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AN EVOLUTION OF LOVE

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Introduction

I no longer remember where I first found the perspective I am about to share, but I do know that it wasn't my own work, so I'll honor its creator anonymously. The idea I am referring to suggests that the first, and theoretically lowest, form of love we experience is that we love someone else based on how we feel within ourselves in his or her presence. It is sort of a "*what have you done for me lately*" kind of love.

When I think back of how I thought and felt about things as a young adult, I definitely see that I was operating from such a place. There was a belief in me that some perfect woman could fulfill me in ways that I couldn't achieve on my own. Of course, my trying to coerce a woman into behaving in alignment with that ever shifting quicksand of obsessive need didn't work too well either.

The three pieces of writing that follow mark points along my path away from an unhealthy conflict-filled way of relating and toward a more respectful nurturing existence. Specifically for me, that also has meant a movement away from the societal norm of the nuclear family and toward a more ancestral form of family – a tribal family, if you will. So, while that distinction may be more about me as an individual than us universally, and well may be not the most relevant point with respect to the goal I have here, I think it is important background to share.

It is my perspective that collectively we are in the midst of an evolution in the way we organize ourselves. While I see how this may extend to business and education and politics and many other places as well, let us stay with personal relationships for now. I am currently of the opinion that how we want our relationship to be formed is now as important a factor in the success of a union as the aspects of how compatible we are together and how healthy we are individually. If we choose very different styles of togetherness, then perhaps it is best that we look to create those connections with likeminded people, regardless of how much passion we have between us.

This is a theme that I think emerges clearly in my stories. I want to be honest about that challenge that existed in the relationship that never was, the one that is explored in the second and third stories. It is not as simple just our inability to relate to each other, what happened is as much a clash of cultures.

Still, while we may have wanted different types of relationships, just as profoundly for me, was an instance for an interaction that was based in acceptance and respect. This commitment to

myself is the source of a lot of the quality that is available here and can easily be translated into everyone's life regardless of the type of relationship they feel aligned to having. Like me, regardless of how unconventional you may be, it is still important to have a reciprocal nurturing that works on your terms.

I want to share one final note about the following diverse pieces. The first one The Infinite River of Love is entirely metaphorical and has no source based in reality. Conversely, the other two Love My Neighbour and The Dumbest Guy in the World are from an amazing period in my life where I was writing almost exclusively about actual events that happened. They are almost exact recountings of events that occurred and the dialogue and assertions made are all true to real life. For this reason, rich in irony and juxtaposition, I love the presentation of the three together.

I hope you enjoy them and find them uplifting.

The Infinite River of Love: A Liquid Metaphor

Like the very air that we breathe, the River of Love is always within reach. A beautiful ribbon of fluid energy that flows from the Mountain of Life through the Desert of Fear and into the Ocean of Divinity, it has no set course and appears on no map. It is truly the freedom that even liberty seeks.

Those who seek to harness the River of Love for power and control find only the grit of sand roughening their hands. Those who want to drink their fill need only hold out a glass. For, if you can admit that you are thirsty, then the River of Love shall find you.

Being an explorer, long have I attempted to chart its movements and learn its secrets. Still, it confused and frustrated me at every turn. It was only when I let it wash over me that I began to see the truth. It is a quantum phenomenon. The River of Love exists not only in one place at one time but simultaneously wherever it is requested to be.

Indeed, the more we draw from it the stronger it flows. It is beyond inexhaustible. Its very consumption feeds its life force in ever-greater abundance.

Some would say that it is most holy and must be treated as such. They say that we must purify ourselves before we come in contact with it, and that we should only call upon it when we have found our paragon within another. Too often, those people are condemned to be parched and dry forever. For they search for the river in pairs and as they journey across the wastelands, soon they become dusty and dirty and unfit in each other's eyes. So, they abandon each other, and even abandon the quest itself.

Let it be known that even the smallest of drops from this river will cleanse you and make you pure. You need not prepare for you cannot injure it. You need not seek it. Only embrace that which is true in your hearts.

Make not a trek unto the horizon, but live in the hearth of each other's nurturance and lift your eyes unto the sky. You cannot watch it approach, nor can you plan upon its arrival. Unseen, drawn by your laughter and your tears, at first it will trickle over your toes; then upon your surrender; it will drown you with joy and bear you anew, innocent and unscathed.

And once you are in the river, let go. Be the river and let it become you. Even if the people who helped you find it should turn away and dry themselves, judge them not. Each must find their

own path. Many know only the barren and arid journey across dry land for perhaps they did not see the river when it came, but only its effect upon you.

Furthermore, you cannot stop the flow of this energy. The River of Love will never be dammed. Those who try to hold on shall be carried off and cast upon many boulders until they are so bruised and broken that pain is all that remains.

When those around us change, then we must change too. Nothing rigid can survive the baptism of the sacred river. Any form that resists the flow of energy shall be swept away and if you are attached to the form that you have created, you shall go with it.

Let the energy of love flow through you and it will strengthen you. Do not resist, for you cannot. While gentle and beautiful, the river possesses enough current to move us all.

