reads: "It does NOT look like a taco." Funny, but I must beg to differ. The shape of the thing between a woman's legs does rather resemble two transversely bisected toroids sandwiched together.

The magazines are used.

You have to check for pages stuck together, but you can leaf through before buying, which is a plus. Only certain bunny configurations will turn you on- it's subjective- so you need to try before you buy.

How disappointing! To get home with your shrink-wrapped magazine and find that, to you, all the girls on its pages are dogs. Every porno user has suffered this letdown. And how many men don't have a magazine stuffed under the bed or in a closet?

The hierarchy of the senses.

But this artistically inclined disciple is not only a spectator but a shy pornographer himself. I draw and paint female nudes in provocative poses, rendering them in graphic detail. To many women- this is objectionable; I'm a distasteful deviate in their eyes. What is natural beauty to me is degradation to them.

I acknowledge my addiction to prurient fantasy; but I see pornography as a symptom not a cause; you can stamp out the symptom, but the energy will resurface in a different form. Aware that our chauvinist system of men exploiting women stems from ignorance and fear, nevertheless, I find artistic inspiration in the so-called dirty magazines; to me they're just sumptuous nudes.

Sensuality is reality. But keep that libido incognito.

It is interesting: a photograph of a naked woman, viewed in the context of a porn magazine, repulses many women. Place the same so-called lascivious image in a coffee-table art book or a high-brow photography catalog, and it becomes great art.

The line between porn and eros: it's in the eye of the beholder, a tiny imperceptible perforated s-curve snaking across the cornea.

Tear along the dotted line.

The real smut hides in the fashion magazines, with their frivolous, trashy articles that pretend you're perfect as you are while they convince you that you're unacceptable without certain products. Ten thousand ways to cover your smell and conquer your man.

In fact, the in-vogue fashion mag pictures steam, hotter than the ones in the porno. And the seduction in the fashion magazines is more insidious, because it coerces you from behind the guise of social acceptability and artsy haute couture.

But here I am now, slinking through the racks of a New York slime-pit, combing through the magazines. The titles are fabulous: "Arch Angel," for the foot fetishist; "Mellow Yellow," for the golden showers freak, "Chain Bang," for the bondage aficionado; "Pregnant and Horny," "Tender Shavers," "Rear Entry," "Farters with Finesse," "Teenage Bitchfight," on and on.

I find a simple one, "Nympho," containing three tawny "tens," major foxes with pert breasts.

Worth the five bucks.

It's curious, how the same woman can appear gorgeous in one pose, and from another angle, she's repulsive. Hmm- that's the way I see women in real life too. Does the classical Greek golden mean ratio, 1:1.618, the universal principle of proportion incorporated by the Renaissance masters, apply to a woman's face? To her fanny?

I purchase the magazine.

I go into a video arcade and buy tokens.

In a cramped booth with an 8mm projector, I watch a tape loop of a tableau with a voluptuous woman down on all fours under a heavy wool blanket, being humped by a monstrous hog. The bristly animal must weigh three hundred pounds. The lady's rabid squealing may not be the agony of ecstasy. Too bizarre to turn me on, but she does have the corpulent buttocks of a Renoir nude.

I fare better in the next stall.

The woman is a dizzying brunette, at least an eleven, with dewy apricot skin offset by lavender undergarments. I become engrossed, as she strips to the buff and gets down to it- she's actually enjoying her hokey ribald tryst with the gardener. That much reality in the phoniness is sufficient to get me off, spasming and spurting inside my pants. My long orange jacket will hide the wet spot.

This dastardly objectification business.

This promise that never delivers.

This grand disappointment, when pleasure's slippery finale slides noiselessly down your leg.

What happened to love? Compassion? Meditation?

But I've got to get home, away from this shady tenderloin night world, back to my resident alien wife and our rented TV and VCR.

Returning to our apartment, I check the refrigerator, its battered door creaking on rusty hinges. A new addition to our meager stock of foreign foodstuffs- my God- two huge, economy size boxes of Velveeta.

"What's with the Velveeta?" I ask Hansa, laughing in disbelief.

"It's my favorite," she answers. "It was a specialty in India. Sometimes we couldn't get it. All the Indians in the ashram loved it."

"Good Lord," I say, "truth is stranger than fiction."

Hansa and I are into watching videos, and going to movies.

We howl in the throes of ecstasy at Eddie Murphy in "48 Hours."

We both like Al Pacino, rent all of Pacino's films on VCR.

We see Scarface in the big theater. The guns are so loud. I like the cocaine scene at the end with the grenade launcher. Snappy action self-destruction.

We attend a Eurhythmics concert in a grubby west Village venue. I love Annie Lennox's orange hair and multiple outfit changes, her spirited stage presence, her sonorous golden voice.

I feel almost like I'm part of the world again, dropping my media-illiteracy.

Occasionally I bring back dirty movies.

Hansa, impressionable and easily embarrassed, enjoys the sex films as entertainment. In response to the young, oily bodies, noisily fucking and sucking, she frequently exclaims, "Ohmigod!"- running the syllables together into one endearing blurt.

But the films' brittle lack of substance quickly becomes boring.

The days roll into weeks.

The pale winter sun strains through the carbon-polluted atmosphere.

Apathy devours me. I develop a bad cold.

But I never get sick on the ranch.

It must be the toxic nightmare environment of the big city.

The drudgery of fixing tape recorders in bleak midtown becomes intolerable.

I quit my job, wander the chilly streets, observing the world in 1984.

I'm overwhelmed by the proliferation of consumer products; the quantity of items-just in one department store- is astonishing. I imagine all the products, in all the stores, in all the malls, in all the world, all piled into one big heap. The packing materials alone fill mountain ranges.

The people groveling for these material objects are insane.

And yet, as I window shop, hands stuffed in my pockets, I too am drooling over the feature-packed cameras and flashy designer apparel. I'm as hooked as the people I condemn.

Freud was right. What we can't accept in ourselves, we project onto others. And once I've acknowledged my greed, and the tendency to blame others for my own faults, how then to exorcise these things from my personality?

These reactions, automatic. This path of awareness, arduous.

The scenarios on the avenues fascinate me. I listen through stuffed up ears to the traffic sounds, the music coming from bars, ragtime, blues, swing, acid rock, jazz; share the joy of the delinquent sidewalk urchins in their threadbare coats; savor the aromas of the food stands, except the noxious ones cooking meat in aluminum pans.

I watch the hurly-burly crowds: haughty socialites, obsequious businessmen, flamboyant transvestites, greasy pimps, homely working girls, phlegmatic derelicts, insipid housewives, ecstatic hippies, brawny blue-collars- a rainbow potpourri of humanity, pulsing in waves through the streets like alternating current in an electronic circuit.

Lust permeates me as I ogle the many ladies, dressed up for each other with all the trappings. The female figures in the window display posters stun me equally. Even the lingerie-clad mannequins turn my head. Image or reality, flesh or plastic- it all pulls me off center.

Something... so lewd, about those mannequins.

I chuckle over the candle shops- I always wanted to open a candle shop when I was a hippie. I peer at TVs in store windows, mistake sitcoms for commercials; read newspapers; hide from the winter's bite in coffee houses,

misunderstanding the jokes I overhear. My media illiteracy, engendered by years of self-enforced abstinence from television and newspapers, is evident.

At home, I try to meditate. But I can't sit still.

Pursuing the spy trade role, I scour pawnshops, buy miniature binoculars, and a small monocular scope.

I comb bookstores and libraries, absorbing the minutiae of espionage, the secret government, and the CIA. I gather product specifications from surveillance companies, little holes in the wall on back streets, with faded grey striped wallpaper and faded grey salesmen in faded grey pinstripe shirts with starched collars. I dawdle, like Sam Spade, around buildings that house private detectives, just to sample the air.

I pretend I'm not a novice.

Real spies: they memorize the walk of the quarry they're tailing.

It's harder to disguise your gait than your appearance.

I study my walk, try to consciously change it.

I practice memorizing license plates.

The lust.

I buy more magazines.

This is not new.

I have this process- it happens intermittently.

I collect all forms of printed matter that contain pictures of nude women. Not only porno- but also fashion magazines, erotic art books, photography books. Any publication, dirty or clean or in between, will do.

I cut out my favorite pictures, and chop them into perfect squares and rectangles, divorcing them from their original environments and dispensing with the garish, distracting captions.

I lend order to my girls, sorting them into matched pairs, wherein both pictures embody similar backgrounds, or subject matter, or color schemes. My purpose is to create an aesthetically pleasing and coherent impression that gestalts well.

I collect so many pictures- they take on their own life. The girls sort themselves into fractally clustered categories, and take up residence in named file folders. I've had as many as 100 in progress at once. A sampling of my classifications, alphabetized:

Chaos

Cowgirls

Dance

Faces

How to Photograph Women, Black and White Version
How To Photograph Women, Color Version
Marilyn
Medium-sized Color Pix
Miss Scellania
Motorcycle Girls
Nostalgia
Outer Space
Rooms
Small Color Pix

Etc.

My files become books, the girls ordered in increasing provocative intensity and installed into scrapbooks and photo albums. Some involve elaborate collage work, such as "The Witch Queen," and "The Tropical Fantasy," and "Aircraft Love."

Some spotlight a particular color, for example, "Red Rooms." Particularly raw and sensual are the black and white collections; I have a special place in my heart for black and white photography- something... so pure and elemental.

I collect a lot of ballet pictures too.

I rarely find my symbols of adoration performing axillary port de bras or agile arabesques sans clothing, but ballet dancing is so magnificent it doesn't matter.

I collect fairies, nymphs, mermaids, troll chicks, and vampire babes as well.

And an occasional snark.

Sometimes I masturbate to my collections.

I worship the goddess, pay her homage.

It's a nice ritual by candlelight, my own brand of sex yoga. If I take my time, I do find meditative inner spaces, but I fear the objectification of women also leaves me often insulated and isolated.

My friend Priya, the cappuccino maker, maintains I'll get enlightened through my pornography.

Why is there pornography?

If we didn't repress our sexual desires, how could we be titillated?

How would indecency be defined?

If sex were a natural thing, women, and men, would transcend their commodity status. If sex were natural, the dirty picture industry would be out of business, and advertising's "sell it with sex" formula would be obsolete; it's the system that's vulgar, not the few inches of anatomy it champions as bait.

If sex were natural, civilization might be civilized.

My beloved bride Hansa mulls over me, as I sit on our living room floor, blowing my nose and assembling a new collection of porno scrapbooks.

The pile of albums grows.

I measure and chop and cut and paste, getting horny as the shapely pixies frolic and prance through my imagination, but with Hansa around, there's not much space for my solo shamanic sex shenanigans.

Another night, haunted by desire.

The incessant craving.

Forty-Second Street.

It's very late, well past midnight.

The crowds have thinned out.

Only a few tattered weirdos skulk in the shadows.

One lonesome prostitute loiters in a doorway, almost catatonic, gaudy lipstick smeared and crumpled wig ajar.

The Harem Theater.

Two triple-X features running back-to-back all night.

I brought my friend Priya here once. We sat in the rarely used balcony, restricted to couples, and gawked at "Bad Girls."

Or was it "Outlaw Ladies?"

After twenty torrid minutes we'd had our fill.

Even though as a couple we'd stopped having sex, we raced home and fucked like rabbits- that's how suggestive the films are. They turn you on, despite your disdain for their sleazy perversion and dearth of content. You watch your biology annul your morality.

In the theater lobby, it's surprisingly busy.

Dressed in my long scarlet scarf, burnt-orange coat, and international orange knitted hat, with blond locks spilling out, I stand out among the businessmen and derelicts. Into the darkness of the small cinema, I weave my way, carefully, as the floor can be slippery.

An aisle halfway down is entirely empty.

I sit all the way over against the wall.

Tonight, I don't know the names of the films.

It doesn't matter.

I love the weak plots, the cardboard dialogue, the banging hot phony sex, the picture perfect proportioned people who can't act. They're having fun making money, with their contrived encounters and whimsical props.

Midway into the second feature, as the limber sweaty blond on the screen convulses in feigned abandon, vigorously pounding the floor with her fists from a doggie-style stance, an inebriated tramp on the front row starts bellowing.

"She ain't real! She's fakin' that shit! She ain't breakin'! Signifyin'!"

He keeps it up.

Perturbed businessmen, fantasy voyages momentarily suspended, begin shouting "Shut up," their voices self-conscious, constricted at first, then forceful.

As the drunk settles down, the audience again lapses into a coma, transfixed by the wanton lechery onscreen, and affixed to the concurrent elongations in their pants.

Suddenly, into the chair next to me descends a heavy presence.

A large, black, military boot lowers itself onto my thigh, just above the knee.

In the light reflected from the movie screen, Das Boot on my leg.

I don't want this boot on my leg.

I don't want what the man wearing this boot wants.

I want to escape from here.

But I am paralyzed, teeth clenched, heart racing.

I can barely breathe through my swollen sinuses.

The boot lingers.

I don't look at him.

Instead, I muster all my psychic energy and broadcast that I am not the one he seeks. It ain't me yer lookin' for, babe.

Poof.

The lights come on.

The movie screen goes blank.

The boot is gone.

The chair next to me is empty.

It's 6 a.m., and the ushers are coming in to clean up the popcorn bags and who knows what else.

I emerge from the theater giddy, debilitated, pallid and unkempt, into a frosty sunrise, under scudding cirrus clouds painted rose and coral and gold. My body aches, my mind saturated with blistering blow-jobs and tenderized vaginal meats. I expectorate a large green glutinous mass, like animal tallow, onto the sidewalk.

I HAVE to start meditating again.

I ride the subway back uptown, hypnotized by the thrumming clatter of steel wheels on tracks, continually re-reading the magic marker graffiti scrawled on the metal seat back. At my building's entrance, a rambunctious piebald stray mutt attacks me. I pull the dog mantra into action, and he miraculously softens into a quiescent state.

God, it actually worked.

Inside, Hansa is asleep, and I dutifully prop myself against the living room wall in a cross-legged position. Trying to watch my mind, within a few seconds I fall dead asleep.

New York is over.

Hansa and I have amassed an impressive paper reality now.

I decide to confront the malevolent INS at their office in Virginia, presuming we'll cut a lower profile if we petition the dreaded devils down south.

I hire a lawyer.

No lawyer is needed.

The presumed uncharitable, hardhearted inquisitors turn out to be lambs.

Hansa and I breeze through the interview.

That was too easy.

I was ready to fight lions.

When the prized green card arrives, Hansa flies back to the ranch without me. I'll miss her- I've grown fond of her quiet presence- but my scrapbooks can keep me company, and I'm to remain in Virginia, ostensibly for a little more time with the relatives. In fact, there are extenuating circumstances: more surveillance data to procure, and one more special duty to perform.

I am to establish a false identity.

Self-educated in this procedure from the underground library I've acquired for Julian, a two-volume set, "The Paper Trip, I and II," acts as my guide.

I rent a hotel room from which to work.

Buy a used Smith-Corona typewriter.

Visit a local graveyard.

A dark rainy day.

Somehow appropriate.

I hate rain.

It gives me a sinus headache.

On a wet tombstone, I find the name of a male who died as an infant in the year I was born. His middle name, Christian. I am to become him.

I had a premonition my pseudonym would include the name Christian.

This must be the one.

Through lengthy library searches of local newspaper columns on microfilm, I locate his obituary. But I need his mother's maiden name to get a birth certificate.

More days, pursuing his mother's wedding.

I can't find it, resort to social engineering.

Locating his actual parents in the phone book, I call his mother, posing as a political pollster. She's mortified, unwilling to reveal her age to a stranger. But I badger her, repeating the question, until she submits.

Interesting, what people do if they think you're holding a clipboard or wearing a white lab coat.

I feel incredible anxiety and guilt invading this person's privacy; for a woman to reveal her age- this psychological warfare- it's powerful stuff. But I can't think of a reason to ask for her maiden name.

More microfilm. Scanning years in which she might have married.

I press on tenaciously.

Finally.

There she stands in the society column, exultant in her diaphanous veils and gown of white. As I gratefully jot down her maiden name, I feel a ridiculous heartwarming surge, like a miserable Dickens character overjoyed on reuniting with his long lost mum.

Posing as a fictitious brother, I apply by mail for a copy of the birth certificate, using only my hotel's street designation as a return address.

I fill out the forms on the used typewriter, wearing plastic gloves.

The application goes into the mailbox.

The typewriter goes over the rail of a faraway bridge, into a river at night.

In care of myself at the hotel, I write letters to the so-called brother, informing the desk clerks he's a business colleague. Thus, when the birth certificate addressed to him arrives, the desk personnel are conditioned into giving his mail to me.

My scheme is convoluted, but if anything misfires, it will be harder to track me.

It's the details, the laborious details.

I kill time, in the interim waiting for my new identity.

The loneliness, away from the ranch, weighs heavily on me.

The TV in my hotel room is dull as dishwater.

My porno scrapbooks fail to keep me entertained.

I revert to drugs.

The ordinary off-the-shelf Benzedrex inhaler has a healthy dose of ephedrine diffused into the cotton roll inside the little plastic dispenser tube. Enough speed to send you to the moon for 18 hours. You'll need another 48 hours to recover from the hyperbolic shock to your physiology and psyche. I've not taken this non-prescription excursion for more than a decade, so just this once, for old time's sake.

Swallowing the cotton is an unpleasant affair.

The menthol and camphor combine to beget a horribly vile aftertaste, which lasts throughout the experience. But it drives me into a sexual delirium, similar to crank, or methedrine. I thrash around and around, by misty yellow candlelight, with sandalwood incense and smooth jazz on the radio, slaving over my collections of paper babes.

I never reach orgasm- the drug inhibits it.

The come-down.

I spend a day lying immobilized in bed, drinking water, loathing the putrid taste in my mouth, and suffering through the inevitable depression as the hell phase of my junket up the stairway to heaven wears off.

What goes up must come down.

The higher you fly, the harder you crash.

Both-And.

I detest psychiatric labels- they exist principally for billing purposes- but I must be manic-depressive, like in the Jimi Hendrix song. Today I know what to expect, so I resist indulging excessively in the old suicidal ideation. I love life now; but I have planned my suicide scores of times during previous negative phases. Could it be a sign of intelligence, to consider all potential escape routes from this madness which is life on earth?

Or is it just a hole in your aura?

The day of my name transplant arrives.

A letter from the Bureau of Vital Statistics, stuffed inside my shirt.

The envelope tickles my nipples.

I flee the hotel, to assure I am not seen with it.

Under a wintry sun, on an avenue lined with bare trees, I'm just a man, opening a letter as he walks.

The birth certificate. Yes!

But.

In large block letters, diagonally across its face, the word: "DECEASED."

Damn. It's useless.

No one gives a driver's license to a dead person.

The book said this only happened in the largest major urban centers.

Another mission miscarriage. Agent, you failed.

On the phone, I explain to Vidya, in couched terms, what has occurred.

She says, "Don't worry about it. Don't be so serious. Come back to the ranch."

"When you are no more, you are in meditation.
Meditation is not more of you; it is always beyond
you. When you are in the abyss, meditation is
there. Then the ego is not; then you are not. Then
the being is."

- "The Psychology of the Esoteric" - Osho

Chapter Five: PYTHAGORAS

"We've got to search your suitcase," says the slightly butch Security guard, addressing me in the lobby of our Hotel Rajneesh in Portland.

This is not good.

The luggage search here in the Portland hotel is mandatory, standard operating procedure since the hotel bombing. Another search awaits me at the ranch. And not only do I have top secret surveillance info, I have my extensive porno collection in tow.

Nervous, I glance about.

The well-appointed hotel lobby smells of leather chairs and radiates the warm orange light of late afternoon. Sannyasins quietly go about their jobs. In my agitation, the atmosphere of cozy welcome feels out of place.

"You can't search this suitcase," I order the Security guard. "I have classified things for Sheela. Get me to a telephone. I'll let you speak to her directly."

The Security guard sees that I mean business.

She is not anxious to speak to Sheela.

Sheela can be very intimidating, even on the phone.

At the hotel reception desk, I get Jesus Grove on the line.

Ah, Sheela.

"Sheela! This is Whiteboy."

"Who?" says Sheela. "Oh. Whiteboy. Yes. How are you?"

"Fine, Sheela. Thanks. Sheela... I'm in Portland, at the hotel. Listen. I've got things for Julian. And I need you to tell them not to search my suitcase."

"Sure Whiteboy, no problem. Put them on the line. No, wait. I've been with Bhagwan all afternoon. I'm exhausted. My mind is wilted like a flower. You tell them yourself. If they have a problem, tell them to call me."

She's right. Her word will be enough.

"Okay, Sheela. Thank you."

I dissolve in gratefulness as I hang up the phone.

The Security guard backs off on the suitcase search.

I pass the night in my hotel room, suitcase close to the bed.

Back on the ranch, in the Mirdad reception room, I again invoke Sheela's name to avoid being searched, saving myself from deeper reservoirs of embarrassment.

Outside, I cast about for a ride home.

Aha. There's my young friend, the Artful Dodger.

He's with three other guys, Shiven, Anam, and Arpito.

Shiven is the ranch conga drum player, a gentle and easygoing African-American man. Or maybe he's from the Caribbean- I'm not sure- but he's one of those unusually receptive people who rarely complains. I don't hang out

with him much- we work in different temples- but we get along great. I love his heartwarming smile.

Anam is a tall and lanky, Anglo-Saxon warrior teenage boy-man. One of the ranch troublemakers, he displays a wild temper coupled with a genius for telling the truth at the wrong times- and lying at the right times. I love him for that. He's a splendid soul, and I always take up for misunderstood underdogs that lose it in public places like he does.

Arpito, my best friend in the world, is a tall stately Englishman with impeccable manners hiding a huge heart. He repairs typewriters for Edison- we call him "typewriter Arpito"- though he can fix anything; he has that razor-sharp analytical type of mind that pierces to the core of how things work. His sense of reality is wonderfully obtuse- he regularly offers me a new perspective.

I met Arpito in Poona, when together we did the "awareness walk," an ashram group assignment which entailed a long trek through the Indian streets, telling each other each thing of which we became aware. Now I am aware of the cows in the street. Now I am aware of the dung in my path. Now I am aware that I'm thinking of the shoes I left in San Francisco. Now I am aware of the beggar pissing. Now I am aware that I'm aware... and like that.

The awareness walk sounds simple, but it produces a profound effect, and since sharing the experience with Arpito, we've been bosom buddies.

I exchange hugs with my friends.

Arpito is headed elsewhere- I never get much time with him now that I'm a spy- but the other three offer me a ride home. The Dodger and I sit in the back of the clankety pickup truck, collars turned up against the cold and the dust. We shout over the noise of the bumpy ride.

"So- Whiteboy, where've you been? Haven't seen you around," yells the Dodger.

I bellow over the wind, "Oh, I was in New York, and Virginia. I got married. Hung out. Watched videos."

"Cool," he shouts. "Did you do the wild thing with your wife?"

"Nah," I moan loudly, "she's not my style."

For the rest of the ride, the Dodger and I jostle together without speaking, watching the mountainsides whiz by. It's good to have a friend who doesn't demand incessant conversation.

In Edison, for the first time in what seems like years- it's only been a couple of months- I find Mary again, and the magic within our hugging is right there.

Sweetness.

"It's you," I say, "I've missed the most."

She parts her lips, bows her head demurely.

Down the hall, I surprise Michel, bursting into the spy room.

"Whiteboy! You're back," he exclaims, putting down his smoking soldering iron.

"Yo Billy! You fucking peckerhead!"

I give him a hug, feeling at home amid the familiar lead fumes.

"So, Mr. Big Apple. How was it?"

"It sucked," I mumble in the lowest voice possible.

Laughter.

"Yeah," I say, "all I did was look at porno and watch movies. The big city is totally disgusting. Filthy. God, so many people, and they all look like death. It was intense. Intensely boring, actually. I did gather a lot of interesting data though."

Michel grins, "You're always collecting data. I've been busy as a big dog without you. Jules has been piling the work on, as usual. Hey, check it out. The new phone-tap system is ready to go. All thirty-six incoming lines to Socrates building. And I fitted the electronics into that metal trunk."

He points to a big beat-up padlocked metal box on the floor in the corner.

"And," he gets excited, "I've almost finished bugging the new ranch hotel. I discovered a slick new way to do it. This one's great. You're going to love it."

"I can't wait. Hey, it's good to see you again."

"Yeah, really."

I look at him. His innocence seems out of place in our world of intrigue.

His heart is so big, you can't help but love him.

It's good to be back with my amigo.

On my workbench lies an expensive rust-colored leather briefcase, open, with two huge transformer coils and a maze of circuitry sitting in it. Multicolored wires spreading out, spider-like.

"What's that?" I ask, nodding at the briefcase.

"Jules wants me to build a bulk tape eraser in that case. A job for some mom. She'll take it to an office in Portland to erase a videotape without anyone knowing."

"Do what? Yeah right!" I howl. "That goddamn thing is going to be too heavy to lift, much less carry into an office."

"I know," complains Michel. "But you know Julian. Nothing is impossible."

"Yeah, he just doesn't get it sometimes. What else is going on?"

Michel consults a notebook on his crowded workbench.

He reads, "Finish bugging all the hotel rooms, the new phone system for Socrates, three more mics in handbags, a new antenna for the Toyota La Noche,

another scanner for Jules's car, test the new parabolic mic, install crystals in the handheld radios, one of the mics in Hollywood's table isn't working, the supplemental system for... "

"Okay okay," I interrupt. "Enough. I'm sneaking off for cappuccino before I get back into all this busyness. I'm gonna walk to the mall. I can't handle driving La Noche yet."

"I'm going to tell Jules you're already sloping," he kids.

"Yeah, and ah'm gonna kick yo fawkin' ass."

Michel and I have our hands full.

And it's festival time.

The overall ranch workload expands to staggering proportions.

Accommodating the thousands of happy visitors- they're already pouring in by the busload- is a formidable undertaking.

Four times each year we do this.

In the spring, we honor Bhagwan's enlightenment; in the summer, our largest festival, we give thanks for all the masters who've come to earth; in the fall, we venerate Bhagwan's father's enlightenment; and in the winter, the upcoming festival, we celebrate the birthday of our beloved master.

There are tent villages to be put up, food areas to be erected, additional therapy group rooms to be outfitted with P.A. systems. On and on. Five thousand people will attend this gathering, and up to fifteen thousand people will be at the extravaganza in the summer. The collective energy of so many people together celebrating- it's phenomenal. Festivals are the most fun, and the most work.

On the road to the mall.

Crowds of bundled up, laughing sannyasins from all over the world.

Extraordinary women, more than you can count.

Look at that pretty one with the black gypsy ringlets.

Ohmigod- I had sex with her during a group in Poona.

It happened in the Tathatha group.

Tathatha. Pronounced Tah-TAH-tah. Such a beautiful word. It means "suchness."

A beautiful word, a beautiful woman.

In the midst of an eyes-closed group energy exercise, I ended up on the floor making love to her, never seeing her until afterwards. It was not an orgy- just a spontaneous event. We had great sex. Guess you don't need a visual image to have a good time.

I don't remember the woman's name.

But she doesn't recognize me anyway.
There are so many ways the universe reminds you that you're not special.
Even if she did recognize me, work- especially at festival time- comes first.

Well, after cappuccino.

Living meditatively provides infinite energy, but I was born to cheat with these artificial substances.

Late evening.

Julian assigns me and Michel a straight job.

He sends us up in the ceiling of Magdalena cafeteria, stringing wires for a new sound system. Nothing clandestine or exciting about this dog work.

My resistance to the menial reminds me I'm not as surrendered as I think.

I am very willing, as long as the assignment is fun, or cool, or dangerous.

But if it's just boring, I get bored.

I am an elitist- not a kitchen worker at heart. Perhaps one day my enlightenment will come as I scrub toilets, or wash rice, but till then, I like pretending to be special. And I don't like it when valuable operatives like myself are diverted, in the middle of the night no less, to perform mindless tasks.

But, even the mindless must be done mindfully.

Up in the rafters in the dark, it's freezing, and dangerous.

You can step only on the beams, because between them lie panels of false ceiling tile which won't support your weight.

Michel perches on a beam across the wide room.

I can barely make out his silhouette in the dark.

He calls that he's throwing me a coil of wire, and misjudges- his toss is a tad wide.

I step out to catch the wire.

Crash straight through the false ceiling tiles.

Airborne.

Plummeting down, twenty feet down.

A sinking feeling in my stomach.

I've made a big, big mistake.

I see stars and black out as my head slams into Magdalena's concrete floor.

Regaining consciousness, the first thing I see is my right hand, lying on the floor at an alarming ninety-degree angle to my forearm. My wrist, definitely broken. No blood, just snapped bones, and a severe throb, blossoming in my skull.

At the medical center, named for the great mathematician Pythagoras, my doctor does not inspire my confidence. He is half asleep, dragged into work by this late night call on his beeper. And, he has never set a broken arm. But it

gets done, with him referring to a book. Great.

I spend a restless night in the Pythagorean infirmary, and the next morning, collapse into my bed at home.

Aloneness.

How divine.

It's only from sickness or injury that one gets any time off work.

Time to just be.

The house is mercifully deserted with all the residents away at their jobs.

I leave my door open for cross-drafts of fresh air.

Sleep. Sleep. Cradle this heavy new addition to my right arm.

What's all that racket?

Opening a groggy eye- it's the cleaner.

Pretty woman.

I recognize her. She's from Holland, with uncharacteristic long dark hair, and typical ruddy cheeks. The ranch women rarely wear makeup- no persnickety painted ladies here, no showy trussed-up trapping-laden trollops, just natural beauty, just divinely real women.

I've chitchatted with this Dutch woman before, about my Sixties hippie adventures in the hash clubs and trams of Amsterdam.

Still half-asleep, I watch her move back and forth past my open door, schlepping her buckets and mops. I wonder if she's making sure I see her bend over in her tight purple pants. There's something... elusively seductive about purple as a color, notwithstanding the curves of her bottom.

She pops into the doorway, hoisting her arms to rest on the door jamb, and her sleeveless top reveals little forests of unshaven armpits. You get used to the European women's way, and it's nice too.

Her nipples show through her shirt.

Did you ever observe that each woman's right and left nipples differ slightly, that they seem to express the respective active and passive sides of her personality? I wonder if other men have sensitive nipples, because mine have been talking to me loudly since I was five years old. Maybe Freud is right- sex starts early in childhood, before you even know what sex is.

"What'd you do to yourself, Swami?"

I sit up in bed and proffer my plaster cast, inviting her to come inspect.

"I fell from the ceiling in Magdalena. Onto the concrete floor. Late last night."

She joins me on my mattress, takes my arm.

She smells faintly of flowers, and underarm sweat, and bleach.

Suddenly I am wide awake.

Our eyes catch.

I fast-forward into a daydream.

Take her hard and fast, like in the movies, without requisite courting rituals.

But I can't- not in real life. I am too tired, too much in shock from my accident, and too interested in Mary. But this woman, sitting on my bed- I look into her eyes.

Stillness.

Thoughts stop.

A wave of that inexplicable nothingness.

Her eyes, looking back into mine.

I know, that for a moment, this woman had her version of the sex fantasy, but now we are just here. Nothing to be said or done. A simple communion between two beings, a spontaneous moment of meditation.

In these silences, you often feel the master's presence. Or his love.

Or his something- whatever essence that he is, or that he triggers in us.

He says that mirrored in the eyes of another, we get a taste of infinity.

The Dutch cleaner and I cuddle a bit, and make jokes, and she vanishes into her chores.

Fucking the cleaner is a common ranch practice. But not for me today.

I must be stupid. With an 86-hour work week, I should get laid when I can.

There's a thing called Darshan.

It's an evening meeting with the master.

An eastern concept, Darshan connotes the act of coming into the master's presence, and the intangible things one receives.

Darshan with Bhagwan takes various forms, large and small, but it's always an intense and festive occasion, with wild live music and dancing. In the orchestration of a Darshan, Edison temple's audio logistics are complicated- with microphones, tape recorders, amplifiers, lights.

Here in Oregon our Darshans are massive energy events in which Bhagwan, sitting on a stage, imparts his energy to the crowd as a whole. Individually, we're uplifted in the measure of our openness. We sit with him, listening to quiet music, and then, as the music grows loud, the hall erupts into dancing and singing.

Darshan can be a personally directed happening as well.

In India, Bhagwan held small Darshans on the marble-floored porch of his house.

On first coming to the ashram, I was given an "arrival Darshan," in which I sat at Bhagwan's feet, received his blessing, and could ask him questions, as

he was speaking then. But I was too swept away to open my mouth, though I'd spent months preparing a panoply of brilliant stupid questions.

We were given a periodic "energy Darshan" as well.

The sannyasin receiving energy Darshan would kneel at the master's feet, surrounded by women in dark red dresses acting as energy mediums. The lights would go out, the mediums would dance to lively sitar music, and Bhagwan would hold his thumb on the sannyasin's forehead, in the spot known as the third eye.

Afterwards you'd barely be in your body, as if you'd been swallowed into space, and a big strong guard would carry you off.

What can occur during a Darshan is not identifiable consciously.

Nor is it an act of faith.

You can't figure out what happened.

You just know you've been transformed.

The sannyasin community is rife with gossip about Darshans.

Rumor says that in the small Poona Darshans, under the cover of darkness, Bhagwan did sexual things with the women participating as mediums. One of them told me she was instructed not to wear underwear in Darshan, and that Bhagwan touched her in just the way a woman wants to be touched.

Was it true, what she said? And if so, does that make Bhagwan unholy?

Does assisting the movement of sex energy in a few disciples make Bhagwan into a warlock wastrel, or the Darshans into devil-worship sex orgies? Can the transcendental experiences at his feet be discounted because he does what men do?

Bhagwan says he'll destroy our ideas of what a holy man should be.

He's made no claim of celibacy, and advises us against enforced vows of renunciation. Paradox upon paradox, the trend here now at the ranch, with the influx of AIDS, leans in favor of abstinence.

I have no answers.

I only know one thing: he's transformed my life.

Although now it's gotten bizarre.

The question persists...

Does Bhagwan know that we inflicted a mass poisoning on the people of Oregon?

Bhagwan's birthday celebration Darshan will be a huge affair, in a large meditation hall, with live music and thousands of people. Again, Julian diverts me from espionage into a standard task. I must comply, for I am Julian's right arm.