Before I learned about the river, I too thought that love was finite. I rationed it, saving enough to support me in a drought. Still, during the dry times when I would check my reserves, I always found them empty. And my disappointment magnified my dilemma.

I was careful in loving others, always worrying about wasting something precious on the unworthy, always fearful that love would abandon me as people did. Like a miser with a full safe, I lived the lie of a pauper. And mirroring my disrespect, the river turned away.

Searching vainly for the perfect woman, I was only a shell of a person. Disillusioned and frustrated, I took solace in the Lake of Pity. There the toxic water burned away at the very seed of truth that lay in my breast.

Amid my mania and despair, I became an unholy surgeon. I attacked the noblest women I knew, carving away their best parts in the insane hope of building some perfect monster – a feminine Frankenstein that could alleviate my suffering and that could replace my yearning for love itself.

I took refuge in the Sexual Marshes. At least here the water had once known the river. Still, it was never enough. Starved for real intimacy, I had to journey out in search of that which would not visit me there. For many years I wandered. I could find where the river had been, but it was only mocking my vanity of control and self-reliance.

Finally, parched and bewildered upon the dunes, I yielded to the infinite. I knew that my life had run aground, that I had failed in my search for purity, and so I surrendered my flawed and tainted ego unto life. As my journey was over, I had no further use for it.

I thought the end would come quickly. I heard a thundering in the distance and the crescendo mounted until nothing else existed. Surely, now I would experience the hell that I had always feared.

But it was the river. And even as I drowned, I learned to breathe its water.

I have learned to live in the river now. I am its servant and its agent, its hands and its feet. I have found new truth in the water. Also, I have found the very reeds of sexuality for which I had entered the marshes, floating abundantly in the current.

In the river, though, the reeds are very different. In the marshes, the reeds were coarse and rough, and their sharp edges would often scar my being. But here the reeds that drift along are saturated with the very water of the river. They are soft and pliant and do not injure one so. The caress of these reeds is so beautiful and gentle that the truth about sex is clear. Sex is only one tributary of love, not the whole river ~~most sacred~~. The river can survive without the reeds,

but the reeds cannot survive without the river. Indeed, it is the river that floods the marsh and creates the very environment needed.

I am whole here. I want for nothing.

I have learned that as long as I search for a part, I shall be partial. As long as I search for people to manifest my fulfillment, I shall be empty. This is our folly.

The truth is that when we are in the river everything we desire becomes integrated, everything we do becomes pure. The truth is that if we live in this way, there will always be an abundance of love. We don't need to compete for more, we need to co-operate more, both with each other and with the Infinite River of Love.

Love, My Neighbor

There is a place that exists in a quiet corner of my vast imagination, in my glorious dream of a beautiful life. It is a small village that has existed for some two hundred years, that still exists even though a great city has grown up all around it. Here the people are cordial and friendly.

Although I am still a newcomer in this locale, already I am recognized and acknowledged when I walk down the quiet tree lined streets. In this mystical place, in this fantasy, I have of a simple neighborhood of a sincere, connected community. We know each other well and care for each other's well being.

My neighbors, please believe me! While it may sound incredible, while it may sound like the whimsical literary concoction of a romantic mind, such a place actually does exist and I am blessed to live there.

This little village of mine is truly magical. Indeed, gifted Inuit sculptors carve soapstone into beautiful tales from the boreal extremes in a backyard across the street. Residents here have come to embrace awe and splendor as just a part of daily life.

While you may question my judgment and my sincerity already, if I were to tell you all the things that go on here, it would test your faith in my very sanity too. Know that despite the color in my language, despite my use of metaphors and juxtaposition, I hardly exaggerate at all. My attention to detail is meticulous.

Mine is like the dedication that the winemaker has when he presses his grapes, for indeed all I undertake here is the distilling of truth. So while this tale is just one person's perspective about some of the strange things that have occurred here, it is also to the best of my recollection what really happened.

My story starts late on a Friday night or early on a Saturday morning. Yet regardless of which side of midnight it actually was, I should confess that at the time I was comfortably intoxicated. Not so intoxicated that the virtually transparent line between reality and fantasy had completely disappeared into the cool dark sky, but intoxicated nonetheless.

As I came around a corner, I beheld an amazing sight. It was so incredible that, even in this place of endless possibilities, I was compelled to take a closer look. I walked around the car, my mind racing and my jaw agape. Surely there was no denying it. There in the center of the car's roof was a small green plastic pot with three purple flowers arising from it. But why was it there? What did it mean?

The probable answer was obvious enough. Probably, flowers regularly appeared on this car. The car itself was ordinary enough, a modest off-white Asian import that already had small flames of rust licking at the bottom of its doors, but the owner of this car was something quite different.

The owner of this car was a beautiful, powerful, compassionate woman, and I knew that I wasn't the only one who thought so. The bar where she worked a few shifts a week at her second job was a simple neighborhood pub at the end of the street, where I had moved a few months before. While most of the men who entered the bar were immediately captivated by her looks and her smile and her joy at living, it was her grace, kindness and dignity that really got my attention.