And my right arm dangles in a cast.

My assignment is to mix the stage sound for Bhagwan's birthday Darshan.

This is the worst.

At a big event, there's the sound in the hall, and the sound onstage: two distinct things. What the dancer in the hall hears is not what the musicians want to hear onstage. Someone has to manage the stage mix, which amounts to

coping with an onslaught of prima donna musicians.

Gag me with a pitchfork.

Each musician clamors for an individually tailored balance of instruments in his or her monitor speaker. The amplification system is not sophisticated enough to make everyone happy, and mixing the stage is a nightmare, as musicians are notoriously petulant and cantankerous, cursed with over-inflated egos.

I know about musicians- I am one.

But musicians can be wooed with flattery and placated into shape.

Feedback is the real devil.

Audio feedback- it's the horrible screeching wail that arises uncontrollably at crowded events. Mysteriously chaotic, feedback magnifies itself swiftly and exponentially. It penetrates the bones of your spine, drives your brain's sensory circuits haywire, and assaults your ears like a giant's fingernails on a huge blackboard.

Technically speaking, feedback occurs when sound from a speaker finds its way back into the microphone which originally produced it.

Sound is air pressure.

The mere sway of a crowd can trigger feedback.

In my current situation, because of so many microphones and monitor speakers onstage, the danger is great. To counteract feedback, one must isolate the microphone at fault and reduce its volume, or quickly turn down everything, which is embarrassing to the mixer and deflates the whole hall's energy level.

I tell you: it's wearisome, but God is in these details.

The Birthday Darshan dress rehearsal.

The songs need practice.

The sound mixes need study.

Drums. Bass. Guitars. Electric piano.

Saxophone. Flute. Congas.

Half a dozen singers.

Microphones everywhere.

Rows of knobs and lights and faders on the mixer.

I hover frantically over my controls, right arm useless in its sling.

Nerves exposed, from too little sleep, and too much caffeine.

They're all yelling at me.

"Can you give me more treble in my mix?" shouts the lead guitarist.

"I can't hear myself," gripe several vocalists in unison.

"There's too much saxophone in my monitor," complains the flute player.

The drummer, a mad Brazilian with a fuzzy Afro, overrides them all, pounding thump thump, whack whack, on his bass drum, screaming, "Whiteboy! My bass drum sounds like wood!"

Thump thump.

Whack whack.

"Can you make it sound wet? It sounds like wood."

Gimme this. Gimme that.

Gimme gimme.

The only musician not complaining is the conga player, my gentle friend Shiven.

Keep breathing.

My main consolation exists in watching the female singer, my ex-girlfriend from North Carolina- the one with whom I had the best sex ever.

She looks good, clutching the microphone, shaking her tail and belting out vocals, cinnamon hair swirling; both sweet and ferocious, she sings like Janis Joplin.

She's written a new birthday song for Bhagwan, an unaffected tune, two simple lines, an elfin melody, pretty chords.

I met this girl in New York/before coming to the ranch, and Cupid, arrows showering, took us for a ride I'd-never known. In our lovemaking, a spontaneous miracle occurred. Not driven to thrash toward the standard orgasmic peaks, instead, we'd remain in the heat at the beginning, descending into prolonged valleys of bliss.

We'd lie for hours, intertwined and undulating in slow motion, merging and coalescing, transformed into floating bodies of light. Self-sustained in this pool of nourishment, we'd fall asleep and awake utterly refreshed, cleansed.

I've since identified the experience as the tantric valley orgasm.

By shunning the summit, we conserved energy, and our exchange matured into an ever-expanding circle. It was the more magical then, for having no name.

A conundrum.

The nadir became the zenith.

But she was yanked from my arms, summoned to the ranch with the first wave of workers. When I arrived six months later, our mysterious convergence had fled.

Where did our love go?

It don't matter to me, because while I daydream about my past perfect sex, the hall is exploding with feedback- icepicks puncturing eardrums- and I've got to get a handle on this right away.

I slam down all the monitors and mics, let the ringing subside- it takes a second or two to decay- and then inch everything back up towards the threshold, sorting out which mic is at fault. Sonic equilibrium returns, and I'm back in control, or the illusion of being in control. Everyone uncovers their ears and stops giving me stink-eye.

The feedback happens again.

And again.

After the rehearsal, with only Julian in the hall, I break down, the

tension inside welling up into in tears.

Julian hugs me as I disappear into the involuntary shuddering.

"I can't do this," I moan as I re-enter my mind, my ineffectual victim rearing its head.

Julian chuckles softly, allows me to feel.

Encouraging, he says, "You did fine. You made all the mistakes tonight. Tomorrow night you'll be perfect."

"Waaa. I'm going to screw up the whole festival. Bhagwan's Birthday..."

I wipe salty tears, and a sniffing nose, on my good arm's sleeve.

I feel like a fucking two year old.

"I can't do this," I repeat, blubbering still.

"Ah, but Rajesh, you just did it. Mistakes happen. It's what you learn from your mistakes that counts."

He looks into me, steady, unhurried, and says, "You have to walk this tightrope. You're the highest, the most alert, when you're the closest to danger. On the edge. Like the Hindu warrior caste- they produced the most enlightened beings. You're never more aware than when you face death."

"It's just too much. I can't..."

"Rajesh?"

"Yeah Jules?"

"You're a good man, Rajesh. You can shed the tears. It takes an authentic man to get weepy. Mixing Darshan is not what it's about. It's about your heart, cracking open. You have to let Bhagwan break your heart every day. You can do this, easy. And you will."

Jules imparts a chain of little pats on my back, as a parent soothes a cranky infant.

"Come on Whiteboy, you just need a good rest."

"I'm going to sleep in late tomorrow, Jules."

"No problem. Just be on time to get the stage mix ready tomorrow afternoon."

One of the reasons I love Jules so much is that he listens to all of my issues, and doesn't buy into them. He stays detached, lets me be who I am in the moment.

It's incongruous, because I keep thinking Julian doesn't understand Bhagwan at all. Julian keeps himself separate; he doesn't get the idea of merging, or that Bhagwan is just a door. It's tricky- if I knew what I say I know, I'd leave this place, and take Bhagwan with me in my heart.

Twelve hours of delicious sleep.

A rare leisurely morning.

And, the real thing.

The master's powerful presence raises the crowd's energy level.

He is awesome, in a luxurious warm maroon hand-sewn robe and hat.

On the surface, the intensity of our group consciousness bears some

resemblance to the frenzy of a presidential nomination crowd applauding their candidate, but underneath, it's totally different.

We're focused on this moment rather than on some future victory.

We're celebrating, not competing.

My ex-girlfriend from North Carolina, angel of the serenade, continues to distract me with her waggling ass, but I'm determined to stay with my mixing task and keep the feedback demon at bay. I sail through the hour's ecstasy, tweaking faders, watching every microphone like a hawk.

The music speeds up, grows louder as Bhagwan rises to leave. He blesses the crowd with the traditional east Indian namaste, hands raised, pressed together in the form of prayer- the gesture means "I salute the Buddha within you." As he turns to exit the hall, the crowd sways and expands in on me.

By my side, I find Anam, my tall and troublemaking teenage warrior friend. He nods hello as the throng pushes us together. I forgot he's been hovering nearby, absorbing the ways of audio mixing by watching me. He already knows more than I do. He'll make a great disc jockey.

Together, Anam and I watch Bhagwan disappear, and instinctively turn to each other. In this moment we unite, two souls with but a single thought, flabbergasted and blown away by Bhagwan's majesty and love. Spontaneously, we shout at one another in unison over the music, "The dude is bad."

I watch winter turn to spring.

The buds open to celebrate a new life cycle.

But it's dangerous for the tiny sprouts.

There will be storms and droughts and winds and floods.

The path of meditation- it's dangerous too- a Pandora's Box, releasing repressed fiends from the subconscious.

It's easy to see why people drop meditation right away when they initially try it.

The antithesis of what you expect occurs.

Your mind appears louder at first.

The mind doesn't actually become louder- you just tune into the fifty radio stations always broadcasting inside your head. Then if you finally achieve a minute of ecstasy, the mind recoils with a vengeance, spewing up additional garbage.

Overall, you experience more chaos, not the peace you crave.

But there's no way around it. You're bound to encounter your dark side, the Hitler within, on the way down to the silence.

All the voices that comprise personality- God, they're inconsistent.

And it is inconvenient, when my beeper goes off at 5:40 a.m. because the sound system in the meditation hall has failed. We're in the middle of our spring celebration, honoring Bhagwan's enlightenment, and we can't turn away the hundreds of eager festival participants deranged enough to do dynamic meditation at 6 a.m.

What am I saying?

I did it myself every morning at 6 a.m. for over a year.

Oh Jesus, work is worship.

Half dressed, I race toward Rajneesh Mandir, our two-and-a-half acre meditation hall, which lies in the base of the valley that stretches from the master's house.

The open-air enclosure consists of a huge linoleum-covered cement slab with vertical I-beams reaching thirty feet up to support a two-tiered metal roof. It reminds me of an ancient Greek lyceum, only much bigger.

The hall acts, itself, like a huge speaker, and when we run pink noise tests to fine tune the frequency response of our monstrous audio system, the whoosh and roar of the noise bouncing off the mountains can be heard all over town.

I skid to a halt in La Noche.

In the back of the hall, by the amplifiers, there's Christ Chaitanya, the meditation leader. What a name he bears. And what a character is Christ Chaitanya. Tall and handsome with long flowing hair like Jesus might have worn, we call him "C.C." for short.

C.C., one of the funniest people on the ranch, can make anybody laugh. His eyes twinkle with the glint of an archer about to attack, or a jolly ventriloquist befooling a captive audience of children. Although he's rarely, if ever, late starting the meditation, he stays calm, blandly concerned that the amplifiers won't work.

I find the neglected power strip, switch on its little red pilot-lit heart, and the amplifiers remain dead. One problem solved. More exist. Ah, another non-glowing power strip, shoved out of sight under an equipment rack. Yes, we have ignition.

Christ Chaitanya starts his pre-meditation music tape, but no sound comes through the speakers.

Of course.

The mixing board is switched off.

It's a-huge multi-channel hog, as wide as I am tall.

It weighs more than I do.

I switch it on.

B0000000000M!

Good morning!

I've forgotten that the amps need to be switched out of the loop when the mixer comes alive. I've amplified the initial voltage surge of not only the

mixer, but also its attendant rack of signal processing gear. My blunder multiplies an ordinary voltage spike into thousands of watts of raw power, and the tremendous shotgun blast reverberates long and loud throughout the valley.

I've just committed a cardinal audio sin, and I've woken up the entire ranch, but at least the thing works now.

Christ Chaitanya's soothing pre-meditation music is playing, and he whistles as he adjusts the volume.

Soon the meditators will embark on an hour's voyage into the unknown. Life is magical again in the ashram.

I'm about to make my exit when C.C. says, "Whiteboy? Can you stay till the end? I haven't got a car, and I've got to be at Jesus Grove at 7 a.m. That means, when the meditation ends, I have to travel at the speed of light to get there on time. Can you give me a ride?"

I hesitate, dreaming of my bed.

But why not? Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans. So said John Lennon, the greatest of the great.

"Sure C.C., I'll be glad to help you. I'll sit in my un-lotus position over to the side and pretend to meditate, while your contestants suffer in the hall. Then I'll take you to Jesus Grove at light speed plus, so you'll arrive before you leave, with your reputation for punctuality untarnished."

"That's fantastic, Whiteboy. You are one of the good guys."

"Yeah, right. Would that it were so."

I survey the hall.

Dynamic meditation is done standing, in loose minimal clothing, wearing a blindfold to keep the-energy directed inward. Hundreds of meditators spread out with as much space in between them as possible.

Right now, I can't face the enormous physical effort required to do dynamic meditation. I've done it enough for one lifetime. Just sitting silently for an hour, breathing into my heart- the technique I use currently- will be fine.

I plop onto the cream-colored linoleum as crashing primitive drums come over the speakers.

The first stage of dynamic meditation consists of ten minutes of chaotic breathing, a rapidly forced exhale technique akin to hyperventilating, performed purposefully without a rhythm or cadence.

Hundreds of pairs of lungs, pushing out air.

This stage raises the energy level.

After ten minutes, the music shifts.

More drums, and shouting.

The hall explodes in one anguished, collective cathartic scream.

Hundreds of voices spew garbage, laugh, cry, yell, moan.

Bodies flail about, convulse, and cast themselves on the floor.

The meditators howl at mother, at friend, at enemy.

Throw it all out.

For ten minutes, this stage allows the participants to clear some of their accumulated tensions.

The music shifts.

Faster drums.

The whole hall, chanting "Hoo."

This is the real test, because while you chant, you're jumping up and down full tilt and landing hard on your heels, with your arms raised, hammering the sound "Hoo" down into the sex center at the base of your pelvis.

To jump up and down hard without stopping for ten minutes is a drastically strenuous physical act. It presses you beyond your limits. Sometimes you break into that second wind space of the long distance runner, when your body turns to pure motion and you're weightless and you could jump forever. Most of the time, however, the Hoo stage is hell. A hell of a long ten minutes.

Stop.

As you are.

Standing, motionless.

Allow the energy to move.

Watch.

For fifteen-minutes.

Bhagwan designed this meditation, with its initial active stages, specifically for tension-loaded westerners. The moments of depth usually come during this silent period.

The hush in the hall is deep.

And I am deep in the quiet within myself.

It's not that my mind turns off- it still runs and runs- but I become detached from it, as if I'm watching it in a movie theater.

If I catch myself getting caught in my mind, I return to the technique.

Thoughts tumble past.

I remember a dream from a few years ago.

I'm standing in a brightly illuminated, empty dance hall.

Bhagwan strides into view, dressed to the teeth like a pimp. He sports a white tuxedo and a broad-brimmed white hat. Spats adorn his black patent leather shoes, and he twirls a black silver-topped cane.

Whirling and shuffling and moonwalking backwards in fast-motion superfly style, he jams across the dance floor, circles around behind me, and begins whispering indecipherable things in my right ear.

In a puff of smoke he transmutes into a shiny black crow, and hops up on my shoulder. I am suddenly afraid he will peck at the back of my head, and I flinch as his hard beak begins chipping away at my occipital skull bone. The pain is excruciating, but I know I must push through it.

I remember that I'm sitting in the meditation hall.

I breathe into my heart.

I wonder if I should have kept those dream journals.

The dream about the crow could hold significance: it may symbolize Bhagwan breaking down my resistance to change, or the opening of the spinal channels where the kundalini energy rises.

I catch myself thinking.

Return to the technique.

Breathe into my heart.

I notice my tongue.

Sometimes in meditation, or in daily life, or in the process of the two merging, my tongue spontaneously rises to the roof of my mouth. I become more self-contained, centered. I've read that the tongue connects the functional and governing acupuncture meridians, completing an internal circle of energy.

Bhagwan says that the tongue mirrors the mind- when the mind is overactive, the tongue is flapping. Conversely, to still the tongue is to still the mind.

This inner alchemy.

If I could just live it, instead of tasting it for isolated instants.

Slowly, slowly... as the master says.

It's easy to fool yourself, but you can't make it happen in meditation.

The techniques are stumblings, statements to God that we're willing to receive. All the methods are similar- to divert one's energy from the mind- but the actual advent of grace out of the nothingness: it's a vast mystery.

When the music in the hall quietly resumes, the meditators dance free-form and celebrate. This final stage lasts a quarter of an hour, and grounds you, brings you back to your earthly existence.

I'm feeling divinely blissful by the end of it.

I shut down the sound system.

In La Noche, Christ Chaitanya and I speed towards Jesus Grove.

A popular sannyas song goes: "Bhagwan, I surrender to you,"

Christ Chaitanya sings it, and adds a second line:

"Bhagwan I surrender to you,
your mother looks-
like Mister Magoo."

Oh God! She does! In her wizened old age, with her thick glasses and wrinkled jowly face, Bhagwan's mother is the spitting image of the cartoon character Mr. Magoo. Laughter engulfs us.

"C.C! You've got to spread this tune around the ranch. If you don't, I will."

The Mr. Magoo song hovers in the air. Each time one of us thinks of it, we both burst out laughing. I try to keep from wrecking La Noche as my sides start to hurt.

Being with Bhagwan is dangerous, sometimes dangerously funny.

In the ranch restaurant, you're not in danger while you sip cappuccino and prepare to read a spy novel. Or are you?

Printed matter.

You can pretend that the word is the thing, like they taught you in school.

You can conjure up suspense via the mind-body connection, stir your adrenals by viewing marks on paper, stimulate your brain through optical inputs with presumably meaningful patterns; you can convince yourself you've had an experience, that the knowledge increases your power, that you've incorporated the author's insight in your impressive personality. But the action remains ephemeral, in your head.

An equation. I am in the moment, or I am in my head.

I move towards the formless truth that is my soul, or I move into the random confusion that is my personality. Two possibilities.

I am a binary being, a Boolean dual-state system.

George Boole was a mathematician during the mid-1800's. Some historians say he invented the binary number system, upon which our digital computer revolution is built. Thank the Arabic culture for inventing the zero- but Boole's approach of thinking solely in zeros and ones- it's so useful that I was inspired, during the acquisition of an Associate Degree in electronics, to write a poem in honor of George Boole:

George Boole
was no fool,
when in school
the decimal rule
was presented.
For to George
there was none,
other than one,
and with zero,
are all numbers
represented.

Well, I did get my poem in the college newsletter, but I was the modest publication's editor. And the school did teach me how a transistor works.

I am not unlike a transistor, basically an on-off switch that either conducts or resists the flow of electrons. I go with the flow, or I resist. A

transistor is said to be high or low, a yes or a no. Just like me.

Agglomerates of transistors institute flip-flops, more paired-state creatures. If you look around, these dualistic binary decisions are everywhere, in everything. The cosmos itself seems to be made of nothing but zillions of tiny transitory yin-yang events.

I'm changing my name to Binary-boy.

Both-And.

A binary decision: I can read my Robert Ludlum novel, or dig into one by John le Carre.

Wait.

A third spy novel in my knapsack.

Trinary-boy.

The triangle.

That inimitable scientist, Buckminster Fuller, advocates the use of the triangle as a design element. For his first three years, no one saw that Bucky Fuller was almost blind. Visually, he perceived only spheres of light, packed into 3-D triangular spatial matrices; thus Bucky's attention dwelt on the triangle, and he invented the geodesic dome, in its basic form an aggregate of triangles.

Three-ness.

Numbers have personalities, if you look at them with the emotional right side of your brain, as opposed to the logical left side.

I now have a three-way decision.

My third option: a novel by Adam Hall, whose hero is Quiller, an action spy and raconteur extraordinaire. I could journey into the field with Quiller, who relishes the psychological advantage of not carrying a gun, preferring to kill with his bare hands, which he does every third page.

Quiller jumps from planes unscathed, endures grueling torture without flinching, leaps tall buildings in a single bound. A master of false identities, exotic poisons, mathematical codes, nuclear chemistry, fine wines, martial-arts techniques, you name it- Quiller's got it covered. Fun reading.

But I go for the Ludlum- "The Bourne Identity."

It's moving right along, fast and furious.

The whole face of things keeps turning upside down, reassembling itself.

The good guys turn into bad guys, then back into good guys.

Sort of like here at the ranch.

Literary comparisons remain subjective, and critics should be drowned.

But to me, Ludlum's books don't exhibit the elegant descriptive power found in the works of the maestro John le Carre, the man who created the famous spy Smiley. Le Carre probes the soul of tradecraft- the case worker, the handler, the safe house, the dead drop- they come vividly to life on his pages.

However, Ludlum weaves his tales in and out with the excitement that le Carre withholds until the last chapter. I do love them both, and Quiller too,

but it's le Carre who strikes the nuanced chords on the espionage keyboard, the vibrant harmony when operations gel, the crunching cacophony when they go amiss.

Gunshots and tires squealing, as I leapfrog through Ludlum's landscape of role reversals, riding my cappuccino buzz.

In real life, I'm surreptitiously scrutinizing the Hollywood crowd at their usual, unusual table in the restaurant. They're yuppies in red clothes to me- drama queens- but are they a threat to Bhagwan?

I'm watching John, their leader.

Maybe he's second in command- I don't know.

John is short, medium build, and wears his sandy hair fashionably long. His grey irises have a wide-eyed fixedness. He flounces about in his seat, entertaining his wealthy cohorts, hands gesticulating like an actor overplaying a part. He's plainly self-absorbed, but everyone's got an arrogant streak underneath. He's not really a bad sort.

And I'm about to slip slide away and break into his room.

Check my watch. It's time.

I exit the restaurant quickly.

Hop in La Noche.

Get on the radio to Julian, who's cruising in his Oldsmobile. To anyone listening on this frequency, our scrambled transmissions will sound like chipmunks jabbering backwards. A double precaution, as we're using an unlicensed channel.

I am Unit One.

"Unit One to Unit Two." I key the words into the radio's mic.

Julian stammers back across the airwaves, "Uh... this is Unit Two. Go ahead... uh... Unit One." He's not as accustomed to the "unit one and unit two" routine as Michel and I are. Presumably he'll figure it out along the way.

"What's our status there, Unit Two?" I ask.

"Status is go. Go, baby, go."

I turn the Toyota into the settlement of small A-frame houses, located in a scenic valley, where John lives. Park. No time to appreciate the majestic panorama.

On with the plastic gloves. This is not breaking and entering. My skeleton key, which Julian has provided, means I am not breaking in- I am just walking in.

Nice carpet. Great stereo.

Exotic wall hangings.

Upper class pad.

Just like I'd have it.

Me and the rest of the third world.

The desk. John's papers and files. I memorize where everything is.

Lay out all his letters and documents on the floor.

Adjust the F-stop and shutter speed on the 35mm SLR camera.

Click click.

I don't know what I'm looking for- my instructions are simply to photograph all of his papers.

"Unit One to Unit Two." I raise Julian on the radio.

"Yo! Unit One, what's up?" he responds.

"How's it look out there, Unit Two?"

By now Julian is posted down at the entrance to this area, on stationary lookout.

"Everything clear, my man."

"Cool. Unit One out."

I snap through four rolls of 36 exposures each.

Put everything back, just so.

"Unit Two?"

"Go ahead, Unit One."

"Hey. I'm done."

"Alright! Let's get out of here."

Visual double check that everything is as it was, and I'm back on the road. La Noche, up, up, and away.

Part two of the mission: I am going to search a piece of John's luggage.

The other side of the suitcase search. Now I am the searcher.

I head to Mirdad, the main reception center, where ranch personnel examine the incoming luggage.

Rendezvous with Julian in the parking lot.

He hands me a black plastic bag, which hides a Security guard uniform.

I race into the bathroom.

Quick change.

Workers stack suitcases on shelves, as I slip into the luggage search area, wearing the borrowed Security uniform.

Impersonator.

Julian's told me what to look for.

There it is, one of those costly machined silver metal briefcases, addressed to John. It pops open with a satisfying clunk, like the door of an expensive, well-made car. A suite of electronic countermeasures modules, compactly built into the case. Sweep generators, oscillators, frequency notch filters, noise reduction inserts. Functions that one needs to detect bugs. John is definitely aware he's being monitored.

But his undertaking is futile.

It's not that simple.

The invisible electromagnetic spectrum of radio waves is a complex and elusive phenomenon, and the chances of an untrained operator successfully using this gadget are slim. Even for highly skilled professionals, sweeping for bugs is a challenging, often maddening, prospect.

I examine the hand-held module stored in the case's lid.

I should steal it- make sure he doesn't find what he's looking for.

Well, maybe it's just an accessory.

I don't know what it is, but I abscond with it.

Julian laughs out loud, back in the spy sanctuary, when I present him with the stolen object.

"Whiteboy! This was a reconnaissance mission, not a fucking pirate's raid!"

I drawl, "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Guess it was a bit impulsive of me. I am the reckless type, you know."

"Shit," groans Julian, "I'll have to sort this out. You opened another Pandora's Box. Ah well, not to worry. John can bloody well kiss my ass."

I wonder why Julian's so vindictive towards him.

On the way out, amid the tape duplicators and video monitors, I stop to melt into an extended hug with Mary.

So sweet, her warmth in my arms.

Stepping from Zarathustra building, I see John, whose private life I've invaded today. He's across the valley, in his Rolls-Royce that Bhagwan bestowed upon him, on the back road heading to the new trailer home where his Hollywood group has moved. Another perk, their own private living quarters.

Should Hollywood's patronage be so lavishly rewarded? Maybe Bhagwan's building up their egos, so that, like a balloon, one day they will pop, and enlightenment will be all that's left.

Stop thinking. You can never second guess a master.

I wonder if John's a bad guy.

I wonder if I'm a bad guy.

I wonder if Bhagwan's a bad guy.

I wonder about Bhagwan's hundred Rolls-Royces.

Couldn't Bhagwan collect Cracker Jack boxes instead?

I'm sure he has all those cars just to attract attention, to stay high-profile in the media. On the other hand, why not?

Bhagwan loves jokes, and he deserves and appreciates the very best.

I suspect that Bhagwan could care less about this fleet of finely crafted hunks of metal and plastic. This is a man, who, after his enlightenment, traveled all over India for years on filthy trains, teaching and blessing crowds of ten thousand, carrying only his sandals, a robe, and a towel.

This is a man who could abide in a lavishly furnished palace or retire to an opulent chateau, who could afford the utmost in exotic and wondrous entertainment, who could be dining on the rarest culinary delectables prepared by world-class gourmet chefs.

And what does he do?

He lives in a trailer home in a desert.

He sits in his room, listening to the same old cheesy Indian records over

and over.

He eats simple chapatis and lentil dahl every day.

Rumor says Bhagwan requests more Rolls-Royces to make life difficult for Sheela and the moms, to provide external obstacles that intensify their inner search.

It's funny: people condemn Bhagwan for owning such a multitude of cars, while the majority dream of similar wealth.

If one secretly longs to be rich, one quickly faults someone else who is.

I think legal ownership of the vehicles rests in the hands of a corporation anyway.

Maybe Bhagwan possesses a hundred Rolls-Royces to mirror the American public, to emphasize our greed. He remains serene as we conceal our jealousy by shaking our fingers at him. Perhaps he's acting out the shadow side of our lust for money and status, dredging it from the darkness into the light as humorous play.

If you could see the airbrush paint jobs that decorate some of his cars, you'd laugh. Wacky color schemes, kitsch moons and stars, tacky desert scenes.

Someone said you should pay attention to what you hate, that it's the part of yourself you can't assimilate yet.

You figure it out.

"Masters don't teach the truth; there is no way to teach it. It is a transmission beyond scriptures, beyond words. It is energy provoking energy in you. It is a kind of synchronicity."

- "Ah, This" - Osho

Chapter Six: SOCRATES

Midnight in the spy room.

"Go ahead and put it in tonight," says Julian, motioning towards Michel's metal trunk.

This unit is the biggest Billy Box yet. It contains hundreds of work-hours and the ten thousand things of the electronic technology explosion; only Michel understands how the electron gremlins relay the signals through it. Once it's installed, Sheela's henchwomen can monitor all thirty-six incoming ranch phone lines.

Inside the trunk, circuit modules nestle snugly in multiple layers, a miniature hotel, each room with a balcony. The trunk's external 50-pin input-output connectors look shiny and new- they're skeleton mouths with braces. On the floor, cables lie coiled like serpents, or DNA strands poised for information processing.

"Jules," I say, "we should do this mission in the daytime. We'll attract too much attention from Security at night. With this monster," I nod at the trunk, "and with the bulky new shelves from the woodshop, we'll stand out like big dogs at night."

Michel joins in. "The Whiteboy's got a point."

"No way," counters Julian, "it's too obvious."

"Well then you fucking do it yourself," I snap. "We're overworked anyway."

"Yeah- forget that, we'll call you," adds Michel.

Julian makes a diabolical face.

But he's crestfallen.

We've shot him down, blown his control trip out of the sky.

Showing his feelings is not Julian's forte, even with his close brothers.

He exhales through pursed lips.

His tenor conciliatory, he says softly, "You lads are too hard on me. I bend over and take it up the ass from Sheela every day. Cut me some slack, jack. I listen to you mates blubber all the time. Who listens to me when I'm beyond the pale?"

Discomfort hangs in the room's atmosphere.

Eyes wandering, I see abstract faces forming in the pattern of scuff marks on the trunk. I watch Michel contemplate the speckled ceiling tiles. Julian examines the shag rug. Leonardo da Vinci studied this tendency of the imagination to find order in random visual patterns.

Red, yellow, black, white- the electrical components on the table become Native American amulets.

The edges of vertically stacked magazines combine to form Van Gogh's face.

Maple lacquered shelves become ladders.

Tinkerbelle flies through the room, sprinkling forgiveness dust.

The energy shifts.

Julian hums a jig.

Michel taps his feet.

"Okay. Yes," says Julian. "Install the trunk during the daytime. But do it with awareness, as if Bhagwan was right there. And don't get caught by Pacific Telephone. If their repairman Bill shows up, stay clear. I've got enough on my plate without Sheela shoving Pacific Telephone problems down my throat."

"Okay," I say, "we'll wear utility tool belts and coveralls. We'll look like telephone guys if anybody sees us. Much cooler in the day."

"Okay guys," Julian clears the air, "I leave it up to you."

He's out the door.

"Julian," I say, "acts like such a tough guy, but he's a kid on the inside. Sometimes he's more of a little brother than a boss."

"Yeah. He's a softy. Everybody loves Jules, but they don't see his bullshit like we do."

"That's the truth. They don't know he's a fucking Nazi dictator. But everyone has a lot of sides. Even Hitler was religious, into the Christian thing. He had a black magician, and was obsessed with crucifixion relics. Maybe it was Hitler's magician who inverted the Native American symbol for life into the Nazi swastika."

"You know," says Michel, "they're always comparing Bhagwan to Hitler in the news. Americans need villains to hate. Whenever your media wants to make somebody look bad, they say the FBI found a picture of Hitler on his desk."

Bang!

The door flies open.

Julian bursts back into the room, yelling "Mugambo!"

He presents us each a cup of tea, and slides the video "48 Hours" into the VCR. We watch the scene where Eddie Murphy, fresh from prison, tries to hustle a woman into bed, telling her he needs to get "into some mugambo."

She screams, "Mugambo???"

Fabulous.

After the movie excerpt, Jules waxes nostalgic, recalling escapades of getting sloshed in the English pubs. He hails from a nation of alcoholics. Oh well, England has produced some of the world's best writers. Jules reminisces about one night when he was accused of being a "Nancy" by a huge drunk Irish geezer. A Nancy, we learn, is a male homosexual.

"So," I ask, "did the Irish lout beat you to a pulp?"

"No. You know I'm the type of guy who can walk through the shit without getting any on my shoes."

Surprise.

Julian pulls three shot glasses and a bottle of Ouzo from his briefcase.

He pours us each a healthy double.
This is rare, as alcohol's a no-no on the ranch.
"Bottoms up, lads," says der Fuhrer.
"The whole thing at once?" I say.
Booze has never been my drug of choice.
"Come on, down the hatch," prods Jules.
"Yeah Whiteboy," says Michel. "Salud."
"Okay. Cheers!"
The glasses clink together in the air.
We all chug it down.
Whoosh- it singses your tonsils- quite a rush.
The aftertaste is thick, oily, sweet and bitter at once.
"Oh yeah," I say.
Everybody laughs.
Our fearless leader pours another round.
We toast Bhagwan. And Billy Boxes. And Mugambo.
"Well guys," says Julian, "I've got places to go. Keep your eyes on the road when you drive home tonight. See you Nancies later."
Michel and I sit, mildly stupefied. The potion we've just imbibed has a slight psychedelic sparkle on the edge of it, like tequila, or sniffing glue.
"Hey Billy? You jumped on that Dutch girl yet?"
Michel grins sheepishly. "No..."
I badger him, interrogation style.
"What the fuck are you waiting for? She's a beauty. Get it while you can."
"Well..." his voice trails off.
I watch tears well up in his eyes.
He resumes slowly, pain in his voice.
"It's been a long time, Whiteboy, since I had a girl. I haven't had many girls. I've got to take it, sort of, one step at a time."
I stay quiet for a minute, letting him feel the pain, and feeling my own stupidity-for projecting my aggression onto him.
Handing him a tissue, I speak softly, "Sorry to rush you bro'. Anyway, you're in love. That's what's important."
"Yeah. It's so wonderful. She's so wonderful," coos Michel, sniffing.
Long pause.
"So," the Whiteboy brightens, "tomorrow, we'll install the trunk in Socrates, and you'll get laid for the first time in a thousand years. Then you'll gallop off on a white charger, the gallant and chivalrous knight, into the sunset with your faithful beloved babe."
He laughs.
I carry on, "Then she'll dump you, and it'll end in despair. They all do. It's not IF it's going to end, it's WHEN it's going to end."

Not if. When.

"I know you're right," Michel says, "and I love it anyway. I love it all."

"You gotta love it all," I agree.

"Love is all you need." Michel sings the Beatles riff.

I join in, but leave off the last two words, saying, "You know, John Lennon is my real master- forget Bhagwan. And not to be disrespectful to John- but the lyrics should be just: 'Love is ALL.' Forget the need part. Need implies lack."

"Love is all..." Michel tries it out with the melody.

It doesn't really fit.

"But," I say, "I'm talking about Love with a capital 'L,' like Bhagwan feels for us. Not love with a little 'l,' like we feel for our girlfriends. Our love is just decorated lust. I'm doomed to play the devil's advocate on that subject."

"Is that like the devil's lawyer?" Michel asks.

As a French-Canadian, sometimes his English, or American, is sketchy.

"To advocate something," I explain, "is to recommend it. When I say all relationships end in despair- I'm advocating the negative side of it. It's a bummer, the intimate enmity, but it's glorious too. So when I say love sucks, I'm taking one perspective, the devil's position."

"Bhagwan is the devil," says Michel, matter-of-factly.

"God, I know. Sometimes when I look at him, he starts to grow pointed ears, and a bunch of tree-branch hair."

"Yeah yeah yeah. Exactly." Laughter.

"Billy? How can Bhagwan be both God and the devil at the same time?"

"Is this a joke? What's the punchline?"

"No punchline. Just curious what you'd say. I was thinking about how I tried to explain Bhagwan to an old friend back in Virginia."

"Explain Bhagwan? It'll never happen. You think too much, Whiteboy."