I too had noticed her silky blonde locks, her slender shapely frame and her effortless ability to connect with others. Like many of the others, I was attracted to her the first time I met her as well. Still, I am attracted to many women; I am drawn to only just a few.

Whether I can ever find even one woman with whom I am truly compatible remains to be seen. I have compassion for the women who were brave enough to even try. Yet that struggle reflects things about who I am, not about her.

Still, like me, she cared deeply about both people and ideals. She was set apart by her perspective. This was a woman who actually felt complimented when she was mistaken for being ten years older. At the tender age of twenty-three, she could be strict and cross with adults more than twice her age in a way that was not only highly effective, but also absolutely adorable. Her empathy and determination multiplied each other to the point that she was virtually impossible to refuse.

Indeed, she was truly a rare breed of vibrant magnetic woman. Her bold confident laugh lit the room and like moths around a single light bulb in a darkened cabin, men were constantly circling her. She didn't tend bar, she seemed more like a queen holding court. That this sublime and subtle goddess routinely would find flowers on her car suddenly had become a point of relevance that I had not considered before.

Even still, a more compelling possibility already had come to my mind. What if the flowers were there for me? What if the flowers were a wonderful imaginative answer to the single bloom I had left on the same car's windshield the night before? What if they were an invitation to overcome my shy tentative approach and get on with what promised to be a paragon of passion and truth, a compelling congress between two equals, between two giants of congruent benevolence?

Then too, what if those flowers were a trap set to lure me, the somewhat secret admirer, out into the open? Should I take them? Was I dreaming all of this? The permutations and possibilities combined to create more and more improbable scenarios in my head.

Is everyone's life this hard to decipher? How do I get myself into these situations? As I stood beside the car with the floral crown, staring at my faithful friend Genghis, the cat who walks with dogs, as he sniffed the tire of a car across the parking lot, my mind wandered back through the circumstances that had led me to this abstract point in reality, or at least shall we say to this significant point in my sweet seductive dream.

The night before was clear in my mind. I had picked a fragrant bloom from a garden and plucked all but four leaves from the bottom of its stem before I placed it under her windshield wiper. The decision to do that comes from somewhat further back in time, from a place that is murkier in my mind.

It was the result of feedback I received from both male and female friends about a conversation she and I had had several weeks earlier. The feedback ranged from “She’s challenging you” to “She doesn’t feel worthy to be loved” and included many divergent points in between. You see, her response had completely baffled me and I was eager to hear the perspectives of others’ whom I trusted about what meaning her statement might hold. I had initiated that conversation one afternoon on the quiet empty patio beside the bar. I was stumbling my way through apologizing for having annoyed her by dropping by the bar after closing the night before, just after I had gotten off work. She made it clear that she didn’t appreciate my late appearance, not even if I just walked through the door with a bottle of water from work. She said that she had enough difficulty encouraging the jovial band of regulars to leave without them being distracted by my arrival.

So, I had returned during the next warm afternoon and promised to end my after-work visits. I had apologized simply and sincerely, but it wasn’t enough for her. She demanded to know what I was thinking about in dropping by so late. She had told me before that she didn’t serve beer after closing. What was I trying to gain?

So, for the third time, as you’ll see, I told her my truth. I told her that it had occurred to me that Saturdays, despite the fact that everyone in the bar was quite intoxicated, that she and I would have something in common for we were both just getting off work and we were both sober and clear headed. I told her that I was hoping to find a quiet time, when she wasn’t busy at her work, when I wasn’t an intoxicated customer, when I could talk to her. I didn’t even get to finish the sentence when she interrupted me.

While I had feared a straightforward response based in disinterest, the one I got was not clear and straightforward but rather opaque and puzzling. Basically, she told me that she didn’t believe me. While it might be reasonable to assume that she thought I was trying to duck responsibility for what, in retrospect, may seem to be odd behavior, I wondered if her mistrust didn’t originate somewhere else.

True, at times in the past few months, my behavior had been juvenile at best, as I overcompensated, trying to avoid coming across as an awkward, bumbling teenage suitor, thereby probably managing to appear so even more. As I hadn’t been a teenager in twenty years, I thought I’d found the wisdom to get to know who she was a little better in a relaxed, unpressured way. Yet anything that remotely resembles wisdom seems to have eluded me, and clearly I am adrift in an entirely subjective realm.

Still, I felt that her reticence at my revelation of personal interest in her came from another source. My guess is that it was another conversation on the vine-covered patio that had happened quite a bit earlier that was the source of her misgivings.

This earlier conversation had taken place on a cool evening a month or so before. Still, despite the length of elapsed time, it is etched in my memory.

I had been sitting talking with Jeff, my new business partner, my sister’s ex and my unofficial blood brother, over a drink. We were discussing the nature of relationships and my thesis that the modern nuclear family of our capitalistic patriarchal culture is harder on children when compared to the ancestral tribal family of a nurturing maternal culture, which I feel provides more support and stability for our young. I finished a sentence with the words “...versus the concept of a life mate or soul mate” just as she walked up to serve us our beers. She smiled with a warm twinkle in her icy blue eyes.

“And what are your thoughts about soul mates?” she asked, provocatively. Knowing the peril that lay ahead, I tried to delay my answer until another day, for a situation where we could explore the subject in detail.

“It’s a long story,” I said dismissing the point.

“Give me the short version,” she demanded smiling sweetly.

“Really, it’s quite involved. It’s not something I can describe easily right now,” I replied hinting that I was interested in having the conversation but at another place and time.

“Well sum it up for me,” she insisted as her smile broadened.

There are many times in life when we know the answers that people want to hear. Her playful expression, her outright glee at having caught me in what appeared to be such an emotionally vulnerable position, told me this was definitely one of those. Looking into her eyes that day I felt that I understood the probable destinations of the two paths that would diverge following my choice of answer.

Still, no matter how much I wanted her to like my answer, the choice for me was simple. I’m at a point in my life where I will willingly skip the short easy solution of becoming what others want me to be, for I already have learned that it never leads in the direction I want to go. It never seems to create deep, long-term, congruent connections with people based on integrity, accountability and respect.

So, once again, only earlier, I told her my truth. I told her I considered the idea of “one perfect person” a fairy tale and a fantasy that, while attractive, romantic and compelling in concept, almost always ends in waking up to a reality of assumption and expectation, and a life of pain and suffering. In staying true to myself, unfortunately I also conveyed a fair amount of anger and pain from precisely those personal experiences.

The look on her face was that which one might expect to see on a woman who returns home only to find her supposedly faithful husband in her bed with another woman. Her gleeful smile faded into a disheartened scowl. Looking deeply wounded, she turned and silently retreated.

I was stunned by the enormity of her reaction. As she walked away across the patio, I called after her in a loud clearly compassionate voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She hesitated and turned back to me. “Maybe it’s only because you don’t believe in it, that you’ll never find it,” she said sadly and then disappeared inside.

“I’m such an idiot!” I said to Jeff. He laughed.

“She really likes you. She likes you as much as you like her,” he said reassuringly.

“I’m probably the only guy in the city stupid enough to tell the truth here,” I lamented. He laughed again.

Jeff isn’t the only one who has told me she likes me. From my elderly cribbage partner who accused “green eyes” of being transparent following several flirtatious interruptions by her into our intent conversation, to the quiet, sincere regular who introduced himself the first time, saying, “You must be okay if she likes you,” several people around the bar had commented similarly.

Likewise, several people had pointed out that it was more than apparent how I felt about her. Still, for me, things are not so clear between us. While we are friendly, polite and respectful with each other, while at times we are playful and flirt with clever language, she has never made it clear that our connection extends beyond the professional relationship of hostess and guest.

Having myself been in similar circumstances previously, I know that when I'm not emotionally involved, I can connect effortlessly with people, and because I too am so good at it, I know how many people have confused my skill in hospitality for something more personal. With that experience in mind, I continue to tread lightly in her space. After all, I consider assumption and expectation to be the enemies of reasonability and respect.

While I still don't know her really well, I honor her for who I think she is and that compliment is not based on the condition of her finding me sexually attractive. So it's simple. If I had to choose, for me, it is more important to honor her humanity than to worship her femininity.

This is the peace I have found. This is the reason I am not looking for a soul mate. This is the reason I don't perceive myself as half of a greater whole, always longing for that which is missing. For I have understood that to be whole within myself and to look for another who is the same, for me, is a greater kind of love. As Khalil Gibran would say, "Stand together, but not too near together, for the pillars of the temple stand apart and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow."

We all can find our own personal point of balance and power on which to thrive, and then stand side by side with each other by choice, rather than being broken and leaning out of necessity. I am not a foolish man who runs after women who run away. I am a powerful congruent man who tries to draw toward me the rare exquisite magnets that I find.

Still, while I have explained my opinions upon life and love, I have not conveyed the probable source of her reaction to my answer, for there is one more significant conversation between us that I haven't shared with you yet. It is most likely the background that will help you to understand her insistent questioning about soul mates and her apparent anticipation of a more romantic response from me.

For me, the additional context of this earlier conversation creates a straight line from our one patio discourse to the other, a clear progression from Point A through Point B to Point C. It is our first relevant conversation that perhaps is the ancestor of the parent whose offspring is distrust. Still, that first congruent connection was a pure and beautiful moment. It is exactly the type of moment that romantics anticipate soul mates would have with one another.

Before I tell you about those moments whose place is enshrined in my memory (except for those few seconds, that day is largely misty and indistinct), let me tell you about a day the week before that day.

I had dropped by the bar one night for a drink to find the owner and all the staff in mid-celebration. Everyone was blissfully intoxicated. In the middle of the bedlam, there she was. Her eyes were glassy and her speech slightly slurred, and still she spoke in a determined tone. She talked quickly and went on at length. She was animated and emotional and laughed loudly at times.