"That's for damn sure."

On the way home, I wonder if "Both-And" is a real word, or did I make it up?

The morning, balmy, behind the building called Socrates.

Never tell the truth- they'll poison you for it.

Johanne, the German telephone crew chief of Edison temple, is protesting against our phone-tapping operations. He's tall and wiry, rough-hewn, in his late forties, and weather-beaten from outside work; a good old soul, Johanne is

an intrepidly hard worker and the nicest person you'll ever meet. In spirit, he has too much integrity, or temerity, to support our unprincipled activities, but in practice he has no choice, as Julian is his immediate boss.

A prime concern of our installation strategy is to avoid Bill, the Pacific Telephone maintenance person, who has access to the phone room. Johanne is valuable because he usually knows Bill's schedule.

Bill, who's uncomfortable but tactfully gracious around us, has surprised us before, during the early days of militarization, when we tapped the original six pay-phones on the ranch- the ones that discovered the Seattle gang's assassination plot. Little electronic bloodhounds. Good dogs!

Now we're the hunters.

We've got the guns.

But suppose the swat-team troops sweep in?

These few token firepower trinkets won't protect him.

They'll come, a multitudinous host, scaling the walls of our citadel with grappling hooks, shelling us pitilessly with all manner of artillery... Wait. We have no citadel, no walls, but nonetheless we'll line up staunchly in front of him to take the bullets, to die honorably for the truth.

Except me- I'll run like a rabbit and save my memory for posterity.

Just kidding. Bring on the National guard.

Today is a good day to die, as brave Native American warriors whooped while racing into battle.

And hopefully Bill from Pacific Telephone won't show up in the fray today.

Our faithful vehicle La Noche brims with stuff: the metal trunk, Michel's megalithic toolbox, utility belts, coveralls, the new handcrafted shelves, three dozen new tape recorders. For voice applications, we use simple mono tape machines. They're inexpensive, reliable, and easily requisitioned through regular Edison channels. As always, they're black.

The Socrates phone bugging operation includes three adjoining locked rooms along the back of the building on the ground floor: the phone room itself, the neighboring storage closet, and the unpublicized monitoring room, where Sheela's moms listen.

The job proceeds smoothly in the phone room.

The telephone company grid occupies a metal scaffold, which transforms the room into a shaded garden, with rows of trellised wire. Pacific Telephone's cables are grey, and so are ours. We connect our cables to the targeted punch blocks, traverse the room tie-wrapping the cables to the scaffold, and thread them through an electrical socket into the storage closet next door. Our addition blends visually into the crisscross of cables.

Michel has even matched the cream color of the phone company's tie-wraps. It's in the details.

In the storage closet, the metal trunk does its dance.

The cool joke is that optical isolation devices keep our trunk insulated from the telephone system. The optical circuits convert the electronic phone signals into light waves and then re-converts them to separately grounded electrical signals, decreasing our chances of being detected.

From the trunk's opposite end, more cables twist through the far wall into the monitoring room, where the moms scan for items of interest to Sheela.

We check outside to confirm the coast is clear.

Into the monitoring room, we haul the custom-made shelves to accommodate the new tape recorders. The woodshop elves never knew for what purpose their handiwork was destined.

We've been tapping a few of these lines for a long time, but now we'll have them all covered: thirty-six machines, shelved in a three-tiered horseshoe configuration, all easily accessible to one listener in a rolling chair.

At the closed end of the horseshoe rests another Billy Box, the headphone distribution module, a flecked grey steel unit whose control panel hosts thirty-six red light-emitting diodes that indicate which phone lines are active. Using the two black rotary switches, the listener chooses which lines to monitor. Two pairs of lightweight stereo headphones, worn simultaneously, allow eavesdropping on four conversations at once.

Michel's genius spawns another electronic wonder.

Everything tests perfectly.

When a line is active, the appropriate diode lights up and the corresponding tape machine switches into record mode.

It'll be easy to teach Sheela's moms how to use this system.

But they'll screw it up anyway.

I'll get beeped constantly to come and find nonexistent problems. I won't be privy to the information being gathered- I'm just the technical lackey. It is a nice little private room though, and if you dim the overhead lights with the wall rheostat, the red diodes on the headphone box twinkle like Christmas tree bulbs.

Ding Ding Ding.

My beeper.

Bang bang bang.

Someone pounding at the phone room next door.

We rush around to see what the fuss is about.

It's Johanne, the phone crew chief. He's breathless with panic.

"Pacific Telephone is here! Bill's on the ranch! He's already at Mirdad reception. He'll be here in a minute. I just beeped you."

"Fuck!" I scream in a whisper. "We got to get out of here!"

Michel and I scramble, snatching up our supplies and his gargantuan toolkit. We're just pulling away in La Noche as Johanne waves to Bill's arriving Pacific Telephone truck.

"That was close," I murmur, tight-lipped, to Michel.

"Yeah. But we got it done."

"As the Minister of Information," I say in a mock German accent, "I must analyze the logistics of how to avoid being surprised by Bill."

"Forget that, peckerhead," says Michel, "you better analyze how to teach Sheela's moms to use my system."

"You're right, my good doctor. Education is the only real forum for social change."

"Do what?"

"Never mind," I say. "Hey, what shall we call the Socrates phone room? We need a code name to use on the radio. Any ideas, Socrates, oh great and wise one, who walked among us, reminding us that we know nothing?"

"Well," Michel says, "it's a drag to walk to Socrates. It's at the top of a long gradual hill, you know."

"Alright then. We'll call it Hilltop."

"Hilltop. Okay, cool. Hey, let me out here at Jesus Grove."

"Okay. What's up at Jesus Grove?"

I pull into the parking lot.

But Michel remains quiet, hiding a smirk as he climbs from the pickup.

Before he walks away, I jeer at him, "Little of this, little of that?"

He responds with more animation, "Little of this, little of that."

Looking at Jesus Grove through the chain-link fence, and beyond the huge satellite dish in the front yard, you can see that part of the house is under construction. But you can't see what's being done, as barriers shield the construction from all viewpoints.

I let Michel get several steps from the car before I call him back.

"Hey Animal. You forgot your toolkit."

"Jesus..." he mumbles as he returns to the car, retrieving his mammoth cache of ten thousand tools from the back seat.

"Forget that! We'll call you!" I shout, as I pop La Noche's clutch and spew dust in his face.

Ding ding ding. My beeper again.

Instructions to call a Jesus Grove extension. Probably Julian.

I stop at the mall and use the restaurant phone to call. It is Julian.

"Where are you?" he asks, straightaway.

"At the mall restaurant."

"Perfect. Have you got a microcassette recorder with you?"

He's in a hurry.

I reach down and feel a lump in my satchel, saying, "Yes. The best one's at Zarathustra, but I have one here. What's going on?"

"You've got to bug Sheela's couch, right away. It's the couch upstairs in the mall, over by the wall. In about fifteen minutes, Sheela will be there, talking with a sannyasin woman named Aviba who sells aircraft. You've got to get the conversation on tape without Aviba knowing it."

My mind races.

These microcassette recorders are only good for a half hour's recording time.

There's gotta be a better way.

Damn. Why don't I have this figured out ahead of time?

I'm still a neophyte.

Should I race to Zarathustra and get the recorder with superior audio quality?

I barely have time. Better not chance it. And I can't stand the thought of driving in this agitated state. I should go with the recorder on hand.

Julian, urgent, says, "You alright? You got what you need?"

"Yeah... I think so."

I'm vacillating between fear and excitement.

"Whiteboy! Why are you hesitating?"

"Well, we don't have any extended play microcassette recorders. The ones we have will only record a half hour. And the recorder with the best audio quality is at Zarathustra. The one I have here is a cheapo."

Julian eases into a softer tone.

"Okay. Just go with what's best. I'll leave it up to you."

He's no help at all.

"Alright then. I got to get into action here. Ciao."

I slam the phone down, race out of the restaurant and bound up the stairs to the open office space, fishing out the microcassette recorder as I run.

The area bustles with people.

There is Sheela, standing with a small crowd.

No sign of her visitor. The couch is still empty.

Trying to appear nonchalant, I cross the long room and sit on the couch, set the tiny machine into record mode and slide it down between the couch cushions. Checking to assure I'm not being watched, I part the upholstery material so a tiny airspace will convey sound to the recorder's built-in microphone.

No. It's too far down between the cushions.

I retrieve the recorder, find the external mic in my bag, quickly plug it in, and bury the whole assembly back down in the couch, positioning the mic right below the surface of the upholstery material.

Now it's optimal. Done.

Confident I've covered all the details, I amble back across the room, looking at the floor. Deborah's desk isn't far away, but I ignore her. I'm interested in Mary now anyway, and I've got to stay tuned to this operation.

Here comes Sheela.

And there's Aviba, my target.

Blonde curls, blue eyes, sly smile.

I remember Aviba. She had this friend, a fine lady, who once ordered me

to sleep with her while temporarily acting as my coordinator. It wasn't a surprise, as I'd slept with her before. We both enjoyed it, but it did strike me as a misuse of power. As if I don't have my own power trip- with my car and my beeper and everything else.

Sheela and Aviba settle into the couch.

I stand at a window, watching. No one pays me any heed.

I check the time.

Oh no.

Reality dawns.

I've used a recorder with an end-of-tape alarm.

In approximately twenty-six minutes, that goddamn thing stuffed down in the couch between Sheela and Aviba is going to start chirping like a little black crow. Not good.

I knew I should've gotten the other recorder.

Body temperature rising. Sweating. Clammy hands.

Dash to the bathroom. Splash cold water on my face.

Think.

Back at the window, watching the couch again.

Twenty-one minutes.

Hoping, praying Sheela will finish her talk with Aviba quickly.

They keep blabbing like schoolgirls.

Back to the bathroom. More cold water.

Seventeen minutes.

Ding ding ding- my beeper.

I find a phone on a deserted desk and answer the beep.

The line's busy. Try again. Still busy.

Thirteen minutes.

Race downstairs and outside for a quick cigarette.

Eight minutes. Hurry back upstairs.

I try again to answer my beep. Still busy.

Can't stall any longer.

Four minutes.

I've got to act.

I dart across the room and barge into the conversation, greeting Aviba as I plop on the couch between her and Sheela.

After a minute of phony small talk, as I lean over and pretend to whisper to Sheela, I scoop up recorder, mic, and wires, maneuvering to shield my actions from Aviba's view with my body. When I rise from the couch, hunched over and stuffing the recorder into my satchel, wires trailing, Sheela snarls in a low voice, "I'm going to kill you."

I drive to Zarathustra, feeling amateurish and depressed.

Another catastrophic failure.

I'm not really trained to do this.

I'm not a spy.

I'm just a simple seeker of peace, forced to fight a complex war of nerves.

A hug with Mary brings me back to feeling halfway good about myself.

Thank God for this silent exchange with her.

Mary and I are both born under the same sign... maybe she's my soulmate.

We look long into each other's eyes as we gently break apart.

I float down the hall into the secret room.

Another Portland run. Another unmarked Oldsmobile.

Mail-drop pick-up. An overflowing shopping bag of mail-order goodies.

But I'm not heading back to the ranch.

Instead, I'm staying overnight in the Portland hotel to fill in for an ailing disc jockey at our downtown disco.

In addition to our hotel, here in the business district we run a combination restaurant and discotheque, called "Zorba the Buddha." The name alludes to a synthesis of energies to which Bhagwan suggests we aspire: blending the earthy joie de vivre of Zorba the Greek with the "well gone" serene tranquility of the Buddha.

Our small general store in Antelope is also named Zorba the Buddha; sannyasin restaurants and discotheques around the world bear the same name; and we're building a Zorba the Buddha disco on the ranch.

I leave the mail-order items locked in the Olds' trunk.

Check into the hotel.

Steal out to the car for my shopping bag.

Whisk through the hotel lobby, camouflage my stockpile of contraband.

Hiding the illicit material beneath my hotel bed, I go for dinner in the Zorba the Buddha restaurant, joining a sannyasin lady I know from San Francisco, and her new boyfriend. I've always wanted to hit on this girl, but I can see the burgeoning momentum of her embroilment with this guy, and I count myself lucky to be single, save for my hugs with Mary.

The dining area, furnished with comfortable chairs, gleams as clean as ever.

Low-level lighting creates a relaxed atmosphere.

Candles and fresh flowers enhance the burgundy tablecloths set with white china and all the accoutrements.

The vegetarian fare tastes excellent, the antipasto somewhat unconventional. I can't comprehend my comrades snidely bemoaning the lack of junk food- who needs all those nameless waste products called "meat"?

Years ago I worked in a big-name fast food spot, and the burgers turned a livid chartreuse green if not placed swiftly on the grill. The lard, the fat, the grease, the ocean of suety gunk in the fryers...

Not my idea of a good time.

The dinner talk wends its way into the political arena, my lady friend and her beau lamenting the evils of Reagan's flagrant uncontrolled spending on weapons.

On a whim, I play the devil's advocate, saying, "But the government is only doing their job. They're supposed to oppress and be corrupt. It's the nature of the beast. They're just being who they are, like snakes, being snakes."

"But they're trying to destroy the ranch, and get rid of Bhagwan," she counters.

I see it, unexpectedly, in a different light.

A flash of acceptance.

"Of course," I say, "somebody has to resist changes to the status quo. Where would Christianity be if no one opposed Jesus? You can't have a play without conflict in the plot. The government's okay. They're playing their part in the drama of existence."

My companions disagree, but it's fun to take the other side. Something... vaguely and irreverently right, balanced, about defending the government's position.

After dinner, I fire up the discotheque sound system, getting acquainted with the mixer and the turntables. The dance floor floods with an enthusiastic blend of humanity, about half sannyasins and half non-sannyasins.

The mixed crowd: a contrast to the ranch, where the outside world encroaches menacingly upon us; here, the two worlds joyfully merge. I think of all the thank-you letters and glowing recommendations we receive from the Oregon firms we do business with. The ambiguity: they love us and they hate us.

The speakers blaring.

Our disco sound system is loud enough to rip the clothes off your body.

Grooving under my headphones, I spin new pre-release platters and old favorites.

My segues from one song to the next, they come off a bit rough. I'm out of practice.

I get four requests for "Maniac."

Okay, I am a crazed maniac.

I'll play it four times.

The dancers shake and spin, jump and jive. Most of them perform their gyrations alone, enjoying the freedom of individual spontaneous movement. The evening ends, everyone divinely exhausted. In my hotel room, I flop into bed, and sleep more peacefully than I have in a long time.

Back to the ranch.

In the spy room, Julian and I examine the new mail-order toys.

He tells me what to purchase, but I'm always so busy that I forget what we've sent away for- so it's like opening gifts at a surprise party.

A bag of electronic parts, a do-it-yourself kit.

"Check this out," I say. "The pain field generator. Give me a break. You've got a sick mind, Jules, you know that? You're really going to have Billy build this thing? We're talking ultrasonic warfare here..."

"What do you care, dill?" Julian scoffs, grabbing the bag of parts and shaking it in my face. "I'm gonna get you with my sound gun, Whiteboy."

"Shut up, peckerhead," I say. "Look at these books."

I hand him a paperback entitled, "Advanced Investigative Techniques for Private Finance."

"Who's investigating what?" I ask. Julian says nothing.

I point at five small red hardbacks, entitled "How to Kill, Volumes 1-5."

"These are a bit dodgy, laddie," I say in a phony English accent. "I remember ordering these. What the hell are you doing with this ungodly ca-ca?"

"You got to be prepared, Whiteboy," says Julian.

"Prepared? You mean paranoid."

"Rajesh?"

Julian always calls me by my sannyas name when he's waxing serious.

"Yes Jules?"

"It's about being informed. We have to educate ourselves. It's about awareness."

"Awareness? What's killing got to do with awareness? It's obvious that someone blessed with awareness wouldn't be interested in methods of killing."

I look him in the eyes.

He changes the subject.

"What else you got?"

I drop six new rolls of film for the Minox miniature camera into his palm.

"That reminds me," he says, "I need to borrow your Polaroid instant camera."

"Sure. No problem. But what about this?"

I motion towards another book, called "Cause of Death."

Without comment, he prepares to depart.

I hand him my Polaroid, the gift from my mother on my wedding day.

One more book on the desk, a compilation of governmental corruption- this one's for me. Julian leafs through it rapidly, hands it to me.

"Talk about paranoia," he gibes, "I'll leave you with this. I've got to make my rounds now."

He steps out quickly.

He drives around alone at night, watching.

To hell with Julian.

Soon I'm deep into the overview of governmental treachery. The facts in this book have been thoroughly researched: multiple sources, documented firsthand accounts, anecdotal atrocities that would make a ninja assassin cringe.

Back down my profligate track, I join conclaves of unscrupulous decadent fat old men, modern-day pirates in bankers' suits and Oxford ties, meeting in secret boardrooms to discuss the next war; convening in submarines below the polar ice cap to plan another assassination, to sway another election, to usurp another government.

Who dies next?

The MIA's?

How about the MBA's?

I hate all these nasty little acronyms.

Plagues of corporate logo insects.

The media bashes you with them.

Merely keeping track of all their meanings is stressful.

AMA.NRA.CBS.DSM.CNN.CIA.DOW.DIA.

Who pays any attention to the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency? I knew someone who worked for the DIA. He exchanged gunfire with the so-called enemy in a park in Germany. Bullets flying among the baby carriages. Sorry I missed that comedy. I'm glad our tax dollars are paying for people to shoot other people in public places.

Is there any intelligence in these weapons economy people?

Who's heard of the NSA?

Who's read "The Puzzle Palace?"

So many truths, thoroughly documented, have been published by courageous authors, but people have forgotten how to read, how to seek out reality when they smell a rat.

The NSA appeared around 1952.

It's still around in 1984.

Its purpose is to monitor the enemy's transmissions.

Who is the enemy?

Perhaps the NSA's real goal is to monitor ALL transmissions.

Who knows what revealing dances their mathematical algorithms will do, integrated with voice recognition programs running on computers, scanning conversations for keywords. Who knows how many millions of phone conversations might be monitored simultaneously?

God, this truth behind the scenes is tiring.

Blam! Slam! Crash!

Out in the hall, solid bodies hit walls, force vectors in collision.

Young people laughing. Innocent kids.

A wailing teenager is overpowered, held down and tickled. He breaks free, and footsteps pound with his attackers in pursuit. I burst from my room, yell

nonsense and monkey sounds at them, and duck onto the fire escape for a cigarette.

The evening is crisp and cool. As I relax, something clicks.

It's about control.

All efforts to control are doomed to fail. The politics in Washington, the personality conflicts at home, the World Bank usurping the global economy in the name of progress, the NSA listening to our every word- it's all the same power trip- the aristocrats and the plebeians, the husbands and the wives, the bourgeoisie and the proletariats, all the same.

Suddenly I'm tired again.

But I can't resist. Back in the spy room.

My head swims with NSA euphemisms.

Call it the "National Surveillance Agency."

Call it the satellite information monopoly that it is.

Call it the total privacy invasion that it is.

Aldous Huxley said that facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.

To people living in their prefab suburban tracts and farmhouses, unwittingly conditioned by television's virtual reality and the sugary pablum of their Reader's Digests, the NSA is science fiction. Only in some far future Big Brother world could all the phones be tapped at once.

But it's 1984.

When I read George Orwell's book, "1984," at age 15, I stopped watching television right away. Not a trivial decision for a person mercilessly addicted to "I Love Lucy" and "Superman" and "Ozzie and Harriet."

Why should I watch TV?

I have enough bad news in my head already.

TV headlines violence: who's been robbed, beaten, and killed. It instills fear in its viewers without their knowing it, promulgating a carefully limited superficial view of what's going on. Out of the millions of beautiful fascinating things occurring every day, it's murder, murder, and murder that makes the news. And a few fires and floods to keep you thinking positive.

But the most insidious facet of television's mind control is that it robs you of your real experience. You soar on the fake emotions of the actors, on the pseudo-intellectual blather of the commentators, convinced that the vicarious life into which you are sinking has substance. You gradually lose the capacity to choose, to think creatively.

You become, well, I guess, sort of, in a way, like... wishy-washy.

A subtle take-over. The very word: television- it's an ugly word.

I think prolonged exposure to television causes cancer too.

Slam! Crash! Bang!

The kids again.

Do they care that sicko scientists are designing wars in phony-foundation

think tanks right now, using software that measures death in dollars? X-number of deaths will yield Y-number of dollars.

Enough.

I'm going home to sleep.

Tossing and turning.

Having a nightmare.

I am two years old, trapped in a hospital, imprisoned in a long drawer, as if in a morgue. Evil doctors in white coats and surgical masks perform torturous medical experiments on me. I become five years old and escape, running up a crowded street, trying to get to a tall brownstone school building where my father teaches. Way up on the seventh-floor, I can see him on an exterior landing, but he can't see me. I remain stuck in the street, running, my feet made of lead. Off to the distance on my right, across an emerald green field, shimmers a white castle where goodness resides.

I awake, lie in bed, wondering about the nightmare. I had a similar recurring dream for years as a child.

My mother says I died at age two in a hospital from pneumonia, contracted in recovery from a double hernia operation, and that she spanked me back to life. Maybe the hospital in my dream stems from that experience. Or maybe the Nazis carved me up as an experiment in my last lifetime.

Being stuck in the street, unable to get back to my father- that could be a metaphor for my religious quest.

The seven floors of the school building could be the seven chakras in the body.

Goodness on my right could mean that my active, in-the-world side is my focus.

Or maybe it don't mean shit.

Who knows what mysteries dreams hold?

Perhaps they are the language of the soul.

I should start dream journaling again.

Often I think the dreamtime is more real than the physical reality.

It's interesting that back around 700 A.D., the Christian church prohibited its members from interpreting their dreams. The priests would be out of a job if people made direct contact with their souls.

I recall a scene from Peter Weir's excellent movie, "The Last Wave." Richard Chamberlain, the white good-guy scientist, yells at Chris, his black Aborigine foil who is wrongly accused of murder, "You're in trouble."

Chris yells back, "No! You're in trouble. You don't know what dreams are anymore."

Chris is right. I'm in trouble. I don't know what dreams are anymore.

I drift back to sleep.

Ding ding ding. The beeper.

Daylight streaming in the window.

Report to Julian in the upstairs mall.

When I arrive, groggy and muddled, he's not around.

The work day is underway, everyone at their desk or bustling about. I stop for a chat with Deborah, and sit on the edge of her desk.

"Hey Rajesh," she says flatly, "you look like you just got up."

"I did. How've you been?"

"Me? Oh, I'm fine. How about you? Are you getting enough sleep?"

"No, but I never do."

She looks up at me for a long time.

"You know," she says, "I've been so into you. Do you know how long I've been in love with you? You don't know, do you?"

"No, I...uh... I mean, well... yeah, I guess."

"No. You just didn't get it, Whiteboy."

"Well, you never... I guess I didn't... I'm sorry..."

I stare at the floor.

She starts arranging the papers on her desk, saying, "I better get to work."

"Yeah... me too... I'll see you later."

She doesn't say goodbye, as I drift away, stunned.

Inconceivable.

We get a day off.

One day per month, we are free to slope.

We can sleep in, hang out, enjoy the lakes, do whatever we want.

The new freedom is disorienting at first, but not for long.

Sunny morning.

I take the bumpy ride in one of our school buses, to the lake where we swim naked.

As I dog-paddle through the shallows, relishing the touch of the water on my skin, I swirl around, appraising my surroundings. Summer is in the air and abundance is everywhere; nature overflows with generosity- the woods and hills whisper and bubble, passionately and profusely alive with blossoming wildflowers and juicy succulents and new-born creatures and infinite shades of green.

Green has so many faces- it's impossible to paint them all.

Did you ever notice how so many artists have trouble with large areas of green?

It's because green is the color of healing, and painters are into their sickness.

But I am feeling healed.

At every point of the compass, in the water, on the diving platform, on the shore, nude women lounge in the sun. All of them- even those who don't fit the fashion model prototype- are goddesses.

I don't feel I have to conquer any of these beauties.

They're just beautiful.

This is the Garden of Eden.

I pass the day leisurely, blessed by spontaneous bliss attacks.

When the afternoon wanes, I board the next bus for home. Next to a window in the back, staring out, sits typewriter Arpito, my friend from the awareness walk in Poona. I take a seat beside him.

"Hey! Arpito! Long time no see. I didn't know you were here at the lake today."

"Hey bro'! How's it going? Seems like I never see you anymore."

"Just busy, I guess."

"I often wonder," he says, "what it is that you do in Edison. What goes on in that locked room of yours?"

"Oh, stuff for Julian. Did you check out all those babes at the lake? I'm telling you, we're living in the Garden of Eden."

"Maybe YOU are," he says, "but I was just contemplating drowning myself. That's why you didn't see me at the lake. I was hiding in the woods, moping. My lady is dumping me. Again. Women. They're going to drive me to enlightenment."

"I was just thinking how delectable they all are."

"I know, that's the problem."

"Well," I say, "as the master says: freedom is a higher value than love. And everything we do is to cover up our aloneness."

"I know, I know. It's just so painful."

"Savor the pain. Bhagwan says that God gives us pain to wake us up, not to punish us. In that sense, you're lucky to be hurting so bad. Your opportunity to become aware is great."

"Yeah yeah, you've got all the answers," he says, "but pain still sucks. What about you? Any love in your life?"

"Sort of- there's that new woman, Mary, who started working in Edison. I've been tuning into her. But I haven't made a move on her yet."

"Why not?" he asks. "You usually get them in bed before you know their names."

"I don't know. This one is different. I love just hugging her."

"You're getting old, bro'," he chuckles.

We jostle along without talking for the rest of the journey, feeling the warm wind through the open windows. As we're climbing from the old yellow bus in front of the ranch mall, I say, "Hey. Let's get a slice of pizza. I've got a little cash. My treat."

"Sounds great."

The pizza parlor's motif is a cultural hybrid, an Italian bistro intermarried with and an American Fifties diner. We plop into a booth and both order a slice of Gorgonzola pizza.

"You know, Rajesh," he says, "you should eat more. You're so thin. I worry about you."

"Aah, don't worry about me. I live on coffee and cigarettes."

"That's what I mean. You look gaunt and pasty. You've got dark circles under your eyes. You don't get enough sleep either do you?"

"Sleep is for mortals."

"Really bro', the body is the temple of the soul. I'm not trying to criticize, but at times, nowadays, when I see you from a distance- you look like one of those haggard private detectives on a TV show. Or a plain-clothes cop in a grade B movie."

"Now you've got me worried."

I stare at my reflection in the pizza parlor window.

I have to think this through.

I touch my hollow cheeks.

I sense the monkey of espionage on my back.

I must look paranoid, and cops- they oftentimes look paranoid, like they're going to get you before you get them. I guess they live in fear, facing criminals all day. Cops and criminals- they're not dissimilar- they just adopt different sides of the chase.

But Arpito is right.

I have that sallow "lean and hongred look," like the perfidious Cassius in Shakespeare's play "Julius Caesar."

"I guess I do look like a cop, or like the traitor Cassius."

The pizza slices arrive.

They're fabulous, with a perfect crispy crust and that indescribable pungent flavor of Gorgonzola cheese. We dig in heartily.

"Julius Caesar," I say, wiping my mouth, "invented the strategy of divide and conquer. When you think about it, democracy is a form of divide and conquer. Keep the Republicans pitted against the Democrats, and you can get away with murder while they're busy duking it out."

"You changed the subject, bro'. I've noticed you do that when you're uncomfortable. But you're right- monarchy, democracy, communism... they're just names. You can see it's all a power trip, when you look at what they're really doing."

"Yeah, it's funny how universal it is- the lust for power. Government agencies, religious communities, the sixth grade lunch table- it's all the same. I steal your apple..."

"And I punch your fucking lights out."

We laugh through munching mouths.

I chomp down the final sliver of crust- the last bite, always the best-

you appreciate it the most because you know it's the end.

"Alright then," I say, "are you done? I'm going to Edison now."

"Edison? On your day off?"

"I've got stuff to do."

"Okay. Thanks for the pizza. Don't work yourself completely to death. I love you, bro'."

"Yo. I love you too. See you when I see you."

Alone in the spy room.

I get lost again in the book on government corruption, falling into a trance-like state, my head spinning with circles of betrayal.

FEMA has the power to usurp the government.

The U.S. Constitution is obsolete.

Today's friends are tomorrow's enemies.

You can't trust anyone.

Disinformation theory. Formulated for the Nazi propaganda campaigns. People can't successfully be told one hundred percent lies- they're not that stupid. But if given ninety percent lies and ten percent truth, even the most intelligent get lost in trying to distinguish which is which.

It's not the cover-ups that gall me so much, not the atrocities swept aside by repetitive diversions and plausible denials, but the overall blanket of lies under which we live. We're lulled into compliance by parades of euphemisms: "in our national interest," "peacekeeping efforts," "collateral losses."

But.

I remember the flash of acceptance I had, the realization that the government is just playing their part in the drama.

There lies a deeper truth here.

Who is the ubiquitous "they" that the theorists, that everyone, talk about anyway?

These are projections, another way to blame someone else for your misery. There's that BLAME again.

Even the government isn't to blame.

What a fucking mind trap. I'm guilty of blaming the world for blaming me. With a jerk, I straighten up in my seat.

My shoulders are tense.

My breathing, shallow.

Enough of this bullshit.

When I get old, I'll drop everything and study physics, and cooking- the two greatest mysteries on earth.

I peek into a porno scrapbook, to freshen my palate.

The page opens to a scorching bare-breasted Copper Tan nymph, her lacy see-through bikini-bottom underwear ornamented with frilly white scallops. The underwear alone will drive a man mad, forget what it rests against. The hidden

is more exciting than the revealed. One of my Edison cohorts, on seeing this photo, began screaming, "I'll do anything, anything, if she'll come to my trailer tonight wearing this scalloped thing."

Okay. I'm having too much fun.

Tap tap.

Someone rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

I shove the porno under my desk, and answer the knock, keeping the door partially closed.

It's my luscious new romantic interest, Mary, looking shy and slightly flustered. She must be working late too.

"Hi," I say, stepping out into the hall, "what's going on?"

Her cheeks turn scarlet.

"I...uh..." she falters, softly, "I... want you to spend the night with me tonight."

"Do what?" I exclaim, thrilled, but in disbelief.

I repeat it: "Do what?"

Again, "You want to do what?"

I am so flabbergasted that I forget to say yes.

"Well?" She teases, embarrassed at being left hanging.

"Well...sure!" I finally blurt out, and take her in my arms.

Our first kiss.

Cherry blossoms in May.

I go home with her.

Her beauty overwhelms me when she disrobes.

God, she's lovelier, more perfect, than I'd imagined.

In bed, our bodies- each knows the other- as if we've been together for lifetimes.

We make love like virgins, cherishing every new minute, every new move.

Morning.

Before she wakes, I'm snuggled against her back, gazing over her shoulder out the window at the majestic landscape. The sunrise throws gauzy abstract patterns of amber light onto her hair. There is that morning stillness.

I have a revelation.

Suddenly it's clear to me that all love relationships are the same, and the issues triggered in me are always the same.

I've been in numerous long-term relationships, but never have I wholly said yes within myself. Why not? I'm tired of waiting for the perfect soulmate.

Mary is my perfect soulmate.

Even if she's not- it doesn't matter.

There's no reason to say no to what's dawning with her.

Bhagwan said that freedom is a higher value than love, but only on Tuesdays.

I've found the woman I want.

"When thousands and thousands of people around the earth are celebrating, singing, dancing, ecstatic, drunk with the divine, there is no possibility of any global suicide. With such festivity and with such laughter, with such sanity and health, with such naturalness and spontaneity, how can there be war?"

- "I Celebrate Myself" - Osho

Chapter Seven: LAO TZU

"Oh God! Oh yeah! Oh God!"

A woman's screaming.

Slap!

"Oh yeah!"

Slap! Slap!

Hard slaps, like a hand on a bare butt.

What am I hearing?

I've just put on the headphones, inside our secret monitoring room in the new ranch hotel. Turning on the recorder, I'm tuning into room number thirty-two as the sound goes onto the tape.

Slap!

"Oh God! Oooooo!"

She's wild.

And there's a male voice, murmuring low, encouraging sounds.

Slap! slap!

This guy's definitely spanking her.

Slap. "Ungh!"

Slap. "Mrammm."

And she definitely likes it.

I'm listening through the mouthpiece of room thirty-two's telephone, which rests on the table next to the round bed. All the hotel beds are round. I can hear this scene as if I were right there.

While I was in New York, Michel altered the telephones in the hotel using the "hookswitch bypass" technique, which amounts to moving a few wires inside the phone itself, and hooking up the wall jack to an unused extra pair of wires. In the main hotel phone junction box, jumping the extra wires from room thirty-two brings the audio back to the monitoring room. It sounds complicated, but in practice, it takes only five minutes.

The effect of the hookswitch bypass is that even with the phone's handset in its cradle, I hear everything in the room through it.

In a lull, after the slapping.

Slurp. Slurp.

The woman panting.

What am I hearing?

Wetness and friction.

Louder slurping.

Louder panting.

It's like I'm lying on the bed next to her, an invisible intruder listening to her being penetrated. It's definitely the characteristic wet sound of penetration.

Slap! Slap!

"Oh God! Oh yeah!"

Slurp! Slurp!

Slap! Slap!

"Oh yeah! Oh! Oh!"

What is going on here?

With the slapping and the slurping and the oh-yeah's all happening at once, I'm having fun trying to envision the actual configuration of the act. I get hard, listening.

"Oh! Oh! Ohhhhh!"

She's coming.

He's grunting, making animal noises, while she howls.

As the fury of delight subsides, I hear giggling and bodies shifting position.

They light cigarettes. The hotel rooms are non-smoking, but I could care less.

A conversation about one of her ex-boyfriends develops.

He was a premature ejaculator. This can be a problem, but as the ancient Chinese wisdom of the "I Ching" says, "Perseverance furthers."

Who cares? No one is using the information I'm surreptitiously gathering.

I doubt that Sheela is interested in the bedroom antics of these visitors.

This can't be the reason we constructed this hotel, raising it from the ground up with new lumber. It's not designed to invade privacy, but to accommodate visitors; it consists of a reception building, and two adjoining square blocks of thirty rooms each. A landscaped courtyard centers the two main buildings, and each of the sixty rooms corresponds to one of the sixty cards of the Rajneesh Neo-Tarot, which have names like "Laughter" and "Surrender."

But what if you find yourself stuck in "Sorrow," or "The Gates of Hell," or "Misuse of Power?"

I hate the "Misuse of Power" card the most.

I pull it frequently. It must be me.

The secret power of clandestine listening.

Our hotel eavesdropping system comprises the deepest layer of surveillance, unbeknownst to almost everyone, but Rajneesh Security covers the hotel as well. The hotel reception building contains a video security room, where a science-fiction array of monitor screens displays the entrances, the check-in desk, and all the walkways between the buildings. The cameras lie hidden around the hotel in small wire-mesh covered boxes which appear like wall-mounted audio speakers.

Rajneesh Security guards sit in their secret room, constantly watching for trouble. Unfortunately, Michel and I, on the way to and from our secret room, are part of the drama they watch.

Agency versus agency. Like when the local police get in the FBI's way, or

the FBI unknowingly steps on the CIA's toes. This culture of secrecy is a peculiar world, and I don't know what I'm doing in it anymore.

The listening assignment: room twenty-eight.

The audio is clear in my headphones, and the tape is rolling.

"I don't think she's going to come." A male voice, middle eastern accent.

"Oh, yes she will." Another male voice, same accent.

"She said she'd be here. I think we should wait longer." A third male voice, also middle eastern.

Long minutes of background room noise.

Drinks being mixed. Glasses clinking.

Shuffled pacing.

One of the men says, "Come on. Let's go out and find something to do. She's not coming."

Another man, "There's nothing to do here. We should wait, I tell you. She's not bad looking. She wanted it when I saw her."

"Yeah, she wants it. I don't think it will be expensive."

"I don't know, she didn't look so good to me."

More drinks being mixed.

A knock at the door.

Someone enters the room.

A woman's voice.

Chatty greetings, introductions.

Cocktail conversation.

The woman's laughter, uncomfortable.

They call her Sonya.

Hmm. I saw a Sonya on the ranch today, a woman I knew back in San Francisco. Could it be the same woman? This voice in my headphones is vaguely familiar. Yes, she's talking about living in "Frisco." Sonya always called it "Frisco." I'll bet it's the same Sonya.

Is she selling her body to these men?

Female and male voices in the bathroom- but I can't make out what they're saying.

The outside door, opening. People leaving.

Bodies moving. Bedclothes rustling. Voices murmuring, barely audible.

A long interval of room noise.

If they're doing it, it is without excitement.

I don't know precisely what I'm hearing on this job- it is interesting-

but even if it's the act of prostitution that it appears to be, I can't see how it puts Bhagwan in jeopardy.

Afternoon, listening in on room number twenty-two.

A man's voice. "Hey. Good to see you. How's it going?"

A woman's voice. "Great, great. Thanks. How about you?"

The man's voice. "Oh, same old thing. Working my ass off. And playing hard. I can't complain. How much do you want?"

The woman's voice. "Three hits. Is it good?"

"Really smooth. You'll love it. That's twelve bucks each."

Plastic rustling.

A different woman's voice. "Here's another twelve. I want one too. It's not cheap, huh?"

I think I know these people.

Sounds like an ecstasy deal.

One of the few drugs I never tried.

Peculiar, this scene.

Of course I will report them.

I report everything.

I am a company man.

I'm not a tattletale. I'm just honest.

A knock at the door.

It's Michel.

"I've lost my key to Hilltop," he says, in a rush. "Can you lend me yours for an hour?"

"I'm so glad," I giggle, removing the key to the Socrates phone room from my crowded key-ring, "that you got stuck with troubleshooting that system."

"Up yours, peckerhead," he grunts, "the moms can't get it right, no matter how many times I show them."

"I know. It drives you nuts. Hey, I'm listening to a drug deal. You want to check it out?"

"No," he says, "I've got to get over to Hilltop. I've been beeped three times in the last ten minutes. Thanks. See you later."

Late night.

At Julian's behest, I deliver the tape of the drug transaction to Su, a tough English top mom. I generally get along with her, but at times she acts coarse with me, tries to push my buttons with her domineering crudities, fishing for an insolent response. I never oblige her.

We meet outside the hotel, footsteps crunching in the shadows.

Su shakes her head in snobbish disapproval when I recount the drug deal, muttering foul oaths and derogatory things about junkies. Having struggled through my own addictions, I long to tell her to kiss my ass, but I keep my mouth shut and hand her the tape, which I've labeled "Hexagon." Hexagon derives from Hex, which rhymes with "-X," the street name for ecstasy. I use a random mental association appellative process, generating indiscriminate and unrecognizable names, to identify all my tapes.

Brusquely, Su thanks me and fades into the night.

There's a strange man staying in the hotel.

We're told not only to listen to his room and but also to follow him.

I christen him "the drone."

He acts, not openly intrusive, but with an air of couched suspicion. Every day, he takes buses everywhere, always looking around, over his shoulder. Then he calls Arizona every night and discusses his personal finances at length.

Late afternoon.

I'm settling down, inside the hotel secret room, to listen to the drone, after a day of chasing him around. I pay careful attention, alert for some trace of impropriety.

A knock.

It must be Michel.

I answer the door.

It's a male cleaner, standing with his broom and dustpan in hand.

Our eyes lock.

I sweep my headphones off, trying to block the trunkload of electronics on the floor from his view.

I shut the door in his face.

Shit.

Security breach.

I've got to arrange a special knock with Michel.

I should've thought of this.

I'm getting sloppy.

Days of dronehood.

I discover his pattern.

He's girl-watching, furtively ogling the many good-looking women that Bhagwan attracts. I sense his growing disappointment as he finds no orgies, no hedonistic flesh piles around bonfires at night, and discovers that sex, contrary to the media's lurid descriptions, is not our primary concern on the

ranch.

Not that sex isn't important; it's the fundamental vibration of life, regardless of our moral ideas. The birds and the bees flit joyously through the physics of everything. Atomic structure itself incorporates opposing yin-yang electrical charges, dancing in bipolar sex-like rhythms, spawning wave-particle progeny.

I catch myself placing mental judgements on this drone, this geekish sex-starved voyeur carrying his obsession.

But I am the same. Maybe I've been with more women- I've lost count since becoming a sannyasin- and maybe I'm more of a connoisseur of feminine pulchritude, but my enslavement to lust is identical to his.

Bhagwan says to go into sex with awareness, to demystify it.

I'm trying, I'm trying.

Bhagwan says that sex must be understood; it's the first step, but not the last; it must be passed through before it can be transcended; sex is not an evil thing, consuming us, as the priests proclaim. Sex is made sinful by the religions to keep us weak, because sex energy is the root core of creativity, and to repress sex is to repress free thinking. If the members of a church become too autonomous, the priest has nothing to do.

I must be missing something.

I am consumed- not by sex, but by my own mind's preoccupation with it. The problem: sex isn't wrong- it just eats up all the time I could use to seek God. I guess sex is like everything; it can be used reverently, or it can be abused; it can be a meditation, or a source of suffering; it can be sacred, or profane. But I am determined to understand this puzzle. Somehow, in this mire of endless desire, I am the arrow of awareness, piercing through.

Slowly, slowly...

But it seems to take so long.

I tell Julian that the "drone" is no menace.

The secret hotel listening room: my second home.

The furniture arrangement, the bathroom layout, the recording setup- I can visualize it all in my mind's eye perfectly.

I could do this job blindfolded now.

Lawyers, journalists, curious visitors, sannyasins from all over the world, reporters from the Portland newspaper, the "Oregonian"- I monitor them all, lying lethargic on the hotel's round bed. Weeks of useless, boring conversations. Repetitive.

Bleary from a long listless night, enduring a triangle of incongruous

flirtations - one female professional bantering with two males about their gender politics- I surface from the hotel monitoring room into a bright summer morning.

Birds sing happily and the earth smells fresh and rich.

There is Priya, under a wide-brimmed hat, watering the hotel courtyard grass.

She works here now, tending the hotel's landscaped surroundings; she prefers this world of plants and fresh breezes to the world of restaurant dishes and air conditioning.

Priya nods knowingly at the monitoring room, says with feigned reverence in her husky voice, "The inner sanctum."

"Ah, yes," I turn the sound of it over, "the inner sanctum."

I don't say much about what I do, but Priya watches very carefully.

"Let's go for cappuccino!" I cry.

"Okay!"

Two kids, off to the sandbox.

New things appear quickly on the ranch.

There's now an espresso machine, a whole little cafe in fact, in the hotel reception lobby.

On a comfortable couch, we sip away.

I brag to Priya, "I'll bet you never heard of FLIR."

A pause, while through a window I watch Savita, the pretty money mom, who's standing outside the hotel. Looks like she's coming into the lobby.

"Well, are you going to tell me what FLIR is?" demands Priya.

"Oh. Yeah... FLIR. It's 'Forward Looking Infra-Red.'

"Ah, I should've known. Your love for the F-16. How is she, by the way?"

"As beauteous and wicked as ever."

Savita walks in swiftly, bare arms clutching her briefcase to her breast. I shoot her a smile. She waves back on her way to the hotel reception desk.

Priya, with a disgusted look, says, "It's Savita's accent that everybody's in love with. You're targeting her right now, honey."

"Yeah. I love her accent."

"You just want to fuck her, Swami."

"That's a nice idea, Ma."

I breathe a sigh.

Stare at Savita.

"How silly we are," says Priya quietly. "Well, you can swagger all day with your chicks and your airplanes, but you never met John Lennon. And I did. So there."

Priya interviewed the Beatles in the Sixties, when she worked as a journalist for a rock magazine.

And meeting John Lennon is as good as it gets.

"I can never top that," I say, "but I shook hands with Ringo."

"That's nothing. I spent a week with all of them, and John called me Maria. How divine."

"You look like a Maria."

"Well, duh, dahling."

"There's also SLAR, 'Side Looking Airborne Radar.' Did you know that certain moths have radar, like bats? The moths can hear bats scanning ultrasonically and jam the bats' radar. That's countermeasures, the most effective tactic. But these Air Force toys, we're talking big bucks. The F-15 guzzles 2,000 pounds of fuel per hour."

Priya whistles.

"The F-15 now? Cheating on the F-16? Such a fickle bitch you are. Why do you read about all this crap?"

"I don't. I make it up. No, I just make up the numbers- the statistics- like Bhagwan does. I had a friend whose brother-in-law was a U.S. Marine pilot. They fly the F-18. He'd fold back the wings, go supersonic with afterburners blazing, and zoom from Florida to Maine for fresh lobster. Back in time for lunch."

"There goes more taxpayer money," says Priya. "Serves them right."

"Talk about fuel consumption, the Blackbird is the ultimate gas hog. It has to refuel in flight multiple times on every mission."

"What's a Blackbird?"

"The SR-71, a spy plane. It flies over two thousand miles an hour. It gets so hot from air friction that the plane expands in flight- it's literally a foot longer flying at top speed. You can fry eggs on the wings. The Blackbird photographs a 50-mile-wide strip across the entire continental U.S. in less than two hours."

"Damn."

She mimics my southern drawl when she says "Damn."

It sounds like "Day-yum."

Priya stares at me.

"It's just so useless," she chides, "all this junk in your head. It's just noise."

She's silent for a minute, says, "The mind... it's about making noise. Life... it's about making noise."

"God, you're right," I laugh. "Life IS... about making noise. The ten thousand noises. But you're a crazed maniac too, so don't complain about my trips."

"But that government shit just makes you afraid. You already know they're sick. You know you're sick. What else do you need to know?"

"Nothing really. I'm just drawn to it. What can I say?"

"You could just drop it, my dear."

"God. I'd get enlightened if I didn't have the F-16."

"Oh bullshit. It's through your pornography you'll reach enlightenment."

"That'd be poetic justice. My paper doll icons take me to the other shore. My passion finally bears fruit."

"Passion, my ass," snaps Priya, "it's just fucking lust. Worse, it's your repressed lust. You could try some com-passion with your passion. Compassion for yourself, that is. Where do you go, in those dark moods, in that necrosity of yours?"

"I don't know, it seems so familiar. The necro thing. The death wish- I must've inherited it from my mother."

"Oh, more bullshit. You can blame your smothering mother forever. You still need her approval. Bad boy with your nasty planes. Haven't you done enough therapy to work that shit? Didn't you do enough groups in Poona? Not to mention all that new age crap you've done. Christ, take responsibility. Listen to what your beloved master is saying. Be here now and drop this necro war garbage."

"Don't tell me what to do. You're getting belligerent."

"I am not. Your resistance pisses me off, that's all."

"I don't know, it seems like animosity to me. I think you just like to criticize me."

"It's not criticism. Since when is the truth the same as criticism?"

"Yeah right. If you believe something, you call it the truth. If I believe something, you label it as the mind and jump on it. We just have different belief systems."

"There you go with that belief system shit again. I'm going back to my plants."

"But... oh never mind. See you."

Sheela passes by the hotel lobby windows.

"God!" Priya exclaims, standing to go. "Poor Sheela! She looks so tired." Her remark jolts me upright.

I don't usually conceive of Sheela in a sisterly or empathetic way.

But Priya's right. Beyond everyone's projections and pedestals, Sheela stumbles along like the rest. And being as close as Sheela is to Bhagwan- it has to be intense.

Priya departs, whispering, "How silly we are."

I sink back down in the couch, sullen.

I hate Priya, and I love her. Both-And.

I hate that sometimes she sees more clearly than I do. But I love her awareness, and her kindness, wrapped in that disarming honesty.

Maybe Priya's enlightened.

I am sure she's fantasized it at times; many sannyasins have, myself included, when that flavor of blissful nothingness lingers longer than usual. But no, Priya still has her judgments, and her attachments to the master and his methods; when you're enlightened, attachments disappear.

What is this quest for enlightenment?

Bhagwan's account of his enlightenment experience is awe-inspiring.

He says one must expend as much effort as possible, but the dilemma is that no amount of effort will achieve it. In one of his discourses on "The Discipline of Transcendence," he recounts in detail how he finally gave up trying, and in that surrender a vast new energy arose while he watched his past, the person he formerly was, disappear into nothingness. More than a metamorphosis, he describes the utter and total dissolution of what went before.

And here I sit, remaining stupid.

Will I ever reach the goal?

Slowly, slowly... but shit, what's it going to take?

How many more stones to turn over?

How many more rat's tunnels, chasing down the cheese.

It's not like I haven't tried: the exploration, the inquiry, the books and scriptures, the methods and models, the systems and techniques.

From Moses to Lao Tzu, I waded through the "-isms," reading and re-reading the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao Te King. I dug through the philosophers from Plato to Russell; delved into the scientists, from Euclid to Einstein. I tried Yoga, Tai Chi, affirmations, visualizations. Astrology, Tarot, Magick.

I contemplated candles, whirled like the Sufis, watched my breath, peered into mirrors, floated in the sensory deprivation tank. I did shaking meditations, dancing meditations, silent meditations; I practiced austerities, stared at the wall for days, screamed on the floor for days, answered the question "Tell me who you are?" for days. Anything to short circuit the mind and let the sublime slip through.

What else? Stand on my head? Contemplate my navel? Chant "OM" till the cows come home? Swim the English Channel? Jump from an airplane? Excavate South African emerald mines in South Africa with a teaspoon?

Damn this casting about, everywhere, for the chimera of enlightenment.

What a relief the ranch is: to forget all that hocus-pocus spiritual carrot-seeking and concentrate on loving one's mundane existence.

Standing in the dust.

The center of town, under a hazy summer afternoon sky.

Nearby, Julian brandishes an odd-shaped object in my direction.

It looks like a Star Wars laser handgun.

The "pain field generator."

This has to be a farce, a scene from the theater of the absurd.

Julian plays the iniquitous robber, packing the gun.

Michel acts as the stalwart accomplice, backing Julian up from the sidelines, and having assembled that bag of parts in the spy room into a high-frequency sound weapon.

I am the unsuspecting victim, waylaid on the road.

Julian lowers the pain field generator, saunters three steps in my direction, mock draws like a gunfighter, and turns the gadget on, leveling it at me.

I can't hear anything, but I feel this painful shiver, like hordes of tiny insects thrashing around under my skin, or the sensory warp from an exotic snake venom. I can't put a name on the feeling- but it makes me want to jump out of my body.

Am I conjuring this up?

Dust clouds whirl around me as three dump trucks roll by.

The circles of dust remind me of planetary orbits.

In the noise of the trucks, I can't hear myself screaming at Julian to stop.

He won't stop.

With a strong act of will, I rush him and wrench the pain field generator from his grasp. My rage skyrockets when he starts laughing, and Michel snickers.

Heartless fucks, both of them.

No friends of mine, these assholes. But now I have the weapon.

I order Julian to show me how it works. He points to the trigger, the three stages of gain control. I fire it up, switch it to full power, and yo! There it is, the back edge of that bizarre sensation.

I turn it on Julian.

He keeps chattering as if nothing is happening. The thing in my hand is vibrating, broadcasting its supranatural trans-sonic blitz, but it doesn't faze him.

He is immune to the pain field generator.

Or his nervous system is made of steel.

Or I'm hypersensitive.

It's peculiar, how your mind leaps tracks when you're in a crisis, like an electron jumping from one orbit to the next. Is it conditioning, or Mars, the planet of competition, that creates strife between men? All the symbols for the sun, moon, and planets can be built from three shapes: the cross, the circle, and the crescent.

This trinity of Julian, Whiteboy, and Michel.

Julian has to be the Father, Michel is the Son, and I'm the Holy Ghost. I am feeling ghostly, blown away by some invisible high-frequency sizzle, and triangled out by my so-called friends.

I hand the pain field generator back to Julian, glaring at him.

I glare at Michel.

A flock of shrill-crying birds careens across the sun's blurry orb.

Feeling unloved and disheartened, I walk away.

"Forget that. We'll call you."

Rain.

The Big Muddy Ranch: it's just that.

I slog through the brown muck, at Julian's instruction, to Pythagoras, the medical center, which has been relocated close to the center of town, and expanded to include a cluster of trailers.

Things on the ranch are always moving and changing.

The administrative temples in the upstairs mall have moved to Socrates; part of the legal services have been repositioned in Zarathustra; the ranch phone switch has been transferred to a new building near City Hall; the mall restaurant has shifted upstairs where the office space used to be.

You can never feel settled around Bhagwan.

The constantly shifting landscape keeps you alert.

Comfort is nice, but it doesn't wake you up.

The porch of the medical center is crammed with people.

The crowd spills out under the eaves and onto the porches of adjoining trailers, everyone huddled against the downpour. I make my way inside, finding every available inch occupied by more hordes, sitting, standing, waiting, all damp, muddy, and bedraggled.

I discover we're being tested for conjunctivitis.

There's an epidemic on the ranch.

It must be serious.

Even the privileged inhabitants of Bhagwan's house are here.

I'm told that one can test positive for conjunctivitis, and be carrying the germ, without exhibiting any symptoms. I overhear Devaraj, Bhagwan's personal physician, complaining that these diagnoses don't make sense.

I test positive myself, and along with scores of other people, am quarantined and forced to stay overnight.

The rain slows to a steady drizzle.

My sinuses swell.

My head throbs.

Like inmates, we pass the time gossiping, telling jokes. We receive meals on paper plates, and sleep packed like sardines in bunk beds and strewn across the floor.

Morning dawns, grey, and the rain won't stop.

Hours of waiting, as everyone is re-tested, and released.

I trudge back to Zarathustra, wondering what that strange interlude was about.

Chalk it up as another mysterious event at the feet of the master.

And move on to the next mission.

A little evening job.

A pleasant chore, developing a roll of Minox film for Julian, who's reserved the photo lab tonight. I am the subordinate in the operation, my overseer being a multi-talented Edison fellow named Robby. Photography is one of Robby's many skills, and Julian enlists his assistance on a limited basis.

Robby knows to keep his mouth shut, but I think he brags a bit on the side about being privy to our covert operations. Regardless of whether he's discreet, I'm grateful to him, because he's the one person on earth who finally explained F-stops and shutter speeds to me. And I'm relaxed with him tonight, as the responsibility for successful printing lies in his hands, not mine.

I leave Robby alone in the tiny developing room with the red light, to get the crucial film baths correct. I'm supposed to be learning the procedure, but right now I don't want to know it. I don't want the burden of possibly screwing up some intelligence photos later.

The negatives turn out fine.

The ensuing prints, glossy and crisp.

Magical, to witness the images forming on the blank paper in the developing tray. The process of capturing three dimensions in a two-dimensional plane- whatever the medium- I never tire of its mystery.

While the prints dry, hanging on wires like little leprechaun shirts on a clothesline, Robby slips a cassette into the lab's modular stereo system. Haunting flute music, comes over the speakers, echoing as if in a bottomless canyon, with a long, sweepingly sad low note rising to a jubilant arpeggio.

"What is that?" I ask.

"That's me. I recorded some flute music in the empty water tower up on the mountain by Magdalena. It's just improvisation. Jules let me use the Nagra portable reel-to-reel from Edison, so the audio quality came out pretty well."

"It's exquisite."

"Thanks."

We listen without speaking for a moment.

So many gifted people, gathered here with Bhagwan.

Robby breaks my rapt attention, moving into small talk. We muse about the things behind the scenes, our radical lifestyles. We complain about the pointless tasks we're saddled with. We remind ourselves that we are ordinary.

While Robby washes the developing trays, I lay out the almost dry prints in rows.

We survey our handiwork.

A house in the country. Maybe the suburbs.

Variety of shots of this house.

Front, back, side, close, distant. That is all.

Oh!

Here's a blooper. My face appears in one print, distorted but recognizable.

An accidental self-portrait, while I was testing the camera.

Duh. No spy includes his own photograph on a roll of film.

Very sloppy. Very unprofessional. Very right brain space-out.

My compatriot Robby voices the inevitable question.

"So why all the hush-hush around pictures of a house?"

Neither of us holds an answer.

We shrug our shoulders, bid each other goodnight.

I never carry sensitive material home, so I make a beeline to Zarathustra to stash the photos. As I climb from La Noche, the moon has traversed the star-studded sky, and a planet hangs along the ecliptic.

The stars twinkle.

Planets don't twinkle.

They wander.

The word "planet" means "wanderer" in its original Greek form; you can watch them meander along, their light burning steadily, each one a characteristic size and color.

I'm watching Mars, which is, naturally, red.

Sometimes I miss astrology.

Most astrologers nowadays use the fictitious "tropical" zodiac, a geometrical convenience invented by calendar-makers to keep the zodiac signs in phase with the seasons. The tropical system accounts for the ecliptic's obliquity, the tilt of the earth's axis in the sun's plane, but the tropical interpretations and timing methods don't coincide with the actual constellations anymore. Thus, for example, some eighty percent of Virgos are born under the stars of Leo.

The sidereal system, based on the original star-clusters, is where the accurate predictive potential lies, but few astrologers use it.

No wonder astrology is currently a mish-mash of gobbledegook.

I suspect that the Vatican sponsored the use of the inaccurate tropical zodiac, to discredit astrology in favor of Christianity. Perhaps things will improve in the Age of Aquarius, which actually begins in 2376 A.D.

Secret knowledge.

Secret rooms.

In the spy room, I'm surprised to find Julian and Michel.

Julian is hosing Michel down.

That's Edison vernacular for: Julian is reaming Michel out badly; or, more politely, Julian is severely reprimanding Michel.

All the chairs are full of electronic debris, so I sit on the floor by

Michel.

Julian pounds him with platitudes, clobbers him with cliches.

I imagine Julian as Machiavelli's Prince, disciplining his Ministers, tempering hot steel in a forge. He stares at the ceiling when dishing out the worst of it, as if executing orders by proxy for a hovering demonic source. During a pained pause, Michel swivels towards me, face distorted.

I urge him, "Just pick up on the energy. Don't try to understand him. You can't. He's a maniac. Just pick up on the energy- forget his words."

Michel nods. Julian resumes hosing him down.

It's not a pretty sight.

The walls quaver.

Julian is an enigma. I can't figure him out. He pretends to understand Bhagwan, even tries to imitate him; but Julian's involvement remains intellectual only.

The figure of Bhagwan, rather than the inner journey, remains the nucleus of Julian's universe. And yet Julian never goes to see Bhagwan's daily drive-by; sometimes I wonder if he's in love with Bhagwan at all.

The first time I saw Jules, in the tape department in Poona, I wondered if he was one of us. I thought, "Who is this guy? He looks like a businessman wearing orange clothes and a mala."

But Jules turned out to be a good friend, and none of us really understand Bhagwan anyway. The master attracts all types, attracts you in spite of your beliefs.

I sit with Michel, so he'll feel supported, while Julian finishes berating him.

I know what it feels like.

Julian's raked me over the coals plenty of times.

I want to leave, to be with Mary, my new honeymoon love, but I hang with Michel until Julian is gone.

"He hosed you bad."

Michel shakes his head, muttering, "I still don't have a clue what he said."

"You never will, because he didn't say shit. He's a wimp. He just needs to make you feel bad. It's his power trip. Screw him."

Michel, wounded, stares vacantly.

The room spins.

"Hey! Wake up," I cry, "you're still magnificent. You're still a child of God. Fuck Julian. He can't turn on a light switch. Maybe you made some mistakes. So what? You're still you."

"I know," says Michel glumly, "that's the problem- I'm still me."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well," he capitulates, "nothing, really."

"That's right," I respond, adding softly, "Dumbo."

The room breathes a sigh.

"Well shit. Thanks, Rajesh," says Michel, teetering on a smile.

"No problem, bro'. You know- the thing about Jules is- he sucks the shit out of a dog's ass."

Michel surrenders to laughter. "You are so gross, Whiteboy!"

"Thank you, Sir. I've been to charm school. Little of this, little of that. Hey, let's blow this Popsicle stand. I want to be with my new girl."

"Oh yeah," declares Michel excitedly, "you're into the new mugambo. How is the love affair? You must be sailing. Remember, it will end. It's not if, but when. I'll say it again. NOT IF. WHEN."

"I know, I know. It'll end in despair. So says Bhagwan. But it's incredible. I'm in heaven. Sometimes I can't even speak..."

"Just pick up on the energy," says Michel.

At home, Mary is asleep, and I'm wired.

She's splayed out on her back, nude, the covers pushed off, her arms thrown up above her head.

In the shadows, white breasts, dark patch of Venus.

I want her.

I want to flail around on her, go crazy on her, throw out all these pain fields and hosings, soak up her beauty. I want to taste her in heat, feel her heart race. I want to do what lovers do. Right now.

But it would be insensitive to wake her up.

I wait.

Sleep intermittently.

Morning.

Mary's body, fragrant, and warm against my skin.

But she can't. Her heart's not in it. She has to go to work; she's upset about a bad dream she had, in which all the moms left the ranch; she's tired, sleep deprived even in the morning.

"Fuck you."

It spills from my mouth.

She glowers at me, dresses without a word, and leaves for Edison in a huff.

What an asshole I am.

It's not easy, being a man.

I watch myself in the mirror while shaving.

My face distorts with rage and blame.

Neediness oozes from my pores.

Men are such creeps.

How do women stand us? We're so selfish, and unconscious, and out of touch with our feelings. We don't listen. There's this pattern I've noticed. To get a woman, you need to look into her eyes. But to keep a woman, you need to listen to what she says. Why can't I listen, make use of my own observations?

I am a caricature of myself.

A robot's visage watches itself cry in the mirror.

Crying is good.

I cry often now, since I became a sannyasin.

The tears, they cleanse you.

But when I get dressed and my tears have dried, unhappiness reappears.

The persistence of memory.

I make myself late to work.

Arriving at Zarathustra, I postpone going upstairs.

I don't want to see Mary in Edison while I'm en route to the spy room. Instead, I fix a sweet creamy cup of tea and perch outside in the warm morning, chain smoking, still wallowing on my negative periphery.

Dodger, my teenage friend, strolls languidly by, headed toward the mall. Just for the walk, I join him. Maybe I'll forget my anguish.

"Yo Dodger. What's going on?"

"I'm just sloping, Whiteboy. What're you doing?"

The Dodger brushes his long dark bangs from his face, a pursuit that engages a good portion of his waking hours.

"Just walking with you, Dodge. Killing time. Mind-fucking. Sometimes it hurts my head, all this government shit. Them opposing us so strongly. Why do they want to destroy us? Don't you wonder sometimes what the fuck we're doing here, with all these Uzi's?"

"I don't think about it, Whiteboy."

"You mean, it just is what it is?"

"Something like that. You're a tad serious this morning, Whiteboy. You not getting laid or something?"

"Something like that. But that's not it, not really. It's just... I'm insane."

"Oh, that's cool. I thought you had a problem."

"We're all insane here, Dodge."

"Well duh, Whiteboy. And the government's insane too. Even if they're out to get us, so what? You read too many books. I read a lot as well, but mostly science fiction."

"You know Dodger, science fiction- the category itself- is a discrediting smoke screen to make great authors look trite and inconsequential. Another hidden plot."

"The only hidden plot is in your mind, Whiteboy."

"My mind never gives up."

"You wish. Your mind is doomed. You wouldn't be with Bhagwan if your mind

wasn't falling apart. Enjoy it."

"Why do you kids love Julian so much?"

Dodger scoops up a handful of rocks and begins propelling them forward in short arcs into the ditch. He lofts one high across the road onto the mountainside and stops to deliberate on its trajectory.

"We love Jules," Dodger says, "because he's into fun- like you are- when you're not into your serious thing. Jules makes us laugh."

"But Jules is a fucking outlaw. And a ruthless tyrant."

"So what? You're kind of an outlaw too, Whiteboy."

"Jules is cruel."

"Didn't you ever kick a cat, Whiteboy?"

"No, but I shot a crow once with my pellet gun. Then I felt like homemade shit."

"Well, Jules is our best friend. Hey. I gotta run. There's what's-her-name. The thrill of the chase makes it worth living. Whiteboy, it's been nice: not talking to you. Let's not talk again real soon. Hope you get laid. See you."

"Yo, Dodger. May the Farce be with you."

Now.

I feel better.

Sort of.

But the anguish lingers.

The corruption voices come again, cheerful inside my head, like little faerie trolls squeaking.

The government's been bugging John Lennon for years, and the Reagan administration had him murdered by a brain-implanted, psychologically conditioned, zombie assassin. Because he spoke out for freedom.

Oh stop it.

But right now, at the School of the Americas in Georgia, they're teaching South American terrorists how to torture people with surplus telephones, attaching the electrodes- ninety volts of AC- to the genitals of innocent people.

Oh shut up.

Mind, gag me with a trout.

But FEMA is ready to make its coup d'etat, and subvert the White House.

Unmarked black helicopters are butchering herds of cows for biological weapons experiments. And here come the cadres of genetically engineered robot-clones, part man and part beast, just like the Lemurian slaves in Atlantis, streaming from government labs, marching in thunderous unison, coming to take me away, ha ha.

I stumble to the hotel, and find Priya in the courtyard, talking to her plants from behind her water can. She greets me gaily, and when we go for cappuccino, I don't mention the government, or Mary.

Ohmigod!

Bhagwan speaks again, breaking his public silence.

Excitement ripples through the ranch as select groups of sannyasins gather inside the master's house to hear the long-awaited sound of his voice.

This is a moment we never expected.

You can never second guess a master.

Bhagwan exhibits a load of idiosyncrasies.

He likes it cold. Real cold.

The temperature in the new discourse room hovers just above freezing. The privileged ones invited to the first sessions are dubbed, "The Frozen Few."

Forty of us sit on thin cushions.

I am the Edison audio technician.

I'm so skinny- my bones press through my cushion's foam rubber into the highly polished wooden floor.

The room's shape: a long rectangle.

My station lies at the very back, opposite Bhagwan, whose chair centers the far wall. I operate Bhagwan's microphone, the P.A. system, and both reel-to-reel and cassette tape recorders. The high quality, fine grain reel-to-reel tape serves as the original in mastering his discourses. The cassette copy functions as a backup.

Redundancy in information processing.

Wherever feasible, I bring not one, but two or three extra, of everything. In this audio field, I've had the experience of replacing a suspect cable twice, trying desperately to isolate a fault quickly, only to find that both replacement cables were bad.

My job presents a challenge, and I am lucky to be here.

Like mixing in Darshan, with all these meters to watch and buttons to push and tapes to change, and the old feedback demon riding on my shoulder, I need to remain alert. One screw-up, one turn of a plastic knob clockwise instead of counterclockwise, and this king of melodrama could find himself in for a lifetime of scrubbing toilets.

But by taking the risk, I get goodies that others don't.

Inside my headphones, from my position in auditory space, I can hear every subtle nuance of Bhagwan's every divine breath. Intimate. Real-time. As if I am breathing inside his body; as if I am disappearing into his nothingness. I can never explain the depth that comes in his presence, a blessing beyond words. It's the reason I put up with conflict and discomfort

and ten thousand inconveniences.

The man is a bitch to record.

He leaps without warning from a whisper to a shout. You see your meters slamming into the red. You pray for someone to invent a limiter or a compressor that doesn't turn his voice into pulsing Swiss cheese. You try to ride the gain to follow his overall flow, but he invariably crosses you up. His sibilance drives you mad.

He's a talker.

The man can talk for hours and hours.

Bhagwan is well-read and articulate.

His library fills room after room, and his command of English is striking, although sometimes his pronunciation sounds funny. His version of the word "shoulders" resembles the word "soldiers."

He speaks knowledgeably on every topic under the sun, expounding on the teachings of enlightened masters I've never even heard of. His insight is distressing. He pinpoints the lies we live and wish to ignore.

It's a paradox- being with him- because he wants to dislodge our conditioning, and it's the conditioned part of us that resists change. We disciples are like pencils trying to erase themselves. How can the mind go beyond the mind?

To sit and listen to Bhagwan, you must prepare yourself.

You need to be perfectly clean, and in deference to his numerous allergies, free of any smell from perfume, shampoo, or cosmetics; unscented shampoo carries more value than gold among sannyasins. And at his feet, above all, don't cough.

It's hellish at times, not coughing.

Sitting in his presence, without tape department duties, is different. Imagine India.

A warm tropical breeze caresses you.

You're sitting on a soft cushion in the open air, marble-floored Buddha Hall, drenched in bird calls and distant train whistles. Bhagwan softens you up with a dozen filthy jokes that would shock a foul-mouthed sailor.

You laugh till it hurts.