In front of her was her friend Sara, another female bartender. Sara, too, was drunk. Yet clearly she was upset and depressed. From the conversation, I understood that Sara, who had first welcomed me, cat and all, to the bar, had just had her relationship with a man end abruptly and badly. This friend in need was stuck in a dangerous place from which there is little escape, in the virtual arena of her own creation, called, "*What did I do wrong?*"

When I mentioned our heroine's kindness and empathy, you may have thought that I was exaggerating, but consider the nature of a person who, while already intoxicated, when all those around her float effortlessly in the joy of the party, stays single-minded in her support of a grieving friend. This is the woman who has captivated my attention.

This was the image that was in my mind a week later, when once again we both found ourselves in the same space. At the far end of the bar, several regular customers were teasing her. Did she remember what she had done last week? When she admitted that the night was a little foggy, the innuendo got worse. Defenseless as those without adequate memory are in such situations, she retreated to a place near me, searching for sanctuary.

It was then that I decided to act. That I wanted to kiss her and caress her suddenly became a secondary concern, for I had seen an opportunity that presented itself to me not just as a man, but as the joyful, expressive and compassionate person I aspire always to be.

I had seen the opportunity to give something quite beautiful. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that what I intended to give is even a valuable treasure. It is the kind of gift that usually brings good luck and even greater fortune to everyone involved.

Please know this: I do not discriminate when I give of my treasures. I give both to children and the aged. I give to both men and women. I give to people of all races and religions. For when the opportunity arises, I will give a tiny little gift to any person who has crossed my path and inspired me. So, for the first time, at least in terms of meaningful interaction, I told her my truth.

"You were quite drunk," I said nonchalantly.

"Yea, I know," she responded searching for a new avenue for escape.

"You can learn a lot about a person when they are drunk," I continued.

"Yea, I'm sure," she said, bracing herself for more ridicule.

"Do you know what I learned about you?" I asked. There was a pause. Something in my tone had caught her interest, and when she responded, she was only half dreading the answer.

"What's that?" she said quietly.

"Well, amid all the frivolity I saw you talking to Sara, who just had broken up with her boyfriend. You were committed and determined. You were investing all your energy into convincing her she was still a worthwhile person, even though he didn't love her, even though she was alone," I explained.

"Of course!" she returned, dismissing my observation quickly.

"NO, not of course," I insisted. "We may wish it was *of course*, but there is no such certainty. If it was *of course*, the world would be a different place. Don't dismiss your greatness so quickly. Learn to honor your own loyalty and compassion, and remember that you're a beautiful person."

Slowly, as the simple truth of my words registered in her mind, her face lit up uncontrollably. Suddenly, she became shy and looked away, but only for a second. When she looked back, she was beaming.

"Thank you," she said sincerely.

"My pleasure," I responded, smiling broadly. She smiled and then looked away again briefly. When she looked back, she was no longer looking at me; she seemed to be looking *into* me. In this written saga, which is still unfolding, in the romantic hallucination from my dreamy little village, in the perspective of someone who is actually living this life, that was the beginning, that was the grape growing sweet on the vine.

While I understand that my altruistic comment also included a personal message that indeed I'm sure she received, if I had stayed silent because of the potential self-interest and personal gain involved, I would have dishonored myself, for I have earned the right to speak in that moment with the thousands of times I have honored the best in the people around me when there was no direct personal gain involved.

Of course, I do not claim to be entirely altruistic, for there is a personal gain that I am left with every time that I offer such insights, these sincere karmic compliments. It is through giving that I also am generously repaid and often with substantial interest. For I am the one who has literally thousands of memories of bold, courageous, honorable, caring and compassionate people looking back at me with sincere gratitude, with the willing acceptance of praise, with the private personal justice of well deserved tribute, with the simple satisfaction that comes by way of honest recognition from a stranger; or perhaps with just a simple, sweet flash or deeper, heartfelt warming of pure joy.

These beautiful memories are gifts that I continue to give to myself in the process of giving to others. And I never have to question if I am worthy of receiving them, for I am only helping myself to the leftovers after others have satisfied themselves at the feast that I have laid. So, on the rare occasion that I find myself in that situation, about to speak truthfully of grace and beauty with a beautiful woman whom I want to attract, I do not consider myself cheap or manipulative, I consider myself blessed.

I could see the path winding out of the distant murky past and into the implausible present. I could see how the disparity between the statements of "You're a beautiful person," and "I don't believe in soul mates," could have led to her distrust during my declaration, which led me to amplify my remonstrations to prove my sincerity, which could be why the planting pot was on the roof of her car. Still, if it was her who put the purple blooms there and not another suitor, then was it a bold answer or a clever and ingenious flirtatious ploy, or was it something else all together?

I stood there, motionless, with my hands folded behind my back, watching my four legged friend, Genghis the cat, investigate his important business matters. The wheels of my mind ground forward, milling all these points. I was utterly transfixed.

"Mario, what are you doing?" It was her standing in the door of the bar. Maybe this was a game of cat and mouse after all. I was feeling like a rodent. She had caught me, or had she? Meow!

"I'm watching the cat," I said blankly.

"What's that on my car?" she enquired peering into the darkness. I turned and surveyed the flowers beside me as if for the first time. It occurred to me that I was being played really well, and even though I seemed to be losing badly, or at most just keeping up, I liked the idea of this game.