Then he isolates a horrifying truth that you can't face, and drags you through it for two hours. You're sinking into the void, flooded with bliss, but simultaneously your mind is about to crack, and your body's gone numb, and you feel the rhythm of his lecture ending- you can feel it winding down- when suddenly he starts off on a new tack. Oh shit. He's going to talk for a full three hours.

And then he pauses, mercifully ending the discourse with his usual phrase, "Enough for today."

Surely, in those last moments of his talk, he feels our fear that he will blab forever, that we're going to explode if we don't get to pee soon, that our

lower backs are going to cave in any second.

The bliss makes it worth it.

Tonight, though, my attention is on the accurate recording of his words, not their content, or the bliss that permeates them. Mid-lecture, trouble arises for the video technicians. Their lights begin to bother the master's eyes, and the Edison boys shut down their bright aluminum towers.

This will become an issue later.

Bhagwan carries on speaking longer than usual, and oh no- he's doing it again- straying off on a whole new tangent when everybody's long since over it. Suddenly he stops, mid-sentence, chuckles mercifully, "But no. Don't let me drift," and ends the discourse.

The next day, Julian escorts me back up to Bhagwan's house. My task: to coordinate the installation of a bank of lights in the ceiling above Bhagwan's chair. With the lights directly above him, says Julian, the man's eyes will be spared.

Scrutinizing Julian's scheme, I ascertain that it's ludicrous.

"You're crazy," I plead, "These lights pump out the heat- if you put them in the ceiling you'll fry the master. Toasted beloved. Bhagwan will hate this immediately."

But Julian persists.

I surrender reluctantly.

Bitterness, over the blatant stupidity of this project, festers like a cancer inside me.

I slave through hot days and cold nights with electricians, construction crews, and video technicians, to get the lights in place. Fighting fatigue, I lobby for the rows of bulbs to be situated as high up inside the ceiling as possible, to lengthen the distance from Bhagwan's chair.

Whenever I see Julian, I bitch, resist, complain.

I insist it won't work.

And it doesn't.

The first night the video crew utilizes the new system, Bhagwan endures twenty seconds of Julian's cockeyed inferno, and testily orders Sheela to switch off the lights.

The summer festival.

Our biggest celebration, fifteen thousand people.

Seven days of morning Satsangs. These meetings with the master are similar to the evening Darshans, but the energy manifests differently, more inwardly directed.

There exist certain treats which we get, at random.

Today, dressed smartly and spanking clean, I stand ready to open the door of Bhagwan's car when he arrives at the meditation hall. It only takes a few seconds, but being so close to him even for an instant is a gift.

This is not hero-worship.

This is a meeting of two lovers.

The morning, warm and sunny and bright.

The white Rolls Royce pulls up.

I open the door for him, and he emerges slowly from the car, hands raised in the gesture of blessing. His grin, foolish yet so genuine- it's overpowering.

As I close the door behind him, for an instant he stares into my eyes, then turns down the corridor to the stage. Melting, I watch him from behind. For a moment, he's an ordinary old man, going to work, a tiny French peasant, off for a day hoeing fields.

Inside the hall, Bhagwan sits onstage in his chair, flanked on the podium by guards holding semi-automatic weapons.

What must Bhagwan feel, onstage between two armed disciples? His job is to destroy our egos, and meditation often uncovers repressed and unpredictable anger. One of the guards might flip any minute, and riddle him with bullets.

But here he sits, serenely detached.

Another morning Satsang. And another.

Demanding festival workloads teach you teamwork.

The positive side of functioning with little sleep: you learn to say yes, and tap into huge energy reservoirs; you outstrip your notion of limits.

In Poona, the moms, noticing my disposition to work hard, entrusted me right away with special responsibilities. Abruptly, I appeared, an unknown newcomer situated close to Bhagwan during his lectures, operating the tape recorders; I entered his house, a rare treat, to fix the Darshan sound system.

At once I felt a bitterness from the established ashram residents.

I observed closely, to comprehend the new game of jockeying for proximity.

How silly we are.

But I still love to work hard.

Today I am up in "the crow's nest," a mixing booth suspended close to the meditation hall's ceiling. From here, we mix the overall sound, emitted from a huge, central, hanging platform of speakers, nicknamed "the starship." Smaller, auxiliary speaker clusters fill in the corners of the two-and-a-half acre enclosure.

After a short period of silence with the master, the band begins to play softly. Some of the seated crowd sway to the music, some rise from their cushions and dance. The energy builds- the music grows louder, the dancing faster.

Six of our Edison audio technicians are connected via an intercom system. We all look cool wearing our headsets. Three of us recording and mixing in the crow's nest, two guys in the stage area, and Julian at the back of the hall- we can all hear anything said over the intercom.

I love working with these guys.

Up in the crow's nest I'm with Sharno, a brilliant electronics engineer who designed integrated circuits and worked with the developer of the Dolby audio noise reduction system. I call him "Dr. Digital." Sharno has a distressing habit of gutting the main mixer ten minutes before Satsang to remedy minor malfunctions. He notices me watching him, not paying attention to my multi-track recorders, and says into the headset, "You're driftin' bro."

Like the master says- don't let me drift.

My other companion in the crow's nest is Premarathi, fondly referred to as "Primo." A professional recording engineer, he's tall and dark-haired and wildly enthusiastic about his lifelong dedication to music. It's a joy to watch him dancing under his headphones, constantly twiddling controls to achieve the perfect blend of musical nuances. I wish I had his single-mindedness in my life.

I watch the stage as the music builds to a crescendo.

Near the amplifiers, wearing one of our intercom headsets, stands my friend typewriter Arpito. He's grooving to the music but looks a bit detached- he doesn't fancy the role of audio technician- he'd rather sit alone, identifying tiny ruby and diamond-studded parts that comprise the workings of a watch.

At the stage mixer, also under a headset, stands another Arpito, an amiable young Dutchman we nicknamed "Torpedo" due to his boundless energy. I taught Torpedo to mix sound when he arrived in Edison, coaxing him through the ordeal of contending with abrasive musicians and dumping millions of mixer and mic details into his head. Now he far surpasses me in knowledge and efficiency. It's gratifying to watch him, cool under pressure, sailing with the Satsang energy.

The music peaks.

The bass player's head is pitched back.

The lead guitarist hunches over his Stratocaster, fingers flying.

The drummer's face contorts.

The crowd whirls, ecstatic.

But there's no conversation in the headset.

I'll spice it up here at the end.

I break into everyone's head space with dialogue from the film "Apocalypse Now."

"I've got some heavy machine-gun fire down on the treeline! I'm goin' down to check it out!" I spit out a stream of perfect putt-putt-putts, too close to the headset mic, creating the deafening roar that a microphone makes

when it's almost swallowed. It sounds like gunfire or the whomping of a helicopter rotor.

My friends in the booth and onstage rip their headsets off: a petite ballet within a play. Somewhere I hear Julian shouting "Shut up Whiteboy!" but I keep pouring a steady stream of chopper fire into the intercom.

A wonderful morning.

And, a wonderful evening.

I'm up in the crow's nest again, now alone.

The hall lights dimmed, the space below me splashed with spinning crimson and scarlet dancers.

It's the finale of the evening disco, and I'm the disc jockey.

But tonight, as I bash out the last tune, a reggae number by the Police, at about 110 decibels- slightly below the pain threshold- I have a special gift for the crowd.

During festival time, the resident ranch workers- you can tell us by the numbered brass beads on our malas- we're often the proud recipients of cheese sandwiches for lunch, as guests are priority and kitchen personnel are overtaxed.

For the past few days, it's been cheese sandwiches for both lunch and dinner. Next to me on the floor of the crow's nest, I've stashed three large cardboard cartons of stolen cheese sandwiches.

This is not Velveeta. We're talking plain yellow American rat cheese. On plain bread, each sandwich individually wrapped.

Turning the music up louder yet, in the dark from above, I start raining cheese sandwiches into the crowd.

Here they go.

In all directions I catapult the cheese bombs, slinging them near and far, heaving them out in twos and threes at the very end as I slap down the faders on the final Police snare drum pop.

"Someone tried to murder Swami Devaraj, Bhagwan's doctor. They took him to the hospital in the helicopter."

I try not to think about my chopperhood as I catch these statements from a couple ambling by in the meditation hall. Basking in the mellow wash after another morning Satsang celebration, I'm winding up cables, with Julian, while the crowd thins out.

"What're they on about?" I ask Julian. "Did someone try to kill Devaraj? I didn't hear a helicopter."

"I don't know. Devaraj is fucking crazy. The man's an ass."

"But... they said someone tried to kill him."

"Devaraj is hallucinating. He's on drugs. He's a danger to himself. And to Bhagwan. The fool has no business being the master's personal physician."

"I don't know about that. Personally, I don't see anything wrong with Devaraj... I don't get why you're so hostile towards him... but they said someone tried to murder him."

"I doubt it's true, Whiteboy. Who'd bother with Devaraj? He's a waste. Let's get these cables wrapped up."

I like the cables tidy.

I look at Julian.

What a wasted deviate he is.

I consider the pathetic semblance of a coil he's fashioned out of one cable, while I've carefully wound and stowed all the rest. The result of his effort has no shape, no ordered circle-ness ready for storage. He relinquishes the amorphous lump, giggling as I snatch it testily from his grasp.

"Get a job, Jules. There's no topological identity to this thing. There is no equation to define how nebulous this shape is. Ah'm gonna kick yo fawkin' ass. You are totally useless."

"That's right," he agrees, too easily.

"Enough of your incompetence, you pompous asshole," I say. "Enough murder talk. I'm out of here. We'll call you."

"I would like to make you more insecure, more uncertain-
because that's how life is, that's how
God is. When there is more insecurity and more
danger, the only way to respond to it is by awareness."
- "Courage: the Joy of Living Dangerously" - Osho

Chapter Eight: ALAN WATTS

Laxmi.

Pronounced "lock-shmee."

Laxmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth and abundance, and Laxmi is a frequently used name in India.

Bhagwan's former secretary, Sheela's predecessor, is a Laxmi.

A tiny Indian woman with immense dark eyes and an effulgent smile, Laxmi has come from Poona for an extended stay on the ranch, and she is housed in bugged quarters. I am consigned to her as an unseen listening companion. I wonder if Sheela considers Laxmi a potential competitor.

I don't know- maybe it's Dhassano, Laxmi's female traveling comrade and protege, who is my real target. Dhassano, a tall and inquisitive African-American sannyasin woman with a loud voice, is highly suspect, according to Julian.

Our location is Alan Watts, a remote valley named for the splendid American writer who espoused the wisdom of insecurity and helped bring Zen Buddhism to the west. In this tranquil cleft between two mountains, single-room wooden A-frame dwellings cluster in groups of four, called "quads." All four A-frame units in Laxmi's quad are bugged.

From my listening post in the next quad twenty yards away, I see Laxmi's windows. Through my headphones, I hear Laxmi. I also hear her companion Dhassano, whose A-frame adjoins Laxmi's.

Because their A-frames share an entrance and they leave their doors open, monitoring both areas at once gives me a pleasant stereo effect. The surround-sound turns brutal, bouncing between my left and right ears, when Laxmi and Dhassano shout at one another from opposite ends of their combined space.

They shout a lot.

We don't use these bugged A-frames much anymore.

The ranch hotel yields better audio, and in the center of town, hotel guests are easier to follow. Also, out here in the residential domain of Alan Watts, I'm highly visible.

I've missed working in this soothing valley.

I remember the cold winter night up here, when Michel and I frantically tore the walls apart, assisted by two ranch carpenters sworn to secrecy. It was our first major bugging job, replete with the now typical get-it-done-yesterday hysteria and components expedited from Portland's Radio Shack.

We installed miniature microphones on the vertical beams behind the pine paneling, ran the wiring down through the floor into electrical conduit, and dug a trench for the bundled cables to the nearest A-frame in the next quad, which now serves as my listening post.

The frenzied workaholic marathon lasted all night.

Slam that shovel into the hard earth.
Hide from the headlights of passing cars.
Sweat in the freezing darkness...
But now it's hot.

Long summer days under this slanted roof, shirt off, sticking to the mattress, bored to death under the headphones, growing ever more lax, anesthetized by Laxmi's unending talk. Yesterday, today, tomorrow- my life consists of listening to my ward Laxmi bluster about her love for Bhagwan.

Laxmi embodies a peculiar admixture of enthusiastic devotion and spiritual pride; she truly does love the master, and occasionally I resonate with her, but she's just so damned cheerful. She never says anything that could be of interest to Sheela.

The audio cassettes accumulate in bundles, wrapped in red and green rubber bands.

Periodically, Julian hustles me to deliver these tapes, but when I do, they often sit untouched in the spy room for days.

I should've stayed in the south, where at least the summer has that inimitable timeless feel, when the sweltering heat slows one's life to less than a crawl, and there is only the murmur of the bullfrogs and cicadas. Ah, the endless nights on the screened porch, and the days of ponds with pussy willows all fluffy and still in the sun. Don't miss the chiggers though.

I hear sounds outside my door.

It must be Freddy.

In my quad, the A-frame that adjoins my listening post is reserved for Freddy, one of Sheela's undercover moms. Freddy's definitely a woman. I don't know why she's a Freddy, and I don't know what she does.

Freddy's a gentle being, tall, and kind of kooky. Her coloring is wintery- coal black hair and snow white skin- and she's endowed with generous bosoms. Freddy hides her femme fatale side from most people, but shows me her wildfire vamp when no one's looking. Our steaming hugs start to go places, but something has always kept us from consummating the attraction.

I run into Freddy on a trip to the bathroom.

She's hot and sweaty, like she's been running.

Bare feet below low-slung jeans.

Bare midriff below a halter top.

She says nothing, the coquette.

A crazy glint in her eye.

Embarrassed, I look down, noticing her long elegant toes. Before I can speak she steps up, thrusts one thigh between my legs and wraps her arms around me, mashing her tits into my chest, and squirming side to side like a predator gnashing its victim's larynx.

She doesn't waste time.

Her tongue rushes down my throat.

My fingers hesitate, run lightly up her sides.

Exploring goose-bump bare skin, sliding back down.

Suddenly I'm wedging my hands flat between our bodies, pushing one hand down into her jeans. Inside her panties, my fingertips find the first the soft curls of her pubic hair, but my hand is squashed too tightly by her jeans to get down between her legs. My other hand fumbles with her zipper.

She growls low, her tongue everywhere inside my mouth.

I don't want to be doing this.

It'll mess things up with Mary.

But Freddy is hot, up on her toes, straining inside her jeans, inching her pussy up towards my cramped hand. And Mary is too busy. I should just fuck Freddy's brains out right here, now.

No, it's not worth it. Mary is too important.

I break away from Freddy, trying to let the energy subside.

"I have to get back to work," I say.

Freddy's disappointment, palpable.

I can barely look her in the eye.

She throws up a phony smile, lunges again at me, french kisses me hard for a second, and disappears without a word into her A-frame.

I crawl back to my headphones, feeling lame and stupid, and submerge myself once again in Laxmi's rushing river of gab.

In a few minutes, I hear the muffled ring of Freddy's phone next door, and soon after, the clunking boots of a man entering her room. She must've beeped someone.

Freddy starts screaming right away.

Like a banshee.

I watch the clock, lying on my stomach, my bare skin against the heat-sticky sheets. The minutes tick by, and tick by, and she keeps screaming.

I get hard listening to her shrieks of delight, burning with jealousy that it's not me. I kick myself for missing the opportunity, literally flipping my heel up from the mattress to knock against my backside. Feelings of inadequacy course through me as I wonder how her partner can keep it up for so long.

I've become Ordinary Man, Superman's neighbor, a shamefaced voyeur.

For an eternity, I listen with one ear to the real Superman, taking Lois Lane beyond her limits of passion. With the other ear, I listen to Laxmi, taking me beyond the limits of patience.

Trunkloads of tapes.

My fingerprints are on every tape, and on every piece of bugging equipment.

There are laws against electronic eavesdropping.

If this ever comes to light, I'm dead.

When I voice any concerns, Julian pats me on the back and tells me, "Little of this, little of that."

Do I dare go over Julian's head?

Screw Julian.

I've had enough.

I'm going to see Vidya.

I find her, sitting in a corner of the Jesus Grove reception area, her arm around an older sannyasin woman. Vidya listens attentively as the woman talks, and weeps.

I wait, across the room, and catch pieces of their conversation.

The woman's husband of many years has left her.

I can feel her sorrow in my chest, even from a distance.

Vidya holds her tenderly for a long time as the waves of grief shudder through.

The woman departs, sad, but absolutely radiant in her vulnerable state.

Crying is good. But God, life is a bitch sometimes.

"Hi, Rajesh," says Vidya. "What's going on?"

I wouldn't be here if something wasn't going on.

"Hi Vidya. I need to talk. I guess I'm... uh... starting to... worry about what will happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, well, my fingerprints are on all these tapes. Trunkloads of them. And there's piles of witnesses. Not that people know definitely what I do, but they see me snooping around. This stuff is highly illegal you know. What if something goes wrong?"

"What could go wrong, Whiteboy?"

"We could get busted. Somebody could squeal. A freak accident could expose us. A hundred things could screw up every day."

Vidya gently takes my cold hands between hers.

She speaks with kindness in her voice.

"Rajesh love, no one's gonna hurt you. You're a good soul. If anyone asks, we'll just tell them you're crazy."

I laugh. "That would be the truth."

I can tell she genuinely cares for me.

"But no," I say, "seriously, you're a kind person. You love Bhagwan. You help people every day through their personal problems. And Sheela, and the other moms- all you guys are tough on us, but you're not malicious. Why are we doing all this shit behind the scenes?"

Vidya breathes a long sigh.

"Rajesh," she admonishes, "enlightened masters are always persecuted. It's the way of the world. No one wants the truth. Sometimes we make bad choices, or let our power trips take over, but in our hearts we're fighting for truth. We have to fight. Bhagwan provokes opposition, automatically. That's his job, in a way."

"But if Bhagwan's about peace- we could at least be in harmony with our neighbors."

"Whiteboy! Face reality. They hung Jesus on a cross. They poisoned Socrates. We're not here to win popularity contests. We're here to learn about ourselves. We have to find our inner peace while the chaos goes on outside."

"Are you peaceful? I mean, inside?"

"Yes, only it feels like love to me. I call it love. I don't feel it all the time, no, but it's enough. We're lucky to be with Bhagwan. Everything happens faster with a master. You should be celebrating, not complaining."

"Hmm. Well. Alright then. But it still gives me the creeps- what we're doing."

Vidya laughs.

"Whiteboy, you're a sweetheart. Bhagwan loves you more than you'll ever know. Don't worry. Like I said, if anyone asks, we'll just tell them you're crazy."

"Okay. Thanks. See you later."

Vidya says no more as I amble out, whistling a single note.

I feel better, but not much.

Oh, there's Mary, walking with her ex-boyfriend.

An Oregon Sheriff is on the ranch.

Julian's orders are to flatten his tires.

We finally get to use the steel pointed star-shaped widgets that we bought through the mail. One for each tire.

Under the midday sun, in the center of town beside the mall, sits the Sheriff's parked car. Julian and I hunker down behind a nearby van and assess the situation.

I'm feeling apprehensive.

This is a high risk job.

The Sheriff is in City Hall, just down the street.

If he steps out while we're doing this, we're right in his line of sight.

And even if he doesn't, here in broad daylight, our target is in plain view of God and everybody. We might as well send up a flare.

"I think it imprudent, mein Fuhrer... this perilous endeavor. Let us not be hasty. Methinks it doth not portend well. Every man and his dog can see us."

"Stay cool, Whiteboy. It's a no-brainer. I'll keep watch. And you do the job."

"Wait a minute," I whisper. "Why me? You do it, and I'll keep watch."

"No way," argues Julian. "This is your baby."

I resign myself.

"Alright then," I say, adrenaline starting to pump, "you got those star-shaped widgets? Let's get this over with."

Julian plumbs his pockets.

He's forgotten to bring the stars.

He produces three long nails instead.

"Do what?" I hiss, enraged. "You don't expect me to this with a couple of fucking nails?"

Jules goads me on with that little smile of his.

"You can do anything, Whiteboy."

"This totally sucks," I mutter.

I raise my collar.

Arrange my sunglasses.

Steel my courage to the sticking point.

Quaking in my boots, I do it, feverishly propping the nails so that the tire will roll backwards over them.

But it'll never work.

This job calls for Bucky Fuller triangulated power.

These nails won't stay braced under the tire's weight.

The physics of the situation is obvious.

The stupidity of the situation is obvious. Kneeling beside this law enforcement vehicle is the last place in the world I want to be.

But the deed is done.

Pulsing with excitement, we vamoose to a less precarious vantage point at the other end of the mall. The Sheriff appears on the steps of City Hall, and lumbers across the street to his car. Climbing into the driver's seat, he bends low to avoid hitting his wide-brimmed hat, starts his engine, backs up, and drives away.

We watch him roll down the road, turn left, and head out of town.

Relief.

Suppose it had worked?

What a mess that would've been.

So pointless.

Julian is crazy.

I'm crazy.

I have to stay up late.

Julian needs three more handbags, wired for sound, by tomorrow morning when work begins.

In the spy room, the almond-brown tea in my cup is hot, and the chocolate-brown leather in the handbags is hard. I can barely stitch through this stuff. I wish they'd furnished me canvas bags, like the last batch.

My thumb oozes needle-prick red.

I lick away the ferric mess.

I need a thimble. I should've been a seamstress.

I am the American housewife, the last one to know her country is cheating on her.

Michel pops in the door.

"Billy!" I yelp, "I haven't seen you here in ages. You just lug that damned monster toolkit in and out without a word. What the hell've you been doing?"

Pause.

Michel remains standing.

"So. How's it going?" We both say it at once.

"It sucks," we both say at once.

Necrosity loves company.

"My life has become meaningless," I moan.

"Get a job, peckerhead. You wouldn't trade your life for mine."

"Maybe. But Laxmi is dragging me down, down. I've been listening to her for months. She never says anything. It's useless, what I'm doing."

"Just pick up on the energy, dill. You should see the job I'm working on. It's a bitch. And my girl is ignoring me now. The honeymoon is over."

"Yeah? My honeymoon crashed too. We just had our first big fight. I guess we'll make up though."

"You wait," says Michel, "more shit will hit the fan. It's guaranteed."

I kick boxes idly under the table while Michel picks up a large spool of gray cable.

"There's got to be," I say, "a better world than this. I'm serious. I mean, I've had more fun at the ranch than all the rest of my life put together, but now..."

"Shut up, Whiteboy," Michel says, stepping out the door with the spool of cable, "they burn heretics who talk like that."

Enough of commiseration. Work is worship. Keep stitching.

At 5:30 a.m. I wake up, slumped across my work bench.

Shit!

I fell asleep and I'm not even close to finished.

Staggering to the bathroom, I splash cold water on my face, and within minutes I'm slurping more hot tea and back at work, sewing needle a flurry.

With mics and recorders finally installed and tested, I Xerox three sets of my detailed handwritten instructions for the moms. These directions illustrate every operational step so lucidly, even a monkey could follow them.

Julian will need these units any second.

At 8:00 a.m. on the dot, I call him, excited.

"Yo Jules! I got it done. Those handbag items for the moms are ready."

He answers sleepily, "What? Oh, the handbags. Fine. I'll pick them up tomorrow or the day after. Thanks Whiteboy. I got to go. Ciao."

Thanks, Jules.

Leaving Edison, I run into Mary.

We've not spoken since our quarrel.

I don't say a word, take her in my arms.

She resists for a moment, but I can feel her melting.

I hold her for a long time.

I whisper, "I'm sorry I'm an asshole."

"It's okay. I forgive you. You had a right to be pissed off."

"Not really," I say.

"Yes you did. I'm so unavailable. Such a workaholic."

"Yeah, but that's no excuse for me being a shithead. I don't want to hurt you. The last thing I want to do is cause you pain. I love you. You're my baby... my baby pudding."

"I like pudding," she says.

"So do I. It's comfort food, like baby food. Did I see you walking with your ex-boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"No."

"Did you want to?"

"A little."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't."

"So am I."

Middle of the night.

I lie awake, inspecting the intersecting polygons of black shadow on the ceiling, trying to relax.

If I close my eyes, I see wires.

I dream of wires.

The tune of my existence, composed of wire notes.

Sweet Mary, asleep next to me.

Noises.

She's talking in her sleep. Loudly.

Her slender arms flop about.

She sounds troubled, blurting out short phrases.

"Soldiers... soldiers... coming... military.... watch out..."

"Hey hey." I shake her gently. "You're having a bad dream."

Her eyes flutter open.

"Oh God, I was dreaming the ranch was occupied by soldiers. Military guys with guns. And there were government officials everywhere."

"How weird."

She grips me tightly, murmuring, "Oh, that dream. Everything was dark grey. It was horrible. The ranch felt like a military camp. The soldiers with their guns..."

"Forget it, baby pudding, it was just a dream."

She sits up and mutters, "I have to pee."

As she stands up, I watch her delicious white ass moving across my field of vision in the dark. She has the most perfect ass. Why should I even think about another woman? I want to spend the rest of my life with Mary. The sexual attraction is there. The love is there. We get along great. What more do I need?

When she crawls back in bed, I entreat her, "Let's forget that bad dream, and enjoy each other."

"Good idea."

The specter of her nightmare fades as she opens her arms and gathers me in, woman flower closing round a bee.

Her face close to mine, she explores me with her lower lip, brushing my cheeks, my eyelids. She finds my mouth, wets my lips with her tongue, ventures an illegal kiss.

She really does love me.

Slithering up higher in my arms, she slips her tongue into my ear.

Chills flicker up my spine.

She whispers, "I love you."

I can feel the rounded cheeks of her smile on my temple.

"I love you too," I gurgle.

"You know," she says, "someday I want to be on my own, in the world, without the commune. I've been my whole adult life in the ashram in India or here in Oregon."

"You'll be fine in the world. It's the same as here. Well, no, it's not. But you'll still do fine. You have resources you don't know about."

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah. And angels watching over you too."

"Mmm."

She nestles closer into me.

We bask in each other.

"Did you know," I ask her, "that the hummingbird symbolizes joy to certain Native American tribes?"

"Huh? You're wacky, you know that? I think that's why I love you. I try to be so sane and perfect, and you just crash ahead with whatever the hell you want to do."

"Yeah. But you can feel your heart. My heart is dead. I've become a crazed maniac, hooked on adrenaline. I don't think about anything or anyone else but me. Except you. You're so pure and innocent. I love your innocence."

"You're too sweet," she murmurs.

God I love this woman.

"You're so beautiful. You're so beautiful." I cry.

But the words don't express what I feel.

We sink into a blissful silence, floating together in that twilight space between waking and sleeping.

Ding ding ding. My beeper.

This can't be real. Report to Julian at Zarathustra.

Bleary-eyed, disheveled, my nostrils still full of Mary, I flop into a chair in the spy room.

Julian is seated, neat, clean, and alert.

"Wake up, Whiteboy. You're going into Bhagwan's room to upgrade his stereo. We have a little Billy Box to add to the system, so the master can switch between his records and the audio from his video machine."

"I'm doing this now, in the dead of night?"

"No, tomorrow afternoon."

"Do what? Why the fuck do you beep me in the middle of the night for something I'm doing tomorrow?"

"You need time to get ready."

"Get ready?" I scream. "How long does it take me to pick up my toolkit and walk out the door?"

"You need to learn how the switchbox works, and plan out what cables you'll need. You've got to be prepared."

"For Christ's sake Jules, that's five minutes work. I'm not a total idiot. You're the dysfunctional one in this gang, not me. Just because you can't change a light bulb- that doesn't mean the rest of us are useless. You suck. You know that?"

Julian, giggling, rises from his chair and moves to the door.

His lips narrow and his eyebrows roll into a patronizing arch.

"Rajesh, if you didn't overindulge in your caffeine and nicotine triflings, you'd be fine with me calling you anytime. Here's the switchbox. Here's the diagram of how Bhagwan's system is wired now. If you don't have it

together at noon tomorrow, you're dead meat."

"Alright alright. Goodnight dogbreath," I growl.

As the door swings shut, Jules snappily chants the dog mantra.

"Big dog, happy dog, lucky dog, dog."

I join in on the last word, shouting, "Dog!"

Condescending asshole.

It takes ten minutes to figure out the switchbox cable requirements and what tools I'll need. Better take more than less.

But. The nerve of Julian beeping me in the middle of the night for this. Screw this. I am like an abused wife.

Ahh- what am I saying?

He's right, I indulge to the max in my stimulation marathons. I can't curb this craving for oral gratification. Jules is a fucking stoic, a goddamn smiling Spartan with a wolf gnawing away at his stomach.

Get over it, Whiteboy. It's your anger.

And teenage brothers always treat each other like shit.

Back in bed with Mary.

She's still half-awake, says, "You're back. That was quick, for a change."

"I won't tell you why I was beeped. It's too stupid to even talk about."

"You get beeped so much. Do you ever slow down?"

"Only when I'm with you, my princess. Or when I'm too exhausted to move."

"I'm constantly wiped out too. Do you think I'll ever relax?"

"You will when you do. Slowly, slowly... like Bhagwan says. But, on the positive side, you're a paragon of organizational efficiency, and Bhagwan loves you just as you are right now. And so do I."

"But I don't love the way I am. I'm always racing. Worse than you, really. I know I do it to avoid my feelings, but I can't seem to stop. What's the answer, Rajesh?"

"I don't know. It's all so impossible to understand. Emotions, ego, personality, consciousness... none of the words mean anything after a while. And it's so easy to see someone else's blind spots clearly. But even knowing that, I still can't see myself."

"I know what you mean, but still, there must be a way to be quiet inside all the time, not just when we're sitting with him."

"Yeah, that's got to be the goal. But it's hopeless. We'll never get there till he throws us out of the ashram. We're junkies, hooked on his love. Vampires."

"We are not! We're his lovers, his non-physical lovers. You're so twisted sometimes."

"Mmm. You're right. You're right most of the time. How do you do that?"

"I don't. You just have me on a pedestal."

She yawns.

"You look gorgeous," I say, "up there, on your pink alabaster fluted-column dais. Let me not be presumptuous, but I beseech you, I implore you, fair maiden, desist with these misgivings, curtail your self-flagellation. I am rent asunder by thy distance. Come down..." I switch to an Elmer Fudd imitation, "and pawrtake in some west and welaxation."

She titters, snuggles up, purring "Mmm."

And nothing is sweeter than falling asleep in her arms.

Noon.

I am squeaky clean and ready to upgrade Bhagwan's stereo system, arriving at the guard hut by the entrance to the master's grounds.

The Rajneesh Security guard on duty is expecting me.

Carrying my tool kit and widgets, I walk up the long driveway through tranquil woods to Bhagwan's house, which consists of a trailer home with some additions, enclosed by a few acres of fenced-off land. His dwelling is called Lao Tzu House, or simply, Lao Tzu, after the enlightened founder of Taoism.

I've been here before, working on earlier incarnations of Bhagwan's stereo system, and delivering Indian films or news clips for him.

Inside his house, everything's been beautified; closets and connecting corridors have been added, the rooms are all refurnished in nice wood, and he has an indoor pool, as swimming is good for his health.

But I don't find the ostentatious luxury I'd expect from a man with a hundred Rolls Royces. The affluent southern upper-crust kids I went to prep school with- they lived in classier houses than Bhagwan does.

What is wealth?

All of us, deep in our hearts, know what real wealth consists of, and it's not money or mansions or cars.

Today, I am so filled with Mary that the women here in Bhagwan's house are not as interesting as usual. Except for a few males- his physician, his dentist, and a carpenter- those that live around him and attend to his immediate needs are all female; women do his laundry, cook his food, make his clothes.

And all of them are dazzling beauties. Conceited, but dazzling. When I visit, sometimes they hang around and pretend to offer themselves, siren-like, but if I show any interest, they delight in rebuffing me derisively.

Bhagwan is never physically present when I work on his system.

Vivek, his best friend and personal attendant, a pale slender English woman that Bhagwan says was his lover in his last lifetime, ushers me into his quarters.

His space is kept immaculately clean to minimize his allergy problems. No odors, the air is conspicuously neutral.

In the room where he watches videos and listens to music, big windows open on two sides to the yellow-brown mountains. A handcrafted cherry wood cabinet houses his entertainment center, which sits opposite an easy chair flanked by a small table hosting several remotes.

Bhagwan's state-of-the-art Bang and Olufsen stereo does everything but milk cows.

Clean clean clean- I clean everything in the cabinet as I go about upgrading the system. Few people ever see his room; I work to contain my excitement and keep my attention undivided.

His attendant Vivek hovers around, assuring that all goes smoothly. She watches me carefully, oddly detached. She's his best friend, but she's also just another disciple. I feel her fragile somebodiness, here next to the fire of Bhagwan's nobodiness, and I wonder how she maintains her sanity.

The wiring is a hassle.

All the little red and black RCA and BNC connectors- there's those acronym simians on my back again- they have to fit through a too-small hole.

Fuck, this can't work.

But I make it work, with much finagling, and prayer.

When I'm done, Vivek is gracefully thankful for the work, the worship.

On my way out, a dark-haired goddess shoots me an electrifying glance when she's sure no one else is looking- she doesn't mean it though.

I suspect that Sheela is jealous of the people here in Lao Tzu.

Bhagwan's householders all radiate happiness, though I've seen each of them look like hell too, as the master brings out the worst as well as the best. But they live a juicy existence in his immediate sphere, while Sheela abides down the road at Jesus Grove, stuck with the headaches of running the commune and coping with the general public.

I think it's also Sheela's jealousy that drives our surveillance of the Hollywood crowd.

Buckminster Fuller! Champion of threeness!

Here's another triangle.

Lao Tzu. Jesus Grove. Hollywood.

Could be a catchy chorus for a rock song.

Imagine a Gregorian choir, chanting it: Lao Tzu... Jesus Grove... Hollywood... over a crunching Hendrix-style guitar.

Jimi Hendrix IS the greatest guitar player that ever lived.

Feels like a hosing is brewing.

Michel and I sit waiting for Sheela.

The Jesus Grove reception area.

I drum my fingers on the long, polished mahogany conference table.

Through the window, I watch the afternoon sky, a faint yellow above the jagged mountains, melting upwards into a light cyan and a cerulean blue, then spreading into miles of pale cobalt.

I rise and roam the room.

Puja, the top mom who runs the Medical Center- I've extrapolated that she masterminded the Dalles poisoning- glides from the kitchen wearing a sanguinely saccharine smile. Wordlessly, she slips a clammy hand in mine.

My flesh crawls.

A shudder passes through me.

She never even speaks to me, let alone holds my hand.

Puja is not unattractive- it's something I can't place, that creeps me out.

She asks how I'm doing, but turns away before my perfunctory reply.

I am not fine, of course. I am about to get hosed.

I amble back to the conference table, sit opposite Michel, leaving the head chair open for her majesty the Queen Mother.

Sheela waltzes from the hallway to her room, hips swinging, trying in vain to strut sexily in red patent leather high heels.

She's decked out in a loud cherry red satin dress that climbs up her shoulders into a huge god-awful full-collar ruffled neckpiece, leaving a square hole in front, from which her cleavage is busting out. Not the get-up I'd expect at a hosing. With the collar floating out behind her head, she looks like a space alien in a Star Wars bar scene. Or a mawkish new attendee at a Frumps Anonymous meeting. The incongruity is staggering, because in her mind, she's dressed for action, feminine wiles loaded for bear.

She must be invited to a party after she slashes us to ribbons.

Women are so elegant when they can walk in heels; and when they can't, it's the pits. Flopping clumsily into her throne between us, Sheela attempts to address me.

"Now..." she says.

She can't remember my name.

Not "Rajesh," or "Whiteboy."

I prompt her with my sannyas name.

"Now Rajesh," she says, "I love you."

Oh come on.

She's lying.

She can't look at us.

Let's get down to business.

Get it over with.

Not savagely brutal as I'd expected, she's whimpery.

"Now listen," she pleads like a maudlin spinster, "you two have turned very negative. You have to stop complaining. You can't be giving Julian such a bad time. You resist him too much, you guys. He works very hard to make your life easy."

Absolute bullshit.

The timbre of her voice invokes a Fantasia-like scene in my head: an empty water tower swarming with animated metal handsaws, all dancing and scraping their teeth against each other.

I look her straight in the eye.

She's not finished.

Maybe she's just getting warmed up.

"I can't have you making trouble," she snivels. "Not now. I'm too busy. Here at Jesus Grove we're slaving to try to make everything nice for you. But you have to stay positive. Your resistance will destroy what we're doing."

So thick, you can cut it with a knife.

Michel and I cower and grovel appropriately, like when you acquiesce to a policeman to charm him out of writing you a traffic ticket. I yearn to advise Sheela to dine on fecal matter, but ignore the temptation.

We keep frozen till her sermonizing stream dissipates, thank her dutifully, depart swiftly.

In the Jesus Grove driveway, I howl, "Billy! Can you believe that obnoxious shit? Gag me with a trout! Sometimes Sheela can be a real android."

"Just pick up on the energy..." laughs Michel.

Dark grey nimbus clouds.

Deluge after deluge.

The ranch, an ocean of mud.

In front of Jesus Grove, I slide to a stop in La Noche, running late.

All of Edison temple is gathered for a big Sheela meeting.

Something is up. Another hosing?

I shed my wet coat and sloppy boots in the mud room, and luckily find a seat in the back next to Mary.

She whispers, "You missed the part about the Mr. Magoo song. The one that C.C. invented. We can't sing it anymore. It's disrespectful to Bhagwan's mother."

"Oh God," I squeak back, "that's so funny. I was with C.C. when he made it up. It was in my Toyota."

"I know. Shush up and listen. Sheela's hosing Julian down."

Oh my.

There is Julian, up in front of the congregation, on display.

Edison is a large temple. All the audio people are here, and the video folks, and the radio guys. The typewriter, washing machine, and Xerox repair people, the kids- everyone's here.

Julian roosts crosslegged at Sheela's feet, rocking nervously to and fro, flanked on both sides by top moms.

This is not a trial. Julian's guilty. Period.

Sheela's ripping into him.

She blasts him for making decisions without consulting her, scolds him for acting too independently. She fumes that he's uncooperative, chides him for trying to manipulate her. The crowd cringes at the intensity of her attack. After her tirade, she asks him what he has to say for himself.

Julian smiles at the room with boyish self-satisfaction.

"Right," he quips, "that's why Sheela and I work so well together."

Pin drop silence.

Is it possible, the room wonders, that Julian doesn't realize he's just been hosed?

It's true.

He's not acting cute, or supercilious.

He really doesn't get it.

He's sitting like a lump, in the ozone.

Sheela gapes at him, astounded, and bursts into laughter.

Everyone joins in.

When the meeting disperses, all the kids crowd round Jules, teasing him and calling him names. He loves it. The boys jump him. They roll on the floor, tussling kindergartners.

Outside, the sky has cleared, the afternoon fresh and pure.

That unique, ephemeral, post-rainstorm green light shimmers in the air.

Julian collars me while I'm kissing Mary, and hauls me into his remarkably clean Oldsmobile; the seats still exude the new upholstery smell. I've refused to wash Julian's car, one of my few noes.

We head out of town and climb a slushy unpaved road to a diminutive plateau where the ranch incinerator stands.

The fire-beast rises menacingly from a concrete slab.

Tall and black and phallic.

A perfect man-made rectangular solid.

Razor edges slice into the placid autumn sky.

The thing reminds me of the monolith from the classic film, "2001: A Space Odyssey." A surreal sight, enhanced by the putrid odor of human waste from the nearby sewage treatment pool.

Julian offloads two untidy heaps of photographs and papers from his trunk.

The incinerator's lengthy printed instructions delineate a complex procedure including an ignition phase, temperature settings, exhaust cycle parameters. You need a rocket science degree just to turn it on.

Julian plays customarily inept with the operational details. By the time I sort it out, daylight is fading, and we witness a brief sizzling whoosh, followed by a deep-throated belch of black smoke into the twilight.

We peek in at the scarcely extant charred remnants.

"Well," I say, "the actual burn cycle didn't take long. Whatever it was, it's unrecoverable now. Come on Jules, what secrets did we just turn to ash?"

"Oh," he squints into the distance, "little of this, little of that."

"Erase his tapes? Erase the master's tapes?" I whine to Vidya.

"Yes. Do it," she dictates impatiently.

It's a late afternoon at Jesus Grove.

I don't like this new mission.

"Erase Bhagwan's words? This is too much. Not the reel-to-reel originals."

"Rajesh... Sheela says do it. The tapes are politically volatile. You know our dilemma. We have to lie to the government to survive, and then Bhagwan turns around and publicly contradicts us. We can't save the commune with him telling the whole truth."

"But..."

"It's your American legal system that can't cope with the truth. And we have copies, minus the embarrassing parts. It's a few sentences, here and there, that we'll lose. We already know what Bhagwan says- he never fucking shuts up. He's published more books than anyone in history. Just erase these six tapes. You can do it with your machines."

"Okay."

Too much monkey business for me.

I sneak to Zarathustra and tiptoe upstairs, glancing furtively about. Only a few stragglers are evident- everyone else has gone to dinner. I stash the tapes in the spy room, and return to the hallway, loitering beside the table that hosts the bulk tape eraser.

I contemplate my task.

I am going to have to erase them.

I can't do it. I can't assent to this.

I remember Bhagwan saying we should never introduce one iota of variance in our documentation of what he says; it's critical to remain absolutely faithful to his phrasing, his nuances, his pauses, even his apparent omissions.

And I am not changing his words, I am destroying them.

I slip back into the spy room, shut the door quietly, and sit down.

Deep breath.

I'll have a peek at my porno collection.

From under my desk, I dig out the red vinyl, pocket-sized album, with the corny cameo embossed on the cover. I love the dualistic nature of it. By appearance, it might present the family's Christmas Polaroids, but in fact it harbors provocative naked girls.

Maybe I've invented a new art form, the "Porno Scrapbook."

I should think of a better name for it.

No, I like "Porno Scrapbook." It tells it like it is.

I think Edgar Degas, French Impressionism's misogynist lover of the ballet dancer, suffered from the same disease; the artist's obeisance to the beatitudes of the female nude. Maybe I actually was Edgar Degas, in a turn-of-the-century Paris incarnation. Nah, I don't paint that well.

I open the book, a low-angle spread-leg shot of a supine bronze nude on a brass bed. Her wolfish incisors kind of turn me on, but she has enormous glaucous vapid eyes, like an cow lowing in the branding iron's shadow. I have an aversion to her jiggly fat arms, but she sports a divinely full black bush. The almost puce coloration of her labia majora repels me, but her asshole's brownish-purple pucker is nice.

You have to take the good attributes with the bad.

I skip to the next to last page, a twin panel of a lanky red-haired vixen. She's stationed before an apple green hedge, lissome arms akimbo, peach thighs broadly bowed, her extruding inner labia hanging backlit in silhouette. The last page features a close-up of her pussy, shot from below, delicate rouge lips glistening with baby oil.

I'm getting hot and bothered.

Where's Mary?

Talkin' 'bout my girl.

Hell, my Mary's a thousand times classier than any of these brainless bitches who pose for money. I don't know why I look at this garbage. I slam the book shut and slip back out to the bulk tape eraser, the tapes under my arm.

No one in their right mind would destroy an enlightened master's words.

Movement down the hall startles me.

My friend, typewriter Arpito, approaches.

Instinctively, I try to shield the tapes in my hand.

"Hey Rajesh," Arpito says, "how are you?"

"Oh, fine. "

"What are you up to?" he asks.

"Oh, nothing much. Little of this, little of that."

He gives me a perplexed look, glancing at the tapes.

Awkward pause.

"Well, it's late," he says, "I'm going to dinner. You want to come along?"

"No. I've got more stuff to do."

"You sure you're alright? You look awfully nervous."

"No. I'm fine. Just a lot of work to get done."

"Alright bro," he says, starting down the hall, "I'll leave you to it. Take care."

"Yeah, you too," I say, as his footsteps trail away.

I erase the first tape.

Just like that.

I drag the master's reel of verbiage repeatedly over the bulk eraser, in multiple directions, scrambling the magnetic patterns into meaninglessness; order, back into chaos.

Glancing out the window, I imagine burying the remaining tapes instead of erasing them. I could return late one night in the future, a stealth grave robber under the moon, and exhume them for posterity.

Bhagwan could care less if I erase these tapes.

Nothing matters to him.

Shit, I'm enjoying this.

I do it- all of them- the eraser buzzing, history undone.

He's said it all ten thousand times anyway.

As I kill the last one, my thoughts drift back to Poona, to a time when I once walked in his shoes, so to speak.

After one of his discourses, the meditation hall had cleared out, the cleaners were at work, and I lolled alone on the floor, mused out from sitting in his presence. Near his podium, an exclusive exit path, reserved for only him, led out the back way. I quickly slipped from the hall along his private path.

On purpose. Just to do it.

Guards converged on me from everywhere.

In the loud confrontation, I played dumb.

I'd made a mockery of their rules.

Dispersing, they murmured righteous indignations.

Secretly, I think he loves me for that rebellious act.

When someone asked Bhagwan what he would do if he were a member of our commune, he said he'd run away as fast as possible.

I awaken at dusk, disoriented, another topsy-turvy day merging into night.

In town, a to-go cappuccino in my hand, I meet Mary on the road.

She's upset, frowning.

"We're going to burn Lazarus," she says.

"Lazarus died?"

"Yes. Late last night. Come on. The celebration's starting at the burning ghats."

Lazarus was an AIDS patient.

I knew him before coming to the ranch.

We used to chat.

But I never saw him after he was quarantined in our AIDS colony.

A contingent of gay sannyasins gripes about the isolation of their friends, understandably unhappy with Bhagwan's stance on AIDS.

I don't blame them.

On the other hand, I'm glad that we're all tested for AIDS, and that it's not spreading, at least not on the ranch.

We walk along the muddy road, past the airfield, out of town and into the woods.

Mary says, "Did you hear that Vidya was locked up in Pythagoras?"

"Locked up? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. The first story I heard was that Vidya had a nervous breakdown, and that she's being held in a room at Pythagoras medical center, on tranquilizers. But a lot of people are saying that Puja poisoned her."

"Mercy. This place is turning into total science fiction."

In a wooded area at the base of a mountain stands an altar, a space-age funeral pyre, festooned with flowing red banners and garlands of flowers.

Hundreds of red figures envelop the burning site and spill out across the mountainside, dancing and whirling to loud music.

Piquant smoke wafts through the air, as the shell of Lazarus shrinks into curls of blue-grey ash. The ten thousand things that were Lazarus' life, cycling back to become ten thousand new things.

Masquerade faces swirl in the darkness, gyrating Fellini-like, grotesque, silly.

The word "silly" originally meant empty, as in the emptiness of the madman, who can be momentarily filled with, and speak, the truth. In the west, we have lost the reverence for the madman. In the east, there exist saints whose sole chosen activity is caring for the "mastas," or crazies, who lie slobbering by the roadside.

There's nothing satanic about us, but if you caught this scene on the news, you might conclude that Beelzebub is in attendance here this evening.

The death celebration dancing continues way into the night.

Bhagwan says to celebrate everything.

When I'm not working, I love to dance to abandon- it transports me to a meditative place inside, like the whirling dervishes from the era of the

Persian poet Rumi, the greatest wordsmith that ever lived. Reading Rumi is the next best thing to reading Bhagwan.

But tonight Mary and I stay hand in hand, watching the ceremony, swaying to the music, not saying much.

Ding ding ding.

The beeper.

Report to Jesus Grove.

See Vidya.

I find Vidya in the Jesus Grove reception lounge, encircled by a party of moms cracking jokes. Vidya's countenance, haggard. No one mentions her recent release from Pythagoras, the medical center, where rumors indicate that Puja poisoned her. And there's Puja, who I'm guessing engineered the dousing of salad bars with salmonella in the Dalles.

What's going on here? Well- not that it's different anywhere else in the world. Intrigue and stealth and power trips abound everywhere. Even, especially, in that white house in Washington, DC.

Vidya draws me aside, informs me in a hushed tone that I'll be going off the ranch tonight to place threatening phone calls.

"Gag me with a trout," I say, "threatening phone calls to who?"

"To us," says Vidya. "Call back to the ranch, and threaten whoever you get on the line."

"Do what? Threaten our own sannyasins?"

"It needs to be done. I can't explain it now. But there's a good political reason. Just do it. And be nasty."

"Okay..." I concede.

I think about what she said.

"Vidya? How can a reason be good, and political at the same time?"

"Good question, Rajesh," she says, laughing. "Sheela's orders are as good a political reason as you can get. See you later."

It's a moonless foggy night.

I am dressed in blue, no mala.

I drive for an hour.

Stop at a gas station to get a handful of change.

Keep driving.

On a lonely stretch of road, I pull off by a phone booth. The light in the phone booth ceiling is frightfully bright. The fog is a proverbial pea soup blanket creeping on cat's paws and there's no one for miles, but I still feel too visible in this Plexiglas cage.

I am shivering, not only from the cold.
I drop coins into the slot.
A ranch operator comes on the line.
"I'm gonna fucking kill you!"
I growl it into the telephone, not knowing at first what to do with my voice, and then finding the deranged rasp of my inner werewolf.
No response on the other end of the line.
I hang up.
Take a deep breath.
Feed in more coins and call back.
I terrorize another ranch operator.
"You're gonna die! You're dead! You red motherfucker bitch-cunt!"
Again, quiet on the other end.
I hang up.
Another deep breath.
Call back.
But I put the phone down before anyone answers, realizing suddenly that I've been here too long since the first call. If it's traced, the cops could already be on the way. I've got to split this phone booth now.
Driving back, dense fog crowds around my car.
I'm squinting ahead, trying to pierce the darkness.
A chill of fear, a delayed reaction, rebounds inside me.
My stomach feels queasy.
My own heartbeat, a loud thudding, resonating terribly like in Poe's horror story, "The Telltale Heart."
I open the window, air out the cigarette smoke, wondering why I did that.

Late evening.
I'm sipping cappuccino, reviewing a few issues of the Rajneesh Times as the ranch restaurant workers prepare to close down.
One disconcerting headline salutes Rajneeshpuram as America's only crime-free city, the accompanying article extolling the virtues of our city.
What a joke.
Maybe it was crime-free before we got guns.
Another issue describes the new religion we've founded, Rajneeshism, with quotes from Bhagwan's recent discourse series, "The Rajneesh Bible."
Preposterous.
I can't stand it.
I can't stomach this discrepancy.

I can't reconcile this doctrinal doo-dah.

How can Bhagwan found his own religion, and generate a bible, when he's spoken for years against organized religions and codes of conduct? I think they call this cognitive dissonance. I think I call it sacrilege: our perfect nameless non-entity, turned into a fucking religion.

He can't be serious. It must be an artifice, legal machinations to qualify us as a bona fide religion. On the other hand, every dish that Bhagwan serves up is seasoned with paradoxes and garnished with contradictions.

I can't figure it out.

You can never second guess a master.

I'm going home to bed.

Mary is already asleep.

I fade away the moment I hit the pillow.

In a dream, I'm standing on a beach in the early morning, watching the ocean. The whole expanse of water is that exquisite, transparent, pale aqua green that you see when the sun shines through a wave. Breaking on the shore, waves swell up higher and higher, until half the sky fills with a towering wall of water.

The pale green water enchants me. As I marvel at its beauty, I perceive that it's actually not water, but fine particles of light. Rising from my dream body, I merge with the giant light wave.

I wake up.

It's still the middle of the night.

I roll over and cuddle up against Mary.

A light sleeper, she awakens and pulls me closer.

Precious Mary, supple in my arms.

My cherished twin.

My darling baby pudding.

My beeper jangles in its charger.

"Dammit. I don't believe this," I mutter.

She relaxes back into the mattress, throws her arm up to shield her eyes, knowing I'll switch on the light to dress. She shivers when I lick down her breast as I rise from the bed.

At Jesus Grove, "Good evening, Jules. Or should I say good morning. It IS... in fact, 1 a.m."

Julian retorts, "It's 12:45 a.m., Whiteboy. Always exaggerating. Now listen. Easy job. I want you to disable the electric fence around Lao Tzu. Tell the Security guard you're testing it."

"Right now?"

He nods.

"You mean disable the fence alarm?" I ask, incredulous.

"No, turn off the whole works. The alarm and the fence itself."

"What for? It's goddamn one o'clock in the morning, give or take your

lousy fifteen minutes."

"There's no need to quibble, Whiteboy. I've got some things I need to scope out. I have to have the fence turned off."

"What's going on? Really?"

"Don't worry about it. I've got it covered. Just take care of the fence, and make the guard think you're testing it. Leave the rest to me."

"You sure about this? This leaves Bhagwan completely unprotected. How long do I keep it switched off?"

"Until you hear from me."

"That could be forever."

"Don't worry, you'll be home in time to get laid twice before breakfast."

"I doubt that. But whatever. Should I go now?"

"Now's the time."

Action.

Clark Kent, bursting from the phone booth.

Can't shed my shirt and run in the wind through the weeping willow fronds, like when I played Superman as a boy with the Jewish girl next door. Can't touch her black ringlets or her porcelain skin damp with exertion or her pink carnation nosegay at the first dance. Can't feel the kinetic erotic mystery of puberty hormone heaven anymore.

Put on my deceit hat instead.

The drive to Lao Tzu.

Silent majesty.

Charcoal tree silhouettes and jagged shadows adorn the slopes. These moments alone with the terrain, with the moon- these are the moments I live for. A small flock of deer bounds across the road. A momma and her babies. I reduce speed while they forage alongside the ditch. Delicate, innocent creatures.

The entrance to Lao Tzu.

I park away from the guard hut.

The Security girl steps out.

Sexy in the moonlight, but no pushover.

Skeptical, she's not quite buying my story.

Cold sweat under my arms.

I can smell my own fear.

The guard's red sweater reminds me of prep school.

I'm trying to feed her a plate of my most accomplished lies, my prevarication platter deluxe, but it's not working. She's not buying my whoppers.

This should be easier.

Another Billy Box controls the fence alarm.

The guard wants to see inside the box. Give me a break.

I move outside to the guard post's electrical panel.

She follows me, posing all the wrong questions.

When I switch off the high voltage, she asks me if the fence is still activated.

She wants to see the actual meter readings.

I wish she would go away.

No amount of red herring blandishments or small talk will diffuse her objections, and I am wound up taut as a harpsichord string by the time Julian beeps me an hour and a half later.

Something about this job I really hate.

Bhagwan shouldn't be vulnerable for so long.

This is tantamount to treason.

Late night shadows on the wall of Mary's bedroom.

Cuddling naked under the covers, her body heavenly against mine.

I ask her, "Beloved baby pudding, do you think Bhagwan is greater than Jesus?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, but what do you think anyway?"

"Well, I don't know," she says, wrapping her leg around me.

"Come on," I say pulling her into me, "assume heaven is a hierarchy that doesn't exist. Like the ashram hierarchy that doesn't exist. Who's the top man on the totem pole?"

"God is," she says without thinking.

"No... you know what I mean."

"Well, I'd have to say that it's Jesus," she says as she pulls her leg off my hip and nudges her knee gently up between my legs.

I play with her hair.

"I'd have to agree," I say. "Does that mean we're Christians as well as sannyasins?"

"I don't know. It's not important."

"But, like with Bhagwan- it's not him, it's what he's pointing to that's important. The same with Christianity. It's the Christ, the universal light within, not the man Jesus, that people seek. In that sense, we're all Christians. Christianity is more like a cult than we are though. We're not a cult you know."

"You talk too much. We don't need to be anything. What's all this about Christianity anyway? It's not like you."

"Oh, I was thinking about the world, and the other stuff going on out there. I think we're too intolerant of other belief systems. But the Christian church- the structure itself, it is a political cesspool."

"Just like the ranch," she chortles.

Pause.

Her eyes sparkle, bright like an elf even in the subdued light.

"You're so smart," I whisper.

"I love you Rajesh."

"I love you Mary."

We stop, watch each other, as time dilates. Her eyes flutter shut. She speaks softly, keeping her eyes closed.

"I see a time when we're more relaxed, more together, more connected to each other."

"Yeah? There's hope for us? Despite my resistance?"

"Of course. Slowly, slowly."

She does a developpe in my arms, like a swan, stretching her shapely leg. She studied ballet.

I love this woman.

Suddenly I am hard, pressing up against her.

She whispers, "I want you inside of me."

Her breath, warm in my face.

She's damp, between her legs.

Ding ding ding.

The beeper.

It never stops.

I bet it's the fucking fence at Lao Tzu.

Dragging myself away from Mary, drunk with her essence, I answer the perpetual call of duty.

At Jesus Grove, Julian says, "Your favorite job."

"The fence?"

"You got it, baby."

Tonight, it's different.

The Security guard on duty is easy, and after switching off the alarm and the fence, I join Julian on watch in the hills behind Bhagwan's house. The trees look like phantoms, raven black against the sky. The smell of pines inundates the air. Julian sends me to the bottom of a hill, instructs me to wait and see if I see anything.

"What am I supposed to see?"

"Just see if you see anything."

I wait forever.

I see nothing.

The night grows ominous.

The moonlight, foreboding.

Julian reappears and directs me to a pathway leading past a shed.

Go down there and wait.

This is ridiculous.

Julian reappears. We climb the nearest hilltop. Michel appears, says "Just pick up on the energy," and disappears. Nothing is explained.

I go home. Mary is asleep. I lie awake, edgy, unresolved.

Jets.

They buzz us.

Black jet coming.

I hear the whine of his approach.

A deadly crack of thunder ricochets off the mountains as he sweeps in at low altitude, flipping ninety degrees to a wings-vertical attitude, side-mounted camera shutter snapping, and he's already past me as I wave.

Reconnaissance mission.

The image of the Whiteboy's wave is too late to show up in the photos, but a 10-millisecond younger version of me will take shape on the paper in some U.S. military lab's developing tray. I'll come up through the chemicals, standing by Zarathustra, shielding my eyes against the autumn sun while I gawk into the lens, trying to read the numbers stenciled on the jet's wing.

But he was too fast.

I couldn't even see if he had a number, much less read it.

The pilot- he's thinking a mile ahead of the plane and loving it. The hideous force: the sheer mass, multiplied by acceleration. I'd be less than protoplasm if he hit me. And he's part of an offensive war machine that dwarfs our meager defenses by exponential proportions.

My romantic fantasy about military aircraft suddenly doesn't seem so cool, with the terrifying death machine roaring right overhead, taking pictures of me and my beloved home.

I think about Mary's dream of soldiers on the ranch.

A nauseating haze of fear spreads from my stomach up through my chest and across my face as I envision actually having to die for the master. This is real shit. No wonder most of Jesus' apostles got scarce when they hung him up to die at Golgotha. Just the sound of it... Golgotha... gives me the creeps.

It sounds like... blackness.

Don't like that black jet.

The noise of its engines follows me through the day, and the night.

I sleep fitfully.

In a dream, out of a yellow-grey mist appears a little goddess.

She's wrapped in a purple hooded cloak, and surrounding her is an intense aura of fiery red.

She has the most stunningly beautiful face I've ever seen.

Opening her cloak, she reveals her naked form.

She has the most ravishingly beautiful body I've ever seen.

I am drawn to her by an invisible force.

We embrace, and I am immediately flooded with ecstasy.

No sexual action occurs, just an overpowering bliss.

She smiles, and fades back into the mist.

Morning.

I forgot to set the alarm.

Behind schedule, I hustle to dress for work.

Mary returns from the shower, still dripping, holding her clothes in a bundle.

She looks like she's in a trance.

In a voice I don't recognize, she says, "The moms are all gone. They left in the night. They took a plane to Germany."

"What?"

"Sheela and the top moms are all gone. I just heard it from two different people in the hall."

"How can that be? You're kidding.

"I'm not kidding. They're gone. Like in my dream."

"Your dream? Shit a brick! This is insane. I don't remember the moms leaving in your dream. Why'd they leave?"

"You tell me. But don't you remember? I had a dream that the moms left. It was before I had that dream about the soldiers."

"God, you had a premonition. This is... something..."

I stare at her.

She stares back.

I can't let this in.

"You're not making this up, are you?"

"No. It's happening."

My world quakes.

We hug, but there's no melting.

"I've got to find Billy," I say.

La Noche kicks up dust, but it feels like I'm in slow motion.

I spot Michel, standing alone near a culvert by the road.

The morning shines on bright, billowing anvil-shaped clouds, and autumn's nip tickles my cheeks, but the mountains never looked more forlorn.

I pull over and rush to Billy's side.

His eyes are lost in the distance.

I can tell he's heard the news.

Without saying hi, I spit out, "What're we gonna do? We got no job. We got no boss."

Michel doesn't answer.

We watch a flock of birds change course, and the wind waves through the scrub brush across the mountains.

"Time changes, the world goes on changing,
but the experience of silence, the joy of it
remains the same. That is the only thing you
can rely upon, the only thing that never dies."
- "Zen: the Diamond Thunderbolt" - Osho

Chapter Nine: MOSES

Bhagwan immediately calls an international press conference.

The meditation hall fills with sannyasins and reporters who've rushed from all points of the compass.

Up front near an area reserved for the media, a table displays a collection of books- a portion of my bizarre library- strewn across a red cloth.

From the scuttlebutt rippling through the crowd, I glean that a cache of my precious volumes has been unearthed in a secret bunker beneath Jesus Grove.

The media's cameras, rolling on my literature.

They can't do this.

That's MY library.

I retreat to the back of the hall, sit alone.

Bhagwan appears without the customary musical fanfare.

Serious and grim, he blows the whistle on Sheela.

He announces her escape, exposes her collusions, enumerates her crimes, reveals that she's planned to assassinate Oregon's Attorney General.

The crowd sits horrified.

As Bhagwan rails through his description of Sheela's atrocities, the reality of the nightmare I've helped to create comes crashing down on my head. God, poisoning innocent people, harassing and spying on my own commune members...

Guilt consumes me.

The poor citizens of Oregon. They don't deserve this plague.

The tears pour, my body shakes.

For this, I can never be forgiven.

During a closing question and answer period, the journalists jockey for position, hungry for gory details. In response to one reporter's allegations, Bhagwan seems caught in a lie. He bristles, defensive, angry, blaming Sheela. I have never seen him backed into a corner, like an ordinary man.

My world is collapsing.

Within hours, the ranch is crawling with law enforcement.

The FBI.

U.S. Marshals.

Sheriffs.

Oregon Police.

The ranch feels like a war zone.

Sannyasins wander the roads aimlessly.

Some rave about the insanity that's been going on.

Some stare blankly ahead, dazed.

Everything's changing.

I watch the Hollywood collective move their gear into Jesus Grove-

they're assuming day-to-day supervision of the ranch. Some of the more assertive Rajneesh Security guards emerge as the new enforcers, determined to depose the remaining traitors who've destroyed their dream.

Sheela is the big bad guy now, Lucifer incarnate.

Although she offended many with her feisty attitude and heavy-handedness, she commanded respect as Bhagwan's hand-picked representative; but now she mushrooms in everyone's mind, like an atomic blast cloud morphing into Fantasia's evil giant.

The Rajneeshee version of the national drug, BLAME, erupts from the ranch collective unconscious. The fire of finger-pointing rages.

A rumor that Sheela stole vast sums of money runs foremost in many minds. Supposedly she has a Swiss bank account waiting in the wings.

To me, stolen money seems trivial compared to the other crimes, but the gossip dwells on the missing millions.

Bhagwan, too, becomes the target of blame.

Surely he knew what Sheela's gang was doing behind the scenes.

Could an enlightened master condone poisonings, and arson, and murder plots?

Did he mastermind it all?

Is he responsible, regardless of what he knew?

The doubts swarm like clouds of angry mosquitos in every head.

Afternoon.

Thick swatches of corrugated stratus clouds blot out the sun.

Michel and I loaf outside Zarathustra, watching the mountains, feeling the disappearance of summer and the life we knew.

"Why on earth," I say, "did we do what we did?"

Michel pokes me in the ribs.

"We did it because we loved it," he says.

"Well, it WAS awesome, even though it crashed and burned."

"You know, Whiteboy, me and Jules... we bugged Bhagwan too. I put a mic inside his wooden alarm button. They call it the panic button. It rests on the table by his chair. We piped the audio through the phone wire pedestals, down to Jesus Grove."

"My God..."

He beams, elated, snickering, "Jules said Bhagwan was bugged in Poona too."

"No way," I say.

"It's true."

"Unbelievable."

"I wired Hollywood's whole trailer as well," says Michel. "That's why you'd see me sweating in those coveralls. Mics in every room. Even the bathrooms. It was a job."

"Amazing. I guess you knew about the Jesus Grove underground bunker too. I'm feeling left out."

"No, I never heard about the bunker. But the less you know, the less trouble you're in. And you did stuff I didn't know about."

"I suppose." God, here I am, competing again. But any way you cut it, we're both in deep shit now. "It's radical, having no boss."

Julian pulls up in his Oldsmobile, smiling behind glass, cool in his air-conditioned interior. He stays motionless as his automatic window rolls down.

"What the fuck are you doing still here?" I shout.

"Mugambo," he smirks.

"Really," I say, "what are you up to?"

"Little of this, little of that."

Sobering, he says, "I know it's dicey. But I might stay. It could work out."

"Forget that! We'll call you," I laugh. "The FBI is gonna kick yo fawkin' ass."

"No way. I ain't afraid of those wankers. They don't know jack shit, those frigging dogs."

I start, and they join in.

The dog mantra.

"Big dog, happy dog, lucky dog, dog."

Jules says, "The best thing you guys can do is... GET A JOB. Me? You know I can walk through the shit without getting any on my shoes. The FBI can bite the bone."

His automatic window rolls up, and with a rictus grin, away he goes. Confounded, I look at Michel.

"Just pick up on his energy," laughs Michel. "He's drifting. He'll be looking out from behind steel bars if he sticks around much longer."

"Truly. And so will we. Let's go to the spy room."

Inside Zarathustra, sanniyasins rush about with stacks of files. Shredders whir furiously.

I assume they're destroying incriminating immigration status records. The INS must be on the way.

Michel suddenly seems to remember something.

"I got to find my girlfriend, Whiteboy. See you later."

"Huh? Okay. See you... in prison."

I go for cappuccino.

Priya sits in the restaurant before an untouched coffee.

She's mute, rigid, as I join her.

I shake my head, lips tight in resignation.

When she finally speaks, her voice quivers with rage, like the tremolo effect on the guitars in the old Sixties hits.

"I hate him. I hate Bhagwan. That motherfucker. I could kill him with my bare hands. I'm leaving the ranch as soon as possible. Fuck him. Fuck you. Fuck this place."

This is not the Priya I know. If there exists a quintessential lover of Bhagwan, it's Priya. She's the epitome of devotion.

"Is he," I ask, "the source of our love, or the object?"

"Don't give me any of that shit," she barks. "He's a rip-off, I'm done with him. Finished. I'm going back to New York today. I'm glad I subleased my apartment instead of giving it up. You better get scarce too, Swami. The FBI's going to be all over you."

"I know. But if I leave, they'll track me down, and it'll be worse then."

"You do what you want. I'm going to my townhouse to pack."

Killing time in front of the mall.

I don't know what to do next.

There's Shiven, my African-American friend the conga player, ever cheerful.

"Yo, Swami, what's going on?" he says.

"Oh, just you baby. All I'm doing is hanging out- I got no job now."

He's puzzled.

I explain, "For the last year or so, all I did was dirty work for Julian and Sheela. So now I got nobody to work for, no job."

"Yeah? Wow. I knew you did something secret. What exactly did you do?"

"I helped bug everything on the ranch. I helped Sheela's gang research the Dalles poisoning. And the arson. I did a bunch of illegal crap."

"Holy shit," he says, laughing.

"Well Whiteboy, if you know the secrets, what's this about a case of guns at the bottom of the lake?"

"I don't know, bro'. That's a new one on me. Guns in the lake? Mercy."

"What about Puja, Whiteboy? The medical center mom? I heard she's been poisoning people on the ranch."

"Puja? I think she poisoned Vidya. And I think she cooked up the salmonella scheme in the Dalles. But I don't know for sure. She slipped her hand in mine the other day. She never holds my hand. It made my flesh crawl. Maybe she was trying some transdermal poison on me."

"Ouch, Whiteboy! You give me the chills."

"I know. I give myself the chills."

My mind jumps tracks.

"Shiven, why are there so few black people around Bhagwan? What do you think?"

"I don't know. Their loss I guess."