"Looks like flowers," I offered. She approached nonchalantly and removed them from the roof.

“Are they real?” she asked. I realized that I hadn’t determined that for sure. Then, my mind was off again trying to interpret the relevance of the possibility that she had left fake flowers there for me to find. This was a new wrinkle.

What was the objective in this game anyway, if it even was one? If it was, then was my clear cool exterior ruining her fun? Should I react? I was probably just thinking too much again.

“I don’t know, are they?” I asked with some interest. She shrugged, opened the car door and tossed them in.

“Somebody will look after them, probably not me,” she said casually. She turned and walked back toward the bar. “There you are,” she said to Genghis as she passed by him. He looked at me and meowed with a whiny nasal tone that conveyed a sort of condescending feline disapproval towards my current immobility.

It took me a minute to decide to just let go and go on with life. Whatever it was, it was over. Still, it had been fun. Later, at the bar, as I watched her float back and forth serving drinks, I decided to probe into the occurrence. “That didn’t surprise you at all,” I observed.

“What’s that?” she replied.

“The flowers on your car...They didn’t surprise you at all. You just found flowers on your car. What’s this, just another day in your life?” She laughed and smiled shyly.

“Yea,” she said bashfully. “There were roses there last week and there was another flower last night.” So much for probing! She was either far better at this game than I was ever going to be or she was just about the sweetest person I knew. Either way I was more captivated than ever.

The night slipped away, as it does. Eventually, the cat and I went home together.

Please don’t feel that I’m leaving you on the unfinished edge, dear neighbors. While you may wonder about our future, if any, that is another tale. Even still, there is a happy ending of a sort.

Currently, after a prolonged time of bitter solitude, she is very much in love with a guy named Mario. He’s another version of me. He’s not really me, but more someone with my name, who talks a lot like me, and who I admire greatly. He is a me of another kind from a slightly different perspective on reality – hers. It’s not the result I wanted, because while she is in love with this other me who lives in her world, she still doesn’t know me for who I really am.

Isn’t that always the rub? Do we really see the people that we love? What with all the masks I wear, and all the assumptions she makes, it’s amazing we can see any truth at all. Still, despite the lack of the extremely pure connection I was hoping for, slowly we are becoming friends. We smile and we laugh, and really that’s a lot, when you stop and think it over. Life is good, and I am peaceful and contented in the knowledge that I am growing and learning, and still I am, and everything I understand is, only one tiny part of such vast and diverse tapestry of greatness.

I have given her a copy of this story. For me, it was meant to be another gift – one part apology, one part invitation and one part the memory of a tear falling into a glass of beer. While I feel my gesture was romantic, while I meant the mystical metaphors I have presented here to contain the content that I wanted to say to her personally, these sentences are more than that too.

You see, from my perspective, my product here is more like a fine bottle of spirits than an intricate weaving of words. Still, it’s not just the kind of liquor that one serves with candlelight

and soft music, but hopefully more a sacred elixir capable of connecting us in a ceremonial community, with ourselves, with each other, and perhaps even with our understanding of divinity. You see, I consider this assemblage of words an excellent vintage, but I think that's mostly a reflection of the quality of grapes all of you have given me to start. And, as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, so taste is on the lips of those who imbibe from the life essence of the bottle they have chosen to open.

So I thank you my neighbors, for your participation in all this, both through your inspiration and through your consumption of this knitting of novel images, through your ingestion of this season's yield of my sweet yet subtle intoxicating nectar. For it is the joy I gain from writing of such things with the intention of inspiring you that fulfills me. It is the effort I expend in the fermenting of such suffering with the hope of quenching your thirst and releasing your inhibitions that keeps me as healthy and balanced as I am.

You see, it is inspiration that is the point of this fable. Whether what I see is real or not, I am more whole within myself after having taken risks through the honest vulnerability of sharing my truth. Perhaps strange experiences happen to everyone; maybe they only happen to people like me. If I am more unique than common, then all the more reason for me to share it with you.

Too many of us have let life's difficulties weigh us down. Too many of us have lost faith in our brothers and sisters. Too many of us even have closed ourselves off from our own feelings.

We are people. We are wounded and injured and tired and sore. We fall and we crawl, and we need to pick ourselves back up. In one sense, we are just social and emotional animals. While we are doubtlessly more than that too, it doesn't completely remove us from that external truth. I think that we need to belong within a community to be whole within ourselves. That I am a part of your world, and you a part of mine strengthens and supports me.

If all you have in your life is a community of words, a community of values where people are welcome to come and share the beauty of living, then know that you are not alone, know that we reside in the same vicinity; know most likely that you live near the outskirts of my little village.

My neighbors, all of you both near and far, please believe me. Please grasp that there are meaningful muscles working beneath the supple skin. Please accept that the eloquent, colorful metaphors I use are stretched over the simple banality of life.