He said "their" loss, not "our" loss.

He's so divinely simple.

"You know, Shiven, you're so easygoing. I'm jealous. I can't stop analyzing everything, trying to figure it all out. I wish I were like you."

"Oh," he says, "don't be fooled. I've got plenty of head trips going on too."

"Yeah? You seem so mellow. Well, I think I need to sleep for a long time."

"Okay. Right on. Good to see you Whiteboy."

I feel suddenly alone, helpless.

Before Shiven has a chance to depart, I ask him, "Do you think I'll do time in prison?"

"Prison? For what?"

"For all that illegal shit I did."

"Mmm, I see what you mean. No, I don't think so Whiteboy. You're innocent, no matter what you did."

"Thanks," I say. "Hey. See you when I see you."

"Yeah, see you."

Home to sleep.

In a dream.

I am twelve years old, standing inside a deserted circus tent.

A raised central platform acts as a crude stage, surrounded by rows of green metal folding chairs.

It's dark- there are no lights on- but somehow the stage is well lit.

The floor, sawdust.

I stand among the seats, minuscule wood chips irritating their way into my tennis shoes. I know, in the way you know things in dreams, that this is where the strippers perform at the county fair.

A woman appears onstage.

She's naked except for a black g-string.

But she's old and haggard, with pendulous sagging breasts, too soft and too bovine, too milkish, to be exciting.

I watch her.

She does a dance, provocative, to no music, rubbing herself and toying with the black nylon straps that stretch around her hips.

She looks at me, to see if I'm watching her.

I am.

She looks down at her crotch as she pulls the g-string away from her body, as if to check whether what I want is indeed available. She glances to see if I'm still watching.

I am.

Her age and ugliness fade. Her ponderous breasts become ripe and pert. She becomes infinitely desirable.

The essence of feminine beauty, personified.

Woman.

I get hard in my khaki trousers, abraded by my fruit of the looms, leaning toward her, yearning.

Feeling my attention heighten, she bends, lithe and poised, stepping out of her g-string. Her arms fly open as she flings the black nylon triangle in a long arc. From a distance I can smell her exposed armpits- the sight of the dappled mounds of stubble quickens my desire.

Standing defiant, she lowers her hands onto her hips, slides her legs wider apart, and squats, keeping her back very straight. Her eyes blaze, fiery black.

Reaching one hand behind her, I can feel how she lays her palm down on her ass, her middle finger inching down between her buttocks. Her other arm shoots out, a stone index finger pointing at me in accusation. Her pupils, fiercely dilated, bore into mine.

"Obedience!" She screams at me, telepathically.

I rip open my zipper.

Pulling out my erect adolescent penis, I start jacking off.

She is pleased.

I wake up, groggy.

God, these sex dreams... but the image fades immediately as the threat of prison crashes into my head.

The real nightmare didn't go away because I've been asleep.

My adrenal glands, barely functioning.

I need caffeine.

It's almost dark- I must've slept the whole afternoon.

I dress carelessly.

Forget the shower and shave.

No one cares what I look like anymore. I don't care what I look like anymore.

In town, I run into Priya, already packed and waiting to catch an evening ride to Portland. One small suitcase. She always keeps it simple.

"Well," she says, "good luck, Swami. I hope the FBI storm troopers don't find your guns in the lake."

"What guns in the lake? I keep hearing about guns. I don't know about any guns."

"Good for you. One less reason to put you in prison. By the way, I heard

the rumor that you're HIV positive- that Sheela kept you in the dark about it so she could keep using you."

"Me? My God. That's a macabre twist."

A long flatbed truck rumbles by.

Tied down under tarpaulins, hidden cargo forms irregular shapes.

Priya motions at the truck, says half-jokingly, "There goes another load of dead cows being smuggled off the ranch. Did you hear? Sheela's gang poisoned the cows that supply milk to Bhagwan's house. This is turning absolutely medieval."

"It is... starting to feel a bit like a Poe horror story. The Fall of the House of Sheela."

"Sheela, my ass. She's just another one of Bhagwan's stupid bitch lovers. She's been lied to like the rest of us. Sheela's as innocent as you are. It's Bhagwan that's the goddamn criminal. He created this nightmare. Goodbye, Rajesh. I'm getting the fuck out of this necro place. See you when I see you."

"Yeah. See you when I see you."

A hug, too short, and she's gone.

In the ranch restaurant, I nurse another cappuccino and stare out the window. The people walking by, the few in the restaurant- they all seem in a trance.

Why did Bhagwan do this to us?

No.

You can never second guess a master.

I can't get into blaming him for what I did.

But maybe I should. Maybe Priya is right.

Maybe Bhagwan took us for a ride.

No.

My actions were of own choosing.

And even if Bhagwan knew everything, I'll be eternally grateful to him for leading me to the experience of meditation.

Still... maybe he IS a son of a bitch.

Darkness falls over the ranch, turning the yellow-ochre mountains into huge shadows.

I loiter outside the restaurant on the wooden walkway.

My tennis shoes, quiet on the planks.

They don't clunk like the cowboy boots do.

The fall night air brings back lonely, wistful pangs that I always felt on autumn afternoons, walking home from school, when the smell of burning pine needles filled me with an ominous sense of something pending, something huge and incomprehensible.

The blue night sky deepens to ebony.

The incandescent mall lights seem too bright.

I retreat into the street.

In the shadows at the end of the mall, a group of people.

Julian's there, arms crossed.

I rush to his side.

He's nervous, harried, pretending to be calm as he surrenders his Oldsmobile keys to a ranch Security guard. A group of men in suits- they must be FBI- crowds around his car, searching it. I can't believe he's standing here with the authorities.

"Whiteboy," he says, "I'm out of here in ten seconds."

I'm hurt.

He was leaving without a goodbye.

In the light of the Oldsmobile's open trunk, I see my Polaroid instant camera being impounded. My mind yells: Hey, that's my camera! My mom bought it for me! But I resist the urge to grab it, not wanting to make a scene. With a sick feeling, I convince myself the FBI will return it later.

Julian hugs me swiftly and whispers, "Blame it all on me, Whiteboy. Tell them it was my doing."

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"Don't worry about me. We'll drink a Guinness one day and laugh about this. Blame it all on old Julian. Be good. Ciao."

He turns, runs across the street, jumps into a car I hadn't noticed in the shadows, and is gone.

I wave goodbye to the darkness.

The authorities move in, take over our City Hall.

Ranch sannasins are summoned for interviews.

My name comes up. Rajneesh Legal Services encourages me to make no confessions.

City Hall, packed with disciples being questioned.

The government worker across the table from me, mistrustful, wary of these red weirdos, struggles with his clipboard; he flounders, as if in quicksand; he casts his net into a swamp of names he can't pronounce or spell; he seeks solid ground in a flood of events he can't fathom.

I can hear him thinking it will take a lifetime to sort this out.

Noticing the similarities between all of the interrogators, I conclude that government work has three basic qualifications: atrocious posture, a noticeable lack of social skills, and a skinny, ugly tie.

How quick I am to judge- it's easy to forget that they're children of God too.

I volunteer nothing.

My inquisitor's probes indicate he's already on my trail.

But the scent zigzags all over the place.

"It is correct," he says, "that you live at Moses?"

"No."

"What is Moses?"

"He received the Ten Commandments."

He ignores my sarcasm.

I ignore his dubious look.

This is fun.

"Moses," I say, "is a group of residence trailers. I lived there when I first came to the ranch, but I've moved since then. I live in a townhouse now."

"And you work for Edison?" he says.

"No. Thomas Edison is dead... just kidding. Yes, I work for Edison."

As the interview progresses, I notice other sannyasins around the room, the ones not in jeopardy, spilling information like water over a dam. I overhear my name mentioned three times.

This is not fun.

Rajneesh Legal Services scrambles, and the ranch attorneys hire lawyers for Michel and I, and the other sannyasins who worked for Sheela but weren't in the core group that fled to Germany.

Off to Portland.

A scrap of paper in hand, seeking out the address of a law firm.

I catch myself memorizing the license plates of passing cars.

The foyer of the building.

Modern Scandinavian design and decor.

Lots of steel and plate glass windows.

I have to wait for this lawyer.

Imitation Jackson Pollock paintings hang on the walls.

Art.

Modern art.

Now the observer requires a theory to view a painting. Abstruse themes, like the thickness of the paint on the canvas, dominate the scene.

Now the painter needs to shmooze, not paint.

Blah blah "informs" the painting.

Arcane verbiage is the currency of success. To understand art, or more important economically, art criticism, you have to use words like eponymous, exigency, and etymological.

Well yes, the iconoclastic quasi-materialist spatio-temporal deterministic post-reductionist causalities suggested by the lack of congruent definition in the penumbrated rubefaction created a plethora of discontinuous non-heterogenous perspectives as to the existential probabilities of the viewer's reference to the cantilevered structural relationships of the frame's interstitial quadrature.

Gosh, I hadn't noticed that.

I thought I was looking at a painting of a dark red square.

In more concrete terms- if, like the brilliant artist Marcel Duchamp, you sign a discarded urinal and enter it in an exhibition, you are destined for fame and big bucks. Then you can forget art and spend your retirement playing chess.

Duchamp did create superbly idiosyncratic and satirical works, and his act of rebellion does challenge values, but it doesn't take me soaring on the wings of spirit, as a Van Gogh does.

Maybe it's advertising that represents the vanguard of art now, with its luminous color, clever juxtapositions, and cunningly crafted Orwellian buy-speak. Art subverting life.

But the artist who's not working for Madison Avenue is the real subversive, and it's a cross to bear. He or she is burdened with seeing the way things are, but still being in the mire. This moment of order amid chaos- that is art- it takes you from the pain that comprises your life, into beauty, and freedom.

What greater gift to the world?

What greater danger to an oppressive government? Thus the FBI maintains a file on every prominent musician and writer, to keep tabs on the cutting edge of creative thought, on whose ideas might foster freedom and foment a revolution.

Perhaps the artists and writers and musicians are the world's historians- and there I was thinking it was the whales. Who's going to know about us anyway, when the sun erupts into a supernova?

But here now, this lawyer is ready to see me.

I make my way upstairs.

An office, littered with papers and stacks of briefs.

Why are offices always so messy?

Sam, my potential defender, studies me. He's blond and Germanic, well built and physically fit, sharp as a razor. He can't hide his curiosity. I'm apparently the key to a storybook he can't resist. His queries are astute, calculated, incisive.

He takes my case.

This is wonderful.

I unfold my tale and Sam immerses himself in the saga, grappling to follow the story's convoluted plot. His appetite whetted, he wants every detail- too much to tell right now. I promise to supplement today's precursory sketch with a full account in writing.

Back on the ranch, people are fleeing in droves.

Emotions run high.

Fear lurks everywhere.

Rumors escalate.

I learn that I tested negative for AIDS, contrary to what I heard.

One woman, confined to the AIDS colony, discovers she's actually not ill at all, the victim of a dirty trick.

There's gossip that a Share-a-Home resident turned up somewhere off the ranch, dead in the gutter, murdered by Sheela and her gang. I don't put much stock in the story- homeless people drop dead in the street all the time.

The ranch corporations come under investigation, teetering precariously above the precipice of extinction. The bank folds, with people unable to recoup their deposits, one forfeiting ten thousand dollars.

Greed.

Sannyasins, stealing things as they flee.

I witness the same tendency within myself, wanting to grab what I can and run.

So much stuff.

Tarrying workers move warehouse-sized loads of ranch equipment, scheduled to be auctioned off, into our huge meditation hall. Nikhilananda, aka Nik, my friend the taxi-driving history professor, takes charge of organizing the lonely reminders, and we joke about the rapacious runaway avarice in the air.

I hole up in my room, tapping furiously on an IBM Selectric typewriter to develop an outline for Sam. In between spurts at the keyboard, I comb the ranch on foot- no more beloved La Noche- dredging my memory at each bugging site.

The document expands to sixty single-spaced pages: everything I did, saw, and heard. I write it in plain language, no urbane sophistry, none of my self-aggrandizing extemporizing or essentially empty erudition, no artistic linguistics, no pedagogue's propensities, proclivities, and predilections for prodigious polysyllabic pseudo-profundity.

Portland.

My life becomes travel. And offices.

Back and forth, between the ranch offices of Rajneesh Legal Services and appointments in Sam's office in Portland, I am commuting so often I'm meeting myself on the way back.

The offices glare at me. The traveling wears me down.

Sam devotes himself heartily to my case.

We pore over my summary, hash through its twists and turns. Sam is relentless, tenaciously following the ten thousand threads that weave the warp and weft of the story's fabric. In retrospect it's unthinkable, unfathomable to me, the whole outlandish sordid affair. The road to hell IS paved with good intentions. It recalls Nazi Germany, where regular citizens were incrementally coerced into persecuting their friends.

"I wonder," Sam says, "how much cash Sheela escaped with. She sure took the commune for a ride."

"I don't know," I say. "Everyone blames Sheela, or Bhagwan. But it wasn't that simple. I think Bhagwan sat and watched it happen. And Sheela's not the only one responsible. We all contributed to it. Even the regular residents- they sensed intuitively, that things were wrong. Everyone betrayed themselves by not speaking up."

"You know," says Sam, "you could write a book about this case. You're articulate. And you have an insider's view."

"I've thought about it. But it'd be tricky to show the different sides. If you read the media, it was a hotbed of evil. If you lived there, it was a communal paradise. For me, it was both, heaven and hell. It was both-and. Not either-or."

"Then say that in the book. I wouldn't worry about what everyone else thinks. All any author can do is offer his own perspective."

But it's prison, not publishing, that weighs on my mind.

On the legal front, Sam's defense strategy entails establishing my role as a sergeant, as opposed to Sheela and her core group, whom he deems generals.

He negotiates a plea bargain with the authorities.

If I plead guilty to one count of electronic eavesdropping, and spill my guts on everything, they'll ignore my illegal marriage and connections to the the violent crimes. This is good- better than facing charges as an accomplice to arson, poisoning, and conspiracy to murder. The single wiretapping crime is punishable with up to five years.

Well, I can stand anything for five years.

Michel's lawyer negotiates a similar deal.

Both attorneys suggest that our prognoses are good. They're optimistic, confident we won't do time. Michel and I are not so sure.

Sam exhorts me to accept the plea bargain. Okay.

I'll go for it.

The elevator opens.

The Portland office of the FBI.

Locked doors behind locked doors.

Thick, thick glass.

Leaning into the intercom, I try to identify myself to the the receptionist, a vivacious buxom matron dressed in the colors of the Nazi flag: black suit, white blouse, red scarf. She denies me entry, until agents appear to verify my identity.

Tell me who I am.

On the lobby wall among the aggrandizing plaques and seals, a photograph of old J. Edgar Hoover portrays him looking nice and straight; his closet identity as a drag queen lies dormant yet.

Old J. Edgar would be cute, here on parade, in a beige chiffon dress and topaz spike heels. Or something... funky chic, maybe a gold lame tank top under a buttery khaki vest embroidered with canaries, and primrose sequined satin slacks. Or lemon yellow velvet bell-bottoms. I keep seeing him chromatically invested in yellowish hues.

Or a saffron robe.

The agents usher me into the inner sanctum of the FBI's command center. I'm left in a disorderly office and told to wait.

After an eternity, another office.

More waiting.

When my captors reappear, they joke more than I expect. They're actually human, with everyday personal triumphs and tragedies sculpted into their faces; but they take their mission seriously.

The heels of U.S. law enforcement commence crunching through my ranch dreams. The strobe flash from my mug shots leaves me blinking at green and black checkerboards in the air. While I'm fingerprinted, the words, "convicted felon" ring between my ears.

A stark consultation room.

A long worn conference table.

Proliferating reams of file folders.

Shifting rows of condemnatory faces.

The prolonged interrogation batters me.

The fluorescent lights drain me.

My inquisitors develop Dali-esque expressions, icy, examining me like the mad doctors in my recurrent childhood nightmare.

Was it desire for recognition that drove me to this?

They want to know everything. It will take weeks.

The FBI's amazement itself is a thing to behold.

They're dumbstruck by the breadth and sophistication of our eavesdropping network, vowing they've never seen its like in this region. Even in my beleaguered state, they often strike me as quite lovely, fighting for their cause, as we fought for ours.

Evidently, I know more about electronics than their so-called technical expert, which makes no sense. Perhaps he's playing dumb, or works for another agency. His face gives away nothing.

These guys like intrigue more than I do.

They ask several times about "the Hitler tape," but I know nothing of it.

Entire rooms overflow with ranch evidence.

The agents lead me in, to identify things.

I notice a pretzel maze of glass pipettes next to a miniature stainless

steel oven that resembles a surgeon's autoclave- maybe it was used to cook up the salmonella salad special; it piques my curiosity but no, I can't identify this stuff.

There's plenty I do recognize: Michel's miracle phone-tapping metal trunk, dozens of microphones, miles of wire, stacks of recorders from our many installations, piles of Billy Boxes, my library, trunkloads of tapes.

Identifying the tapes, I come across the spanking scene I overheard in the ranch hotel. I hold the tape up, saying, "You should listen to this one- a hot sex scene- this guy spanks a woman while he gets her off."

I'm enjoying this.

The agents stare at me noncommittally, stonefaced and mute, but I'm sure they'll give the spanking tape a spin later.

I am the perfect stoolie.

I find myself unburdened, relieved to be disclosing the truth.

So much easier than the constant lying.

I learn as much from the agents as they do from me.

I discover that by disabling the fence around Bhagwan's house on those eerie moonlit nights, I unknowingly opened the way for would-be assassins of Bhagwan's personal companion, Vivek. They planned to drill up into her room from underneath the house, and inject her through a hole in the floorboards.

Insanity.

Bhagwan's physician was in fact poisoned right after Satsang, and he almost died. One of the moms executed the traitorous act, in the confusion of the exiting crowd, wielding a poison ring outfitted with a tiny hypodermic needle. I wonder if she wore it on her wedding finger.

And yes, the Share-a-Home program was contrived to increase the ranch's voting capacity; irrational, as the election occurred prior to the mandatory six months waiting period for new voters.

Sheela didn't let details stand in her way.

How could I have missed what was going on?

The salad bar poisoning in the Dalles formed an alternative ruse to attacking the water system. I wonder if my failure to obtain blueprints from that City Hall clerk was a factor. The goal: again, to sway the election, in this instance by incapacitating the opposition's voters. Utter madness.

The innocuous photographs of a country house, which I helped to develop, showcase the home of Oregon's Attorney General. I'm told Sheela's gang planned to assassinate him. My botched false ID mission saved me from purchasing a murder weapon.

I wonder if the FBI's attributions are accurate.

Could they be wrong?

Or lying?

Some things they refuse to talk about, letting my questions fall flat into a maddening silence. They won't corroborate my hypothesis that Puja

actually engineered the salmonella poisoning. They mention a large number of Valium prescriptions, but won't elucidate. They can't, or won't, explain the conjunctivitis scare. This is Ludlum and le Carre all over again.

It strikes me- how my story encompasses the ingredients of a classical Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. I became the victim of my own hubris, and my tragic flaw, a James Bond lust for power, precipitated my demise.

Tragedies build to a point of no return, and the apex at which my fate as protagonist was inexorably sealed occurred when I recognized the guilt of the two moms on the newscast, and started to leave the ranch; but I chose to continue despite realizing I'd become a terrorist.

In plainer theatrical terms, I missed my exit cue.

Simpler yet, I should have run like a rabbit.

But the tragedy, like tragedies are, was inevitable.

However, unlike Hamlet's final scene, a stage littered with dead bodies, in this drama no one sustained serious injury; a scourge of bad feelings, a rash of enmity, a glut of dashed dreams, but no pile of bloody corpses to gratify the audience.

It is strange, with all the danger, threats, and subterfuge, besides some sickness from poisonings, all that happened was just: craziness.

Even in my despair, I kid with the FBI.

"Come on guys, we are not a cult. Any more than the Catholic Church. Look at the Catholic mass, with its symbols and rituals, icons and incantations. It's like a pagan witches' sabbath."

"But," says an agent, "look what you were brainwashed into doing."

I detest the fact, and am loath to admit it, but he has a point.

"I guess you're right," I say, "we were conditioned to see the outside world as antagonistic- our whole way of thinking was combative. It was always them against us. On the other hand, the Catholic Church brainwashes you from birth. They instill a deep-rooted subconscious fear of God in you. Then you spend your life in fear of the devil, of your sexuality, of your original sin."

"And you haven't been living in fear? What about your freedom? Your freedom was completely taken away by Bhagwan."

I wonder to myself if people in organized religions ever experience the inner freedom that I find in meditation. They must, maybe through prayer. But I never felt it in the Episcopal church. How confusing it is.

Bhagwan says freedom is an internal state, unrelated to external circumstances.

But Bhagwan's experience and mine are two different things.

He's not responsible for my mistakes.

And it's hopeless to pursue this discussion.

Neither the FBI agents nor I have a clue what the truth is behind these differences.

I drop the subject.

Another office.

How many more offices?

In this one, scribbling away, hunches my probation officer, Mr. Looney.

Thick rimmed glasses on a rugged John Wayne face.

He wears the stern aura of a self-made man, mildly imperious, but his voice holds kindness in it.

He motions me into a seat and continues writing.

I sit waiting, trying to conceive of a way to work the phrase Looney Toons into the conversation. But I can't get inspired.

My eyes rove languidly round. I sense my psyche merging with the perpetual old brownness of these dingy government offices.

I become one with the grey steel filing cabinets.

I am the stacks of off-white forms and dog-eared yellowing file folders, little paper Empire State Buildings rising arbitrarily to fill space. I see the entire galaxy revolving ground messy offices, which emit stellar gases that condense into spacetime events.

It's the chaos that breeds order.

Gaye's universal theory of officehood.

The ten thousand offices.

Mr. Looney looks up from his desk.

"So you're Rajesh. I've read your case folder. You're a talented young man. I've talked to others in your group. You're not the type of criminals I'm used to seeing. You've done terrible things to the state of Oregon. But there were mitigating circumstances. Most of you have been exploited. Sheela used you."

"Does that mean you don't think I should go to prison?"

"Do you think you should go to prison?"

"No."

"Well, I don't think incarceration in prison is right for you either, but you need to resign from this cult, and rejoin the ordinary world."

The C-word again.

We are not a cult.

But I don't say it.

I don't say that we're just lovers, struck with a divine madness.

At least he doesn't want to lock me up.

His recommendations to the judge will be a major factor.

"So what are you going to do with me?".

"That's up to the judge. I may suggest probation. Possibly some time in a halfway house, which you can serve anywhere in the U.S. that you want. But this cult- the guru is highly suspect. And Sheela's a murderess. She owes the state of Oregon some prison time. The group- it's just not a healthy environment."

"Well, I don't feel a part of it anymore anyway. But I am thankful to Bhagwan for what I learned about meditation."

From his officious frown I can tell I've taken a wrong tack.

I change the subject.

"Do you know how the judge feels about my case?"

"I can't second guess the judge. You'll have to wait and see."

I visit the District Attorney.

My God, his office is clean as a whistle and neat as a pin.

I have to re-write my whole theory of universal officehood.

The District Attorney's hair is perfect. He's a straight shooter, ambitious.

He believes in justice, right and wrong, black and white.

I enjoy his curiosity, though my value system currently consists of shades of grey, with fuzzy edges.

I have nothing to hide now, so it's easy to answer his questions.

"You're lucky to be alive," he says, "after messing with that gang in Seattle."

"I know. My guardian Angels worked overtime on that one."

He diverts the conversation, asking whether a certain Edison technician, whose name keeps popping up, was part of our eavesdropping network.

I tell him the truth.

"The man is innocent. Julian had him do some shady things, but he wasn't one of us. What little he did, he did under duress."

"So you think I should forego pursuing him?"

"Yes. He's basically a good person. It'd be a shame to drag him into it.

"Okay. Thanks. I'll consider what you said."

We part congenially.

In another office, I wait.

My next inquisitor, ogre of ogres, the head of the INS.

I've often heard this man's name uttered with fear and disdain by Sheela and her crowd. I expect him to have horns, and cloven hooves.

Instead, although not exactly charitable, he's benignly amicable, and portly, somewhat W.C. Fields-ish, with a good sense of humor and glasses that won't sit straight. My fraudulent marriage story is straightforward, no surprise, and again, I can tell the whole truth so help me God.

Back to Sam's, thankfully messy, office.

A snag.

Rajneesh Legal Services runs out of money, the ranch corporations one and all now foundering in a maelstrom of bankruptcy injunctions.

Sam elects to continue my defense without further recompense, approaching my now charity case with the same zeal as before. It's not altruism, or benevolence, that spurs him onward; he's bewitched by the inscrutable contradictions inherent in our case; and I think he enjoys my blah-blah. For whatever reason, boy... I am grateful.

I go before the grand jury.

The everyday people who've been corralled as jurors sit rigidly, mesmerized by the epic tale unfolding before them.

They look like holograms in a video game.

I perch on an uncomfortable chair, deliver my testimony.

The dumbstruck jurors strive to make sense of it all: this phantasmagorical parade of sensitive, well-educated people confessing to a shocking array of crimes.

It takes less time than I anticipate.

But the facts are clear.

The indictments are inevitable.

And I'm toast.

"Loneliness is absence of the other.
Aloneness is presence of oneself. Aloneness
is very positive. It is a presence,
overflowing presence."
- "The Discipline of Transcendence, Vol. 1 - Osho

Chapter Ten: MIRDAD

The ranch, stranger than ever.

At the gate to Jesus Grove.

I look through the chain-link fence.

The compound seems to be waiting for something.

The lawn sprinkler's fan of droplets superimposes on the satellite dish behind it.

The big round antenna looks like a fallen giant's eyeball shedding tears.

Even as I watch, circular discs like this use the geometric properties of the parabola to focus information-bearing waves into millions of brain-dying craniums.

Does the venerable Euclid know we've bastardized his revered parabolic conic section into a techno trash can, a cosmic catcher's mitt for puerile game-shows? With sandwiched subliminal frames, you're unaware of the suggestions planted in your subconscious mind.

It's even trite now to remark how subtle its grip is. I hate this fucking world.

A scant figure materializes in the doorway to Jesus Grove.

Michel expands in my field of vision as he approaches.

Agitated, he says, "Bhagwan's been arrested!"

"Oh my God!"

"It's true. He was at an airport in Charlotte, North Carolina. Out on the runway. A few sannyasins were with him. They were re-fueling their plane. They say he was fleeing the country."

"Christ! Is he okay? What'd they arrest him for?"

"I'm not sure," says Michel.

"That's insane. They can't do that. What law was he breaking?"

"Like I said," says Michel, "I don't know."

"Maybe there's an agreement with the INS that he can't leave till his case is decided. God, they'll nail him to a cross before it's all over."

With Bhagwan incarcerated, the ranch morale sinks lower.

We hear he's being transferred across the U.S. on buses, from prison to prison.

Why are they doing that?

Why don't they just send him back here on a plane?

The days of his captivity creep painfully by.

In a newspaper, I see the picture of Bhagwan at the airport, at gunpoint and in chains. The government agents encircling him grimly clutch their weapons.

But Bhagwan smiles calmly.

In Jesus Grove, I find the Hollywood crowd, now in command, to be quite personable, not the ignoble, venomous, degenerates that Julian had led me to

believe they were. They're shocked at the tales I tell them about invading their privacy, and they're not wholly forgiving, but who would be?

I don't know what to do here on the ranch.
I go to Portland, just for something to do.
Cracks in the sidewalk.
Cold wind.
The wind, the wind.

Whiling away the late autumn afternoon, I wander through the town square amphitheater, descending the tiers of steps now deserted by the lunch crowd.

Desolation. Litter.
No sun in the grey nothingness sky today.
No cyan, no cobalt, no ultramarine.
No rays of false hope.
Or too many false hopes, for this homeless nihilist.
I AM homeless.

The ranch is no longer my home. Nor is Portland. Nor is Virginia, where I grew up. Nor are the many places I've lived. Not San Francisco or New York. Not London or Florence. Not Spain or India.

There's nowhere to be.
It's just one big white sky.

"White sky" is the title of a song I wrote, back in 1975, The chorus goes:

White sky white sky
White sky white sky
I can see you you you
I can see you you you
Sayin' that someone has died
Sayin' that someone has died.

What good are songs? I just wallow in them.
What good are friends? I just lose them.
Priya is gone. Everyone's gone.
Julian is gone. Sheela and the moms are gone.
Even though they were dishonest, they were my friends.

Why did I love them so much, when they shit on me and used me? The horrible truth- I used them to be with Bhagwan. Anything to sit at his feet.

But after all these years of study and meditation and work, I'm more of an asshole than ever. If I'd followed a different path, by now I could be a successful artist, or a published writer, maybe even a rock star.

But what am I?

I am a goddamn useless disciple with a felony conviction.

Michel's also on the verge of leaving. He doesn't need to take the rap.

He can escape to his native Canada, and because electronic eavesdropping, being a non-violent crime, is not extraditable, he'll be safe just over the border. With Michel gone, and Sheela and Julian out of the picture, I'll be Oregon's main scapegoat for the eavesdropping crimes.

Those trunkloads of tapes. My fingerprints everywhere.

For each instance I picked up the headphones, for each act of listening, I can get five years. Suppose they waive my right to the plea bargain? They can do whatever they damn well want. My prison sentence will be ten thousand years.

I walk, aimlessly up the street, head down.

The wind whirls litter scraps around me in nose-dive dips.

I glance up to see Bhagwan's picture on a newsstand.

Back in Oregon after two unexplained weeks in captivity and a quick trial, he's been deported from the USA on charges of immigration fraud.

In the photo, he waves, smiling as he boards a plane.

He is gone. Well gone.

And I am, just, gone.

Demolished by headlines. Bundled away like newspapers.

Bhagwan, my only true friend- at your feet, I danced in ecstasy, sank into bliss, glimpsed peace. And you left me in the dust. You son-of-a-bitch.

But I can't stay with blaming him.

Who knows why he let it happen?

You can never second guess a master.

All I can do is flounder, in horrendous loneliness.

Only the lonely- Dumb dumb-dumb dumb-dumb dumb de-doo-da.

Goddamn songs.

Whatcha gonna do when your troubles they get like mine?

Turn and face the strange.

At midnight, near the Hotel Rajneesh, I wait in a parking lot.

My nose is numb.

I blow on my hands to keep warm.

My breath creates frosty clouds that rush away in the wind.

The tops of cars glimmer in the chrome orange fluorescence from the tall parking-lot lights; high above me, around the light fixtures, kaleidoscoping fragments of light swirl in scintillating haloes.

I watch the sky.

Strain to see stars.

I think of the astrological computer for children that I always wanted to design and market. It would be simple, with an invisible operating system, and the celestial computational algorithms in read-only memory, the signs and glyphs and aspects integrated into a bank of function keys. And using the

accurate sidereal system, children could experiment, watch their lives mirrored in the stars.

But it will never happen.

I am no longer an astrologer.

Nor am I an engineer, or an entrepreneur.

I am a busted disciple, living in dread.

And this is a moment I've dreaded.

Michel is leaving tonight.

I clock him approaching, down the street, indistinct from his shadow.

With Bhagwan out of here, Michel is out of here.

We both knew he would leave if the man left.

I make jokes and pretend to be happy, trying to ignore my looming, irresistible future. Michel's overjoyed to be escaping to freedom. He's whisking his girlfriend away with him. We keep it short, except for a long hug.

"Remember Whiteboy," he says, "we did it because we loved it."

"Yeah right. We just picked up on the energy. See you when I see you."

"Yeah, see you when I see you."

He disappears, grinning into the blustery coal black night. Canada-bound.

I pray that he and his beloved lady make it safely over the border.

Things are moving so fast.

And my heart is so broken.

On the ranch again.

Mary is busier than ever- she's as dedicated as she is efficient- helping with Edison's repair schedule. Life goes on for the small group that remains. There are still copiers and typewriters to be fixed, audio and videotapes to be produced. I could assist, but I'm too depressed.

The sloth within me crawls to the surface; I sink into lassitude.

I don't want to work.

I've worked a lifetime's worth in the past three years.

Forget work. I want to play.

But there's no one to play with.

Anxiety invades my depression.

Surely I'm going to jail.

I think it's time to leave the country.

I want to play, but not the martyr. Not the penitent citizen who went astray.

Not the spy who got caught red-handed.

I'm going to Canada, like Michel. No leavin' on a jet plane- a Greyhound

bus will do fine. I'll change my name later with a black-market passport. It can be done. I'm grabbing my girl, and leaving my mala, and the U.S., forever. I'm sure I can find a way back to see my family too. I'm resourceful.

Suddenly having a goal rousts me from my torpid state.

Mary is ready to leave with me.

We're out of here.

The Portland Greyhound bus station.

An unearthly ceiling-scape of lights and ads and steel beams.

Amorphous travelers with no faces between their ears.

Slovenly vagrants asleep on benches.

My hands shake when I purchase the tickets.

We arrive at the Canadian border about 4 a.m.

The customs officers are cordial, and we slip right over to freedom.

Thank you, Lord.

Within a few hours, we're carousing with Michel over cappuccino, laughing carelessly at the nightmare we've left behind. We spend the day seeing the sights.

Just picking up on the energy.

Vancouver.

What a captivating city.

Clean fresh air.

Aesthetically fanciful skyline.

Backdrop of pale fuchsia snow-capped mountains.

Eye-catching modular apartments, designed right down to the water's edge.

Harbors abustle with sleek pleasure-craft and ferryboats.

The clear sky, spanned by the pinkish-grey moire patterns of bridges.

The open air market, awash with sparkling faces amid racks of green and yellow and purple vegetables. Flowers of every color.

Three girls, effervescent, all in red hats, stroll arm in arm shelling pistachios.

The smell of chestnuts roasting, and freshly baked bread.

The ten thousand joys of life.

I'm having too much fun.

Mary and I rent a closet-sized room in a crowded sannyasin house. It's chaotic- the bathroom and kitchen are always mobbed- there are too many people under one roof.

New guys flirt with her.

New girls flirt with me.

I feel threatened, that I'll lose her to another man, or myself to another woman. Mary's sincerity- something I love so much about her- starts to wear thin. She withdraws. I fall into depression. How to remain lighthearted when you're running from the law? I don't even want sex, because I can't get

into the bathroom to have a shower, and who wants to have sex when they're filthy?