When it comes to love and to trust, hope and humility, responsibility and respect, passion and compassion, honor and integrity, empathy and determination, these qualities, these idealistic characters still exist. I can report that they are all alive and well. I see them on the tree-lined streets and in the little Irish pub that exist in my fantastic dream, in this noble community, this place of restless yet peaceful slumbering that includes lucid nocturnal hallucinations as well as a place where sobering truth and tangible reality also live in bright daylight.

These glorious embodiments of humanity, they too are my neighbors this summer and they bring endless joy into my home. They tend to my suffering and they fuel my creativity. How could it be any other way?

This is a divine place where grace and dignity reside just around the corner, faith owns a house across the street, and humor has an apartment just two blocks a way. No, everything's not perfect. Still, I love the simple dream I have of a full and productive life in this village within this city we have called the meeting place, where people from all corners of the world now live together most peacefully.

Please forgive me, I may well be insane. I live in a dream of tranquil cyclical connectedness, in a village that exists within a city that exists within a country whose very name was mistranslated from the word village. This amazing place that presently exists both in my most incredible fantasies and also upon this our only planet, our global village, and all during a period of time I have come to refer to as the springtime of the human race.

I know but one family and you all are part of it.

The Dumbest Guy in the World

I leaned down to the rear window of the taxi as it opened and shook hands. “This is Mario,” she said, introducing me to her roommate beside her in the back seat. “He’s the most intelligent man you’re ever going to meet.”

“Well... I don’t know about that.” I said, laughing with real disbelief. I was disagreeing partially because I think that the quality that she sees personified in me really is better described as wisdom. Still more profoundly, I was disagreeing because, regardless of the semantic differences between intelligence and wisdom, I was feeling like the dumbest guy in the world.

The light turned green and the cab pulled away, leaving me alone with the wind and snow in the still dark morning. I watched the taillights drift off down the street. I started to chuckle again, but it wound up in a long sigh.

I was very much in love with her and she knew that. Still, there she went and here I was. I turned and walked up the hill into the bitter breeze.

For such a supposedly smart guy, sometimes I make some really dumb decisions. I could make lots of excuses for myself. In this particular situation, my excuse would even have had a basis in reality. Indeed, it was the amazingly fluid interchange between fantasy and reality on that frozen sidewalk that had led me to acting with so little common sense. It was those same sweet moments when life dissolved deliciously into delusion – the brief period that ended so rudely with a bang of clarity like the one a novice skater finds when landing awkwardly on the rigid truth of hard ice – that has taught me such a valuable lesson.

Still, once I describe the circumstances of why I even was in the situation, you might question whether I have any concept of reality, or if I’m just making this all up as I go along. You see, walking around in the middle of the night is very common for me. Usually, though, when I’m walking around in the middle of the night, I have company.

Most often, a cat accompanies me on my early morning adventures. Then, too, some of our other friends are often with us. A dog, a herd of horses, and sometimes a cat or two tag along for our moonlit promenades. Amazingly, two cats and a pit bull terrier and myself have walked for some hundred yards in a parallel direction with a skunk we had just met, while he attended to his business a mere twenty feet or so to my left. The only one who approached him was the kitten, who was just over half his size. So, once he had faced us alertly several times and only a co-creation of calming mutual respect was our mutual reality, he continued largely unalarmed by our further presence.

Occasionally, other human beings partake as well as we all meander leisurely through the darkness. Despite being within a city, there are no leashes and very little control exerted upon the friends who most would view as pets. We just amble along together along the stream and out onto the golf course, stopping to smell the interesting smells and pausing occasionally for those of us with the shortest legs or most curious noses to catch up. Several nights a week,

eight or nine months a year, we tread lightly while all is most peaceful, before even the birds, within their daily chorus just before dawn, awaken the early risers. Such is the routine of a poor pioneer still just starting out in life, and of a wise old monk wealthy in wisdom and insight, but mostly of a simple man who tries to be humble and compassionate, and above all else who is benevolent and fair.

On this particular night I was alone, without the usual parade that accompanies me. What with the wind chill and snow, the cats declined even to begin, and after a brief stooping and scooping, the dog had had enough too. Still, as I had been yearning for some vigorous exercise after many days of hiding inside during a cold snap, I struck out in a different direction and at a different speed than was our usual way of trundling. Stimulated by the novelty of my actions I strode firmly ahead.

I found myself walking fast along the road. Instead of a long slow saunter, I embarked with an impassioned push. Despite the wind, I was well bundled and enjoying the cold. It was invigorating.

The snow whizzed diagonally by and none of the few residents one usually might see in the night had chosen that time to expose themselves to the harsh conditions.

I was peaceful but not still. This was not the tranquility of the lagoon. I was in the eye of my own storm. I was powerful and healthy and alive, and I knew it. Everything on the surface was perfect, but my mind had wandered off into the most improbable scenario. What if I happened to bump into *her* out here in the desolate emptiness along this barren track of road on one of the harshest nights of the year? She would be amazed, as would I.

She would smile and be happy to see me. She would comment on how cold it is and then there would be a taxi and she would invite me to come back to her place where it was warm. There, after fearless vulnerability and tender truth, our passion would accelerate quickly, growing rapidly like young plants in the spring, and our bodies soon would strain against each other with sweet fluid friction and the hungry, exciting rhythm of life.

I know there is nothing spectacularly unique about this harmless fantasy of mine. Most men with just a little imagination probably would imagine the same thing about the women they are drawn to in their lives. Still, while most men don't exercise at two o'clock in the morning in the midst of a January blizzard, I've been living in the month of April for more than a year now, and no matter how insane all this sounds, regardless of how fantastic that looks in print, this nocturnal lunacy I call my life makes all such frigidity easier to bear. Indeed, I am thriving!

What happened next, though, was one of those rare and ridiculous coincidences that make one consider if fate might not just be a documentable occurrence. On the other hand, maybe it's just a simple example of co-creation without any hint of destiny worked in. Whatever one might call it, in an attempt like this at writing an artistic form of calm objective reporting of a previously experienced, highly emotional occurrence in one's life, at that time, for me, it was more wonderful than it was anything else.

It all seemed to start most innocently. A car came along the road and then stopped at the red light up ahead of me. Then two people were walking up to the car from out of the darkness, talking to the driver through the closed passenger side window. I guessed they wanted a ride, but the window stayed closed and the door never opened, and as I got closer, the light went green and the car started to drive away from them and they turned and walked back to the sidewalk.

By this time I had already progressed from fantasy, to curiosity, to possibility, to amazement, to probability, to utter joy. *Déjà vu*... There she was. At first, I put it down to just an improbable happening.

Amazingly, at that exact moment, all of my trusted words disappeared. I was dumbstruck. I stared blankly at her as she approached me.

"Mario!" she said as she met my eyes. Her face broke into a wide grin. "It's so good to see you." I began to have a second eerie sort of *déjà vu* experience, which then made me wonder if I was having *déjà vu squared* and, or, if one can even do that... whatever it is.

She asked what brought me out in this strange place at that time of night. I told her that I was out getting some exercise, reminding her that it was the equivalent of five o'clock in the afternoon for me. She was amazed at the coincidence, as was I, even more than she knew.

She said her ears were so cold that she couldn't feel them. I had a momentary vision of myself sleeping in my bed and the alarm clock going off, but I was so awake in the fierce wind there was no question that it actually was happening. Then, remarkably there was a taxi. I started trying to remember if I had ingested a lot of alcohol, or other intoxicants, or very moldy food, or wild mushrooms, but to the best of my recollection I was quite sober.

She and her friend laughed and cheered. They were giddy with a mixture of intoxication and celebration, and a cab on a cold night, like a tiny oasis of heat in a vast icy desert, is worthy of much festivity. Her friend got in first and got in quickly, but she hesitated at the open door.

She asked me if I wanted to go for a ride with them in the taxi. The texture of time and space had begun to come apart around that point in time, and I started questioning my own sanity. Maybe this was a dream after all.

"Where are you going I asked?" already knowing the answer that was to come.

"Home." she replied.

The blizzard now raged inside my head as well as all around me. What was happening here? Was this still reality? I replayed what I knew was true.

I knew that currently she was in love with another man. Still, we were supposedly friends and there was a half-finished conversation that she had said she wanted to complete. Maybe it was an innocent invitation from a place of trust and respect.

Then too, maybe it was more. She was a bit drunk and no doubt feeling uninhibited. While she didn't speak directly of love to me, the intensity of our arguments told me a lot about the reciprocal nature of our passion.

I wondered whether this could be one of those dreams you need to wake up from more than once. But it didn't feel that way. Then too, maybe I had misunderstood her.

"Are you inviting me home?" I blurted out.

"No," she replied simply without further explanation.

There was reality. I had found it at last. I laughed heartily at the ridiculousness of both of us.

"No I don't need a ride anywhere," I said, incredulous (not my meaning). "I'm exercising."

She got in and the light went red again as the taxi pulled forward. That's when she opened the window and introduced me to her roommate. Then, when the light went green, they pulled away.

Walking home, I understood something. I realized that somehow I had become stuck in a state of constantly wanting clarification about how and why. In my ongoing desire to learn and be clear, in my simple search for wisdom, now instead of being in the flow of life, I just ask too many questions. It was a general lesson, but it has proved to be most useful in specific.

You see, despite the lost opportunity for almost-manifested adventure, The more I get to know her, the more I see her as the queen of the mixed message. Then too, I despise assumption and do not wish to transgress against anyone because of it.

I try not to make assumptions about others and try to avoid others who make assumptions about me. So, on one level I am not totally disappointed in myself. Regardless of what goes on with her, and despite the fact that everything isn't perfect, I am happy and content with who I am.

It was a powerful realization to have. Still, I understood an even more valuable lesson that night. On that frozen sidewalk, after fantasy and reality were suddenly torn apart, I realized that despite all the wonderful things one can learn by asking questions, sometimes it's better to just say "Okay" and go along for the ride.

So, after all that, here's all I have to say. Balance in everything, even extremes, as the extremes act to balance even balance itself. It's a simple idea that almost anyone can understand, even from me, a mysterious nocturnal gentleman who is probably the dumbest guy in the world.

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