Outside, there's a freak of nature occurring.

Ordinarily, Vancouver winters are mild, but this year the temperature hovers around twenty degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Fucking cold. No amount of clothing alleviates my suffering on the inclement streets- merely taking a walk in this arctic surprise hammers my joints and sears my lungs.

After two weeks contemplating my fate as an international fugitive, I decide that it sucks.

On the phone to Sam, my lawyer back in Portland.

"This is Rajesh."

"Rajesh! Where are you?"

"I'm in Vancouver."

"British Columbia?"

"Yes. I decided I couldn't handle it."

"I've been wondering about you," says Sam.

"I've flown the coop."

"Well, what are you going to do? Are you coming back?"

"I'm considering it. Do you think anybody's missed me, or knows I'm here?"

Sam puts me on hold while he checks his calendar.

"Rajesh? You're fine. Your court date's still over a month away. You haven't missed any appointments. The authorities should have no knowledge that you've been gone."

"I know I've asked you a dozen times, but what are my chances of staying out of prison? Does it look the same to you now?"

"I still doubt that you'll go to prison. Your probation officer mentioned the possibility of a half-way house. But I think you'll just get probation."

"You're relatively sure?"

"Well, no guarantees of course, the law being the law, but I don't think you'll be incarcerated."

"Okay Sam. Thank you so much. I'm gonna head back there."

"There's no need to come here yet. Go see your folks for the holidays, Rajesh. Call me when you get back to Portland. Merry Christmas."

"And to you too, Sam. And thanks again."

Another anonymous Greyhound.

Mary and I slip back into the The U.S.

But she's finished with the ranch.

Enough.

We stop in Seattle.

In a phone booth, she arranges to join a sannyasin house in Marin County, California, and books a flight for tomorrow to San Francisco. When she hands me her new phone number, the reality that we're parting ways sets in.

I call my parents collect. They're thrilled that I want to come for Christmas, and promise to have a ticket waiting at the Seattle airport tomorrow.

My last night with Mary, for who knows how long.

I want to spend our last hours, just the two of us, making exquisite love and melting in a romantic embrace, but we end up on a sannyasin crash pad floor, surrounded by piles of sleeping bodies. Our lovemaking is quiet and brief, not the extended tantric fireworks pageant I'd hoped for.

In the morning, at the airport waiting for her flight.

I complain, "I don't want to lose you. You're my baby pudding."

"I know, but I have to go. I've got to learn to take care of myself in the world."

"I understand. But I don't know if I'll see you again. I could go to prison for five years."

"Don't talk like that. You're not going to prison."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

"I'm scared."

"You have to trust."

When we kiss, our last kiss, a feeling of déjà vu washes through me- a peculiar sadness, like I've said this goodbye before. I watch her walk down the ramp to board her flight, and she doesn't look back.

I trudge off.

Drink a disconsolate coffee.

Wait for my plane to Virginia.

Christmas day.

My family goes into shock, disbelief, when they learn the truth.

I tell them everything- no more lying.

I'm surprised when they recover quickly and proceed to put on the holiday cheer.

But below the family ritual veneer, my mother broods, devastated that the marriage to Hansa was a hoax. She strives to forgive me. It kills me to see the pain I've caused her. How can I forgive myself? Assuage this guilt? In my ruminations, the lies eclipse the actions they covered.

Christmas always depresses me anyway.

When I was a kid, this holiday- holy day- was a source of joy and delight.

But now, every year there's something suicidal that invades my being,

like a gloomy black and white Bergman film, or an LSD trip gone bad. It's a curious irony: the celebration of one of the world's greatest lights precipitates this dark haze within me.

My family's love for me seems boundless.

By the time the new year arrives, even my mom has softened into acceptance.

These people amaze me.

When I see their faces, still full of warmth and welcome after all I've done, I have to retreat to the bathroom and let the tears fall.

The crying feels good. It's healing me.

But there's still no cure for this loneliness.

New Year's Day feels pointless- so what if Janus, the two-faced god for whom January is named, looks forward and back- he does that every day, and every day is a dull spoke on an interminable wheel of pessimism.

Before returning to Oregon, I call Mary in California.

"Hey you," I say, "It's me. How are you?"

"Rajesh?"

"Yeah... it's me. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine," I say.

"Well, I'm busy right now. And someone in the house needs the phone. I got a job though. It's only cleaning houses. But at least it's a paycheck."

"How is the place you're living? Are they good people?"

"Yeah fine. Look, I've got to go."

"Okay. I'm flying back to Oregon tomorrow. My trial's in a week. I'll call you from Portland."

"Alright, see you."

"Yeah. Ciao."

She sounds so distant. I'm losing her...

I'll call Priya in New York.

I still remember her phone number after all these years.

"Hey Rajesh!" exclaims Priya. "You're not in prison. Yay!"

"Not yet. We'll see... I'm leaving for the west coast tomorrow to collect my stuff at the ranch and then go to trial in Portland. It's not really a trial. I'm already guilty. I'll just receive my sentencing."

"What's the ranch like now?"

"Almost deserted. Kind of nice in a way. But really, it's nothing without Bhagwan. And my friends are mostly gone- except Nikhilananda. He's fun."

"Rajesh, my dear, you have one friend in the world. And that's Bhagwan."

"I know."

"So- do you have a lawyer?"

"Yeah. I got lucky. Existence brought me a wonderful lawyer- he doesn't think I'll go to prison."

"That's great. You must've been hanging out with the FBI. How divine. I'll bet it's exciting."

"Yeah right. Actually, they were okay. They believe what they believe, but they weren't heavy with me. They didn't throw me up against the wall, like in the movies. Do you know where Bhagwan is?"

"He's on someone's sailboat. He can't find a country that will take him in."

"Well, that's what he gets for being a troublemaker. But I'm sure he could care less. He's blissed out wherever he is."

"That's right," she says. "You know, Rajesh, I had a revelation about the master. He didn't rip us off. We created it. It doesn't matter what Bhagwan knew. What matters is that he showed us ourselves. And we had an experience beyond your wildest imagination. Bhagwan's not just a powerful being, he's the most fucking outrageous master that ever lived. He's so magnificent, I can't stand it."

"Totally. But there's a lot of sannyasins that don't agree with us. They're still blaming Bhagwan, or Sheela."

"And they will forever, honey. How silly we are. But who cares? Fuck them."

"Right on," I say, laughing. "Remember that simultaneous flash we had when we saw him start the Rolls-Royce?"

"How could I forget... that divine instant. Something... When he turned the ignition key, just, so totally turning that key, doing nothing else. Oh God, could you die? Someday we'll be that completely in the moment."

"Well, until then... I could spend hours on this phone, but I've got to start packing to go meet my fate."

"Okay, beloved Swami. Good luck with the government."

"Thanks. See you when I see you."

"Yes my dear. See you when I see you."

On the plane back to Portland for my trial.

Returning from the lavatory, I randomly pick a section of newspaper from the magazine rack, feeling a vague sense of duty to become informed now that I'm back in the real world.

I find that I've chosen the business section.

Damn. This economics stuff is the most incomprehensible of all.

How does anyone make sense out of an economics textbook?

I get lost right after the law of supply and demand, and even that doesn't make sense. Is there really not enough to go around? Or are we too busy making money, and weapons, to feed ourselves properly?

The man next to me peruses the sports page.

Dark landscapes under his eyes indicate he hasn't slept.

He glances periodically at my paper's stock exchange column.

I turn to speak to him, instinctively reaching to arrange my mala.

I'm not wearing it.

"Do you ever wonder," I ask him, "how much money there is, all total, in the world? There must be a finite amount. And where is it all?"

"Never thought about it."

"And since we threw out the gold standard, how can money have any value? There's nothing to back it up. It doesn't stand for anything. It's just data bits moving around in computers now."

"Never thought about that either."

I give up on him.

But our money system?

I thought the U.S. founding fathers insisted that a centralized governmental banking system would become oppressive. Now the Federal Reserve Bank can print money whenever it feels like it. Total control. Whatever happened to "We the people...?"

I listen to the jet engines, pulling air and pushing metal.

An energy and motion exchange.

The stock exchanges.

The celebrated deities of our modern mercantile madness.

Who actually decides what's worth what on the stock exchange board?

The experts say there's a multitude of factors involved.

Little of this, little of that.

The investment routine is a smokescreen of busyness to occupy us while the bankers grab the lion's share. Consumers grovel through cycles of easy credit followed by inflation, hypnotized by fluctuating numbers, while the elite buy more yachts and build more mansions for their grandchildren.

Is there a mathematical definition for inflation? Or is it just a word foisted on us, to convince us that our money's buying power should decrease every year, and that untenably exorbitant price increases are unavoidable.

Surely I am guilty of oversimplification, but it is simple: the whole system of free trade is a global network of oppression.

I fall asleep with the business section on my lap, and arrive in Portland dejected, incapable of making heads or tails out of this world. At the Hotel Rajneesh, I find that there's no ride to the ranch till the Islander flies tomorrow afternoon.

I have to wait.

The waiting.

The weight of the loneliness.

I wander Portland's streets.

The afternoon, cold and bleak.

Winter's darkness sets in fast.

Down in the town square amphitheater, I notice an attractive woman, milling around. She reminds me of that girl- the one with whom I had blind sex during the group in Poona. The same black gypsy ringlets. I sidle across and

down the wide expanse of steps, stealing glances at this lady.

She warrants attention.

This is no feckless waif.

She's comely and svelte, pedigreed and accessorized, wrapped secure against the cold in taupe conservative chic.

She looks real good.

I like her black fedora, jauntily canted to one side, and her sexy black high heels.

But the idea of sex abruptly seems absurd.

The Portland airport, the private hangar area.

On the tarmac, groups of sannyasins with luggage.

The wind, blowing hard.

The Rajneesh Air Islander sits, preparing for the ranch shuttle.

The propeller sputters to life, settles into a warm-up idle. I climb aboard, thankful to be getting underway. The clink of the safety belt latching.

I watch goodbyes on the runway. Faces wear the pain of shattered dreams, the intensity of separation, the relinquishing of friends to divergent paths.

I watch the pilot up in the cockpit.

A sensitive, nervous young man.

Shaky hands.

He looks tired under his baseball cap. A beautiful soul, but in my estimation, he's not firing on all eight cylinders during the pre-flight instrument check.

I don't like this.

This pilot is undependable.

I can feel it.

I am getting off this plane.

I ease the seat belt buckle open, suppressing its telltale click.

Half out of the seat, frowning.

I notice the bulkheads, the fuselage structure, the cramped cabin space. I imagine how this hollow tube of fragile membranes will fold and shatter on impact, like a little girl's China doll dropped on a sidewalk.

Peering inside my mind's eye to see if I sense a pending crash, I get a picture of myself arriving at the ranch, and force myself back down into the seat.

The flight home passes through dense clouds.

Staring out the window, the lack of visibility is unnerving.

Severe turbulence rocks the plane.

I hold my breath all the way.

The ranch- I am walking the streets of a ghost town.

I discover that in my absence I've been relocated. Oh God, whoever transported my things- did they look at my porno scrapbooks?

Dark days.

I hack my way through brutal loneliness, and the suicidal ideation returns. Leering phantoms arise, inside and out. Perversity pervades my being, churning inside like an infestation of maggots. Life's challenges become unsurmountable obstacles.

I should just blow these brains right out now.

Who would care?

The trouble is, people do care.

If they didn't, bang.

But it would be a bad choice- I'd have to float in astral purgatory till I absorbed the remorse, and then I'd be dragged into another lifetime on this haunted planet.

My final day.

Trudging through the mud to the mall for caffeine, missing La Noche, I run into a construction worker I know.

"Hey Rajesh," he says, "that's some set of books you've got. The ones with the pictures in them. We looked through them when we moved your things."

"Yeah, right," I laugh, embarrassed.

Alone over cappuccino.

I should be having a meal. I need nourishment, not more stimulation.

A sudden fear arises.

My porno scrapbooks may be tainted with the AIDS virus. I tell myself: the fear is irrational; but... no one knows how the virus transfers, and some of the magazines were used, and who knows what deviants touched those pages?

I plow through the mud, back to my room, wrap the big stack of scrapbooks and albums in a black plastic garbage bag, and dump them in a trash can. I'll never learn the mysteries of sex, or transcendence, by looking at that crass perverted shit anyway.

On the bus, leaving the ranch.

I watch the reddish-brown ranch buildings pass by for the last time.

I watch the yellow-ochre mountains for the last time.

This is the end.

I should be filled with emotion, but I feel numb.

The Mirdad reception center slips behind me.

It should have been called the Mirdad deception center.

Mirdad was one of many great enlightened masters I'd never heard of 'till I began listening to Bhagwan.

Fuck Mirdad.

Fuck Bhagwan, and the grand story of his enlightenment.

Fuck enlightenment.

The bus rattles up through the hills.

There is only the road, and the leafless trees, bare skeletons against the blank sky.

As we pass the white marble Rajneeshpuram sign, I burst into tears.

In the Portland hotel, I await my sentencing. Tomorrow is the day.

I force myself to eat.

In the basement cafeteria, one of Sheela's undercover moms screeches and rants, subjecting all the occupants to a loud harangue proclaiming her innocence. It's about making noise. She refuses to plead guilty. I admire her spunk and her mettle, but she must be crazy. The wheels of justice turn, sometimes sluggishly, but they inexorably turn. I may be morose and lackadaisical, but at least I know I fucked up, and I'm willing to endure the consequences.

Evening.

Possibly my last free one.

Accompanying three sannyasins, I see "Kiss of the Spider Woman."

The nightmarish reality of the imprisonment ordeal unreels before me.

I exit the theater, infused with misery.

Back in my room, I call Mary in California.

She sounds distant, evasive, even curt.

I hang up with a sigh.

Suddenly I am ablaze with rage, kicking furniture, throwing pillows, rolling on the floor, hating God, hating the system, hating the whole life that's tricked me into this blind alley.

The trial.

The lights in the courtroom are too bright.

It all spins around me: the expensive carved wood paneling, the flags and the stars and the stripes and the plaques and the crests and the eagles and the rows of people in suits standing at attention; and above it all, high on his dais, the judge, stern and somber behind his schoolmaster spectacles.

Sam, my intrepid attorney, counsels me to make no statement.

The U.S. justice system slams me with a sentence of four months in a halfway house, purportedly to rehabilitate me, to integrate me back into society. I'm also given five years probation, and required to secure gainful employment.

Get a job.

They had to say it.

The judge advises that my sentence is more serious than the others in my group because I have special talents and I've abused them.

What horseshit. Because I grok the difference between voltage and current, I'm subjected to four months in a halfway house, while all those moms that did the listening get to walk away free?

Outrage kicks in.

I am innocent.

I've committed crimes, but there's this innocence inside me, I swear it. I'm a good person. Exonerate me.

Remorse kicks in.

I am guilty.

I've damaged the state of Oregon, desecrated its land, abused its people. I'm a bad person. Punish me.

Virtue and vice. Necro and nice.

Both-And.

Either way, four months in a halfway house beats prison.

Anything beats prison.

I should be on my knees, counting my blessings, thanking the judge. He could have hit me with five years behind bars, getting raped and beaten by misunderstood people with nothing to lose. In a brutal system founded on punishment rather than forgiveness, my sentence can scarcely be termed a slap on the wrist.

As court adjourns, Sam shakes his head, unhappy with the verdict, convinced of its injustice. I'm disappointed for him, thinking how much I appreciate his crusade on my behalf, and how few good deeds go unpunished.

In Sam's office, he says, "I'm sorry the judge nailed you."

"Hey Sam, don't worry about it. I'm not going to prison. That's what's important. I can't thank you enough. You saved my life."

"Well, I enjoyed it. The whole case continues to baffle me. I still wonder how many millions Sheela got away with."

"You know, the people left on the ranch- they gossip about the money Sheela stole. But the poisonings, the murder plots- that's what grosses me out. Who cares about the money? I'd be rich by now if money was my motivation in this life. I'm after something intangible- the peace I've glimpsed through Bhagwan."

"Well then, write your book, make a fortune, and give me the money- since you don't care about it."

"Yeah right. Maybe someday, if I ever find the words to describe Bhagwan's compassion."

"I don't know how compassionate Bhagwan was. I think he could have averted the whole disaster. But you could do justice to the story."

"Well, we'll see. Anyway, thanks again. Someday I'll repay you."

"Don't worry about it. Your case was fun. So how do you feel, now that

it's all over but the crying?"

"The crying feels good... but I feel many things. Relief. Guilt. Exhilaration. Gratitude. Even though it screwed up royally, and I did a lot of bad shit, the ranch years- they've been the best of my life. I got to be with Bhagwan. I got to be part of a fantastic experiment. And I got to play out my secret agent fantasy, I even lived to tell the tale."

Sam laughs.

We rise from our chairs and shake hands.

"See you, Rajesh."

"See you when I see you, Sam."

On the street, feeding coins into a pay-phone, I call Mary.

As I listen to the phone ring, I wonder who else is on the line- I'll never make another call without wondering.

Mary answers. "Hey, it's me," I say.

"Hey you! How are you?"

She sounds happy to hear from me.

"I'm fine," I say. "How is my baby pudding?"

"I'm good. Work is hard, but it's nice here in California. When is your trial?"

"I just came from the courtroom. I got five years."

"What? Five years?"

"Yeah. Five years... on probation."

"Oh my God, you scared me."

"Just kidding. I am a bit of a prankster you know, when I'm not necro. I do have to serve some time- but it's only in a halfway house. Four months. It shouldn't be too bad. Not heavy like prison. They'll let me do it anywhere I want. I'll probably go to Virginia. It'll be easier there, with my family to help me."

"Well at least the worrying is over."

"Yeah," I say, "I miss you so much."

"I miss you too. I've realized how much I miss you... you seem so far away. But I can kiss you through the phone."

"Mmm," I murmur.

"I can feel you inside me," she coos dreamily.

"I'm getting a hard-on."

"Not like that, silly. I mean I can feel you in my heart."

"I know. I'm just playing. But I want to make passionate love to you. Slowly. All night long. Until you're totally exhausted from screaming in ecstasy."

"Mmm," she murmurs.

A long quiet.

Feeling each other across the airwaves.

She breaks the silence.

"I'd better go. Someone in the house is waiting for the phone."

"Okay," I whisper, "I'll call you from Virginia. I'm going to come and find you after I get out of that halfway house. I love you madly."

"I love you, too."

I hang up. Mary is there for me.

But I feel strangely alone.

I notice the dirt-smudged windows in the phone booth.

The broken grey sidewalk, littered with refuse.

The burnt sienna stains under a drainpipe, liked a faded watercolor.

The ten thousand imperfections... are perfect.

Something inside me breaks.

In a rush I am flooded with angelic light, like the love I experienced when I first read those two paragraphs by Bhagwan.

Tears.

For a moment, that nothingness.

One more office.

Mr. Looney, my probation officer, is pleased with the verdict.

"What will you do with your new life?" he asks.

Jokingly I say, "How about a job with the FBI? They could use a man of my talents. I have all of the qualifications they'd want."

"Not really," he says, studying me. "They would appreciate your knowledge and abilities, but you're no good as a witness. When an agent gathers evidence, he has to testify in court. You're a convicted felon. See the problem? You have no credibility."

"Oh well," I say, feigning disappointment.

"But there are other agencies that might use your skills. If you're really interested, I can put you in touch with the right people."

I consider it.

But I shrink at the thought of resuming that lifestyle. The obligatory paranoia, the adrenaline, the stress, the layers of lies. I glimpse an image of the inevitable outcome: my body lying in an alley in Beirut, amid the colorful trash and animal droppings, a 9mm bullet in my brain- another anonymous agent oozing red, hearing the last echoes of the silencer's muffled pop, the fading shouts of the Lebanese children, the receding and unheeding din of nearby traffic.

No, I don't think so.

I'll pass on another tragic espionage career, thanks anyway.

I am sick of being a hero.

I am sick of being a villain.

I am sick of being special.

"No," I say, "I'm tired of snooping around and living in fear. Maybe I'll go back to college and become a teacher."

"I can arrange for you to do your halfway house time anywhere in the U.S."

"I guess I'll go to Virginia. At least I'll have the support of my family there."

"Fine. I'll organize it for you. Call me tomorrow for the particulars. You'll have a probation officer in Virginia, but jurisdiction of your case remains here in Oregon, in my hands. If you have any problems, contact me. And make judicious use of your time there. Find a job as soon as you can."

"Alright then. Anything else I need to know?"

"No. But if you take my advice, you'll be better off disassociating yourself from the cult."

"That's not a problem. I feel disconnected from them anyway."

There is truth to what he says.

My world inside the commune is no more.

I remember Bhagwan saying that everyone's experience of sannyas is different, and the only common thread among them is the connection to the master. The real core of the relationship exists, not between one disciple and another, but between master and disciple.

I will always have Bhagwan in my heart.

But to Mr. Looney, I don't mention my gratitude for Bhagwan's gift of meditation. And for the ranch experience: the opportunity to learn, the intensity of it, the sheer somethingness of it.

I doubt that Mr. Looney will ever understand that Bhagwan could remain in a state of innocence and allow us enough rope to hang ourselves. No, Mr. Looney, like most of the world, needs someone to blame. Unfortunately, many sannyasins share that feeling. They'll probably be enslaved to their blame for years to come.

Mr. Looney hesitates.

"Before you go..." he says. "Have you had a chance to reflect on your actions? Any thoughts about why you did what you did?"

Reasons flash by like words on a game show scoreboard.

I did it because I wanted to stay close to Bhagwan.

I did it because Sheela conditioned my mind.

I did it because the government was trying to destroy us.

I did it because I'm crazy.

I blurt out, "I did it because I loved it."

His face scrunches up, quizzical.

I notice the old brown walls of his office.

The overhead lights, reflected in his glasses.

Shaking his head, he stands up, offering his hand, "I wish you good luck."

"Thank you, Mr. Looney, you've been very kind."

Adios Oregon.

Adios ranch.

It's been wild.

As one Edison friend said, "I expected the ranch to be a nonlinear experience, and it was."

"This is the way of Zen, not to say things to their completion. This has to be understood. It is a very important methodology. Not to say everything means to give an opportunity to the listener to complete it. All answers are incomplete."

- "Joshu, the Lion's Roar" - Osho

Chapter Eleven: OSHO

It's 2001. Fifteen years later.

I sit before my little black laptop, drinking green tea.

I am frustrated.

My hard drive keeps crashing at random intervals, and my cliché filter/generator has developed a glitch; but my exasperation stems from trying to end my story with a satisfying resolution.

My Zen self whispers to be done with it, that this is not a documentary. Do the Zen thing.

Leave the ending as an exercise for the reader.

But the requirements of dramaturgical propriety outcry for a conclusion.

I surrender.

Crank those frames backwards, flashing back.

It's 1985.

The INS not so politely deports Bhagwan on charges of immigration fraud, and the already reduced ranch population dwindles swiftly to nothing. Our beloved city lapses into decay, a modern American ghost town, the deteriorating carcass of a caged animal that tried to break free.

Dozens of countries, including Bhagwan's native India, refuse him entry.

A man without a country, on a sannyasin's sailboat with a modest entourage of devoted friends, he navigates the seas in search of a haven to rest.

After expulsion from a brief refuge in Greece, he ends up landing in Uruguay- or is it the other way around? Reports vary. Eventually, India grants him permission to return to his ashram in Poona, whereupon he changes his name to Osho, which means "keeper of the temple."

Detractors say Osho is changing his name to hide his past.

I don't think so. He's doing it for the fun of it.

But no one will ever know the reason.

You can never second guess a master.

The FBI cranks the wheels of justice, tracking Sheela down in Germany. She, and most of her gang indicted for violent crimes, spend time in prison. The extraditions, the trials, the prosecutions, the sentences- the entire judicial melee drags on for years- I can't keep track of all the details.

There they go again- those ubiquitous details.

Julian skates free, as electronic eavesdropping is not an extraditable

crime, and somehow nothing else catches up to him. As he said, he manages to walk through the shit without getting any on his shoes.

Our mayor, Sheela's pet who remained behind and was in on the worst of it, sings like a bird but does two years behind bars anyway. The authorities subpoena me to testify against some of my friends, a drastically painful experience.

Gag me with a trout.

A ramshackle dwelling in Virginia.

The halfway house.

I call it the happy house.

It reeks of industrial disinfectant.

The floors creak and groan, sag in places under my feet.

But those marvelous cicadas buzz away outside, and the verdant foliage of maples shades my window.

My roommate, the only other white face in the place, robs convenience stores with a knife. He's afraid of guns. Eternally sullen and inert under a backwards baseball cap, he checks out of our roach-ridden Hotel Cannedfoodia the day after I arrive.

Doing my stint of penance "inside" these dilapidated confines: it's uncomfortable, especially for a vegetarian, but the cook is a sweetheart and makes me extra veggies. It's trying, coping with the bureaucratic tangle of triplicate forms, and intimidating, being among the thieves and the murderers.

I tolerate it.

I am adaptable.

But strife is a way of life here.

Through my door bursts the hulking prize-fighter from the next room, dressed in yellow boxers under a red plaid bathrobe.

He threatens to kill me, driven mad by the sound of my typewriter.

This does not look good for the very white boy.

The small social worker with the big Afro, on duty at the desk out front - he's not much help.

I summon every ounce of fake fortitude and bogus bravado, and put on my career's most radical performance of palliative Ministerial bullshit, which saves me from a hospital trip to reconstruct my facial bones.

I become best friends with a Black Muslim from the Moorish Science Temple.

We get along famously.

We both seek spiritual goals within systems that strike fear in the

common populace; we're both misfits who've gone down the tubes; and there's a balmy joy in our commiseration, the finding of a kindred soul. He's boiled the whole of political science down to one sentence: Whoever has the guns, gets the money.

Toward the end of my stay, my friend receives a 36 year prison sentence for robbing a grocery store, having made off with \$140 for his daughter's birthday presents, and having made the larger mistake of committing his crime in an all-white county where the jury unsurprisingly turned up all white.

This is after all, Virginia, bastion of fear-driven southern conservatism, where the lauded pious elders and snotty scions of old money have made sure that over 90% of those executed were African-Americans. Appearances have changed, but the oppression of slavery remains intact.

I decide to go with the truth on my resume.

Previous employment: "Edison Electronics" in Rajneeshpuram, Oregon.

Well, not the whole truth.

Not what I actually did.

I send out 35 copies. No one calls.

And finally, an interview.

The retail computer franchise looks like a rug store from a distance.

Inside, the decor is Alfred Hitchcock meets Sears; but there's a lot of foxy women in the cubicles.

An easygoing red-haired young man, a technical wizard, hires me.

A miracle.

He confides shortly thereafter that his sole criterion for interviewing me was to find out for his wife what a Rajneeshee looks like.

Isn't that conveeeenient?

I enthusiastically reinstate myself in this dreaded world of gainful employment, becoming rapidly PC-literate.

Why not?

Be here now.

The ranch is the dead past, and my workaholic passion is equally applicable to socially acceptable activity, and these people give me paychecks for absurdly few hours of labor per week.

I grow to love my esteemed work associates, learning to forgive them for living their lives through the TV program Dallas, which dominates the conversations in the halls.

Keeping my new friends in the dark as to my nefarious past, I nonetheless terrorize them, gleefully shouting "gag me with a trout" and "wet monkey love"

while crouching on tabletops, and frequently chanting the dog mantra.

As I relapse into the role of so-called productive citizen, Mr. Looney terminates my probation early. Good dog, Rajesh. Woof woof.

I hear on the radio that the police have apprehended a serial killer living in my old halfway house. Isn't that speeeecial?

For Christmas, my sister and niece give me socks emblazoned with big rainbow trout.

It's 1988, three years after the ranch's demise.

I visit the Poona ashram for two weeks.

The commune bustles with energy, more splendid and alive than ever.

New commandants merrily enact their ten thousand leadership scenarios.

On arriving, I write Osho a letter.

I confess that I'd been involved in criminal acts at the ranch, and that I'd betrayed everyone, including myself, by not exposing the corruption I witnessed behind the scenes. I admit that despite my ugly actions, I had a great time.

Osho writes back, in his divinely detached way, that he's happy I enjoyed it.

During my stay, I meet a sannyasin journalist who's investigating the U.S. government's campaign against Rajneeshpuram. He says he interviewed U.S. military personnel who'd been training to storm the ranch.

Is it true?

I suspect that Osho blew the whistle at just the right moment, saving us from a bloody cult-discrediting Waco-style death.

Sitting at Osho's feet, again, that peace.

He glows with the same radiance.

He speaks with the same brilliant insight and sublime eloquence.

But his body has become very frail.

Osho says that during his two weeks of captivity in 1985, the U.S. government poisoned him with a thallium isotope, a chemical compound that passes rapidly through the body and sets up an irreversible deterioration of the bones and joints, resulting in a slow and painful death.

Is it true? Osho's discourse describing his poisoning is very convincing.

But I am not a detective or a historian.

And the truth I am seeking is not about who did what.

It's 1990. I'm living in Virginia.

A winter afternoon, almost dinnertime. My favorite Osho picture inexplicably leaps from my studio wall, crashing onto the wooden floor in a burst of broken glass.

In that instant, I know he is dead. The next day, I hear the news.

The beloved well gone master is gone.

My mom is visibly moved by Osho's death.

She knows that he's been a transformational force in my life, and that without his meditation techniques, I'd have become another drug scene casualty.

She doesn't care that the media portrays Osho as an evil despot.

She doesn't care that from his calm vantage point he let us blunder along.

She doesn't care that I tricked her with my phony marriage, or that I had broken laws in learning about my power trips.

She only cares that Bhagwan has shown me the glimpse I've been seeking.

Very frail herself, succumbing step-by-step to emphysema, she makes one final trip to my apartment, and gives me these poems she wrote on hearing of Osho's death:

Another star shines tonight.

Outrageous man,
we got the message,
so rest in peace.

We heard your roar,
now rest in peace.

We burn the tired bones you left,
and the energy takes another form.

As we celebrate your life,
your tired bones emerge as clean ashes
to nourish and live again.

Now safe beyond the stars,
may you rest in peace
'til you swirl through space
to live and love again.

Her poems bring us both to tears.

She dies knowing I've found the tools I need.

Osho left his body in 1990, but Osho is not dead.

Every year, thousands more people become sannyasins.

The ashram in Poona flourishes, second only to the Taj Mahal in the number of visitors it attracts to India; Osho meditation centers all over the globe continue to conduct groups, meditations, and celebrations; Osho's many hundreds of books and tapes, available in dozens of languages, enjoy an ever-expanding worldwide circulation.

The beat goes on.

I still love Osho madly.

Osho often said that after he was gone, we would feel his love and compassion stronger than before, and I found myself nodding in agreement, but secretly dreading the day. Now that he's left his body, I know what he meant. I feel his soft nothingness yet, passing through me like a warm wind, like the kiss of an angel.

At times, I am utterly immersed.

No, it's not in him per se- it's the silence that keeps finding me.

I still let myself cry a lot.

Unfortunately, I still catch myself occasionally memorizing license plates, and wondering who's listening to my phone lines.

I still meditate every day.

I've invented an amalgamated meditation technique for myself, a casserole of Taoist delights with a sprinkling of Hindu condiments, and a dash of Christian mysticism. The masters commonly advise against mixing methods, but all these gurus- who ARE those guys?- are liars anyway, and I keep slipping into a blissful peace, so I must be doing something right. Slowly, slowly...

I still have sannyasin friends, although I rarely go to the Osho centers. I miss the fantastic celebrations, the group meditations, the growth opportunities- but I love my solitude, and I'm convinced that the real work is done in the inner space of aloneness.

Sannyasins- I still count them among the world's most weird and wonderful, but I do tire of the narrow, elitist "them and us" position that some sannyasins still take, as if they own Osho, or they have a monopoly on bliss, or their techniques are superior to all others. At the other extreme, the sannyasins who denounce him, who write books against him, who still blame him- I find those folks boring.

As the years go by, the distinction between sannyasin and non-sannyasin becomes less relevant to me. I have friends who are disciples of other masters, and their seeking is as valid as mine, as is the journey of those without a master.

Who am I to judge?

Who am I to say that God must be sought in a certain way, or at all?

I am just a big happy lucky dog.

When someone asks me whether they should join a commune, or become the disciple of a master, I tell them God must be everywhere; I tell them to follow their heart; I tell them that being with a master, for however long, is fine, and that being without a master is fine too. If you fall in love with Mother Meera, so be it; if you elect to find your own way, so be it.

When someone asks me about Osho, I tell them:

Beware!

Run like a rabbit!

Get out while you can!

Your house is on fire!

Just kidding.

In fact, I tell people to read his books, check out his tapes, try his meditations. I tell them he's awesome; he's an outrageous enlightened master; he can be a gateway to the beyond. But he's not the only way.

And in fact, everyone's house is on fire, as God gradually seduces us all into the living flames of her silence.

Rajneeshpuram: a traumatic travesty?

Rajneeshpuram: a precious jewel?

Must I take a final stance?

When someone asks whether the ranch was a good thing or a bad thing, I tell them it was both, or neither, or I don't know.

Both-and.

Should it have been different?

No. It was absolutely perfect.

Would I do it again the same way, knowing what I know now?

Absolutely not, says my guess-work mind.

But how can I know?

I don't know anything.

I don't know why a green leaf grows.

I do know that Bhagwan showed us ourselves at the ranch.

It was a magnificent wake-up call.

And in meditation, my questions about it, and about everything, disappear.

And, I know that, as the rising sun throws those intriguing patterns of orange light on my wall, and my fingers go tap tapping along on this keyboard, whatever I say, whether it comes from my head or my heart, is the irrelevant blind babble of an unenlightened creature.

I will close this tale with the words of one who is enlightened:

"Love.

I am one with all things-
in beauty,
in ugliness,
for whatsoever is-
there I am.

Not only in virtue
but in sin too I am a partner,
and not only heaven
but hell too is mine.

Buddha, Jesus, Lao Tzu-
it is easy to be their heir,
but Genghis, Tamur, and Hitler?

They are also within me!

No, not half- I am the whole of mankind!

Whatsoever is man's is mine-
flowers and thorns,

darkness as well as light,
and if nectar is mine, whose is poison?

Nectar and poison- both are mine.

Whoever experiences this

I call religious,
for only the anguish of such experience
can revolutionize life on earth."

- "A Cup of Tea, #54" - Osho