

# Chapter 1

“You planning to jump?”

I looked up to see my recent-but-former boss, Jake Hooper, standing on the cliff above me.

“Why? You gonna fire me twice in the same day?”

“Sorry about that. Mind if I come down?”

I shrugged indifferently. If I’d wanted company I wouldn’t be sitting on a ten-by-ten piece of land jutting out into the Pacific Ocean. I could only access the small plot of ground by carefully—very carefully—navigating an overgrown switch-back trail.

To my left was the White Lighthouse—that’s what I called it anyhow. It was a lighthouse at the Palos Verdes Interpretive Center. Beyond the lighthouse was Catalina, 26 miles away. To the right was the entire Pacific coast from Redondo Beach up beyond Malibu. Locals called the view the Queen’s Necklace.

Jake arrived, briefcase in hand. He looked a little pale. One false move and he’d be two hundred feet down. And dead. It wasn’t ocean directly below. Just rocks.

He sat down and opened the briefcase. Inside was a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label Scotch Whisky. “A parting gift.”

“Thanks,” I said, flippantly. I wanted to be alone.

Jake poured a healthy—perhaps that’s the wrong word—dose of the very good stuff in short glasses he had brought

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along for the occasion. He handed me one and said, “Better days.”

I took my glass, nodded and started drinking. This was definitely not a day to turn down free booze.

“So, this is the ‘office’ you talk about,” said Jake, raising his glass and taking in the expanse of ocean.

“Yeah,” I said. I often brought my laptop down to this spot and wrote. Mostly poems, songs and occasionally I’d work on a novel. For the past few years this view, so grand, so pure, so inspirational, had been my muse. Whenever I was dry I came here. Nothing seemed all that big when compared to this view. I was lucky to have found this harbor. I needed it a lot these past years. And on this late afternoon I needed it more than usual.

“I’m really sorry. You know that, don’t you?” asked Jake.

Sorry was nice if you wanted an apology. What I needed was a job with a paycheck.

A few years back Jake and I had been competitors. I published a magazine in the South Bay and so did he. After about ten years, mine went under. He came to me, sensing I would be too proud to go to him. He hired me. I did reviews of all kinds: music, movies, restaurants, and the endless string of puff pieces Jake needed done to stroke the egos of potential advertisers. Magazine publishers and the print media in general had been decimated by the Internet. I’d seen it coming before he did, but I couldn’t save my business. He was on the ropes now, which was why he had to let me go. There were less than ten people left at the magazine and most of those employees sold advertising. Truth was, you didn’t need a restaurant reviewer when there weren’t any new restaurants opening.

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I wanted to be mad at him, but he was actually a pretty good friend. And I didn't have a lot of those left. I had never considered myself a loner and I never thought there was anything romantic or elitist about being one. It's just that one day I looked around and realized I didn't have a wife anymore. No kids. People I'd hired or worked with kept in touch now and then, but always less frequently. One day it was just there. Obvious to everyone except me. I was a loner. But then, maybe that just sounded better than admitting I was alone.

Jake poured another round.

"How are you getting home?" I asked. I had jogged down from a condo I rented about a mile and half from where we were.

"Jenny dropped me off on her way home. I'm gonna call a cab to pick me up. I can drop you; it's on the way."

Running *down* the hill was a lot easier than running *up* the hill. Especially after a few glasses of Scotch. "Sounds good," I said, clinking glasses.

"You got any plans?"

"Man, you just fired me three hours ago. Jesus..." I said and poured myself an extra helping.

"Sorry. I was just..."

"Not thinking?"

"Exactly."

"Don't worry. I've got enough money in the bank to last me till...oh, I'd say another week or so. I'm sure something'll come up."

"You kidding me?" Jake looked genuinely shocked.

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“A little. Not much. I’m basically living paycheck to paycheck. I can probably last a couple of months, but when the magazine went down a few years ago, I lost everything.”

Jake sorted through a bunch of words and finally settled on, “Wow... That’s rough.”

I looked at him incredulously. “I’m guessing you never worked a suicide hotline.”

“No, why?”

“Wild guess.”

We both sat and watched the sun getting closer to the horizon. I was looking for the “green flash.” It was said to occur rarely and it lasted less than a second. Good luck was supposed to accompany witnessing it. I’d never seen it.

“You remember that psychic you did an article on a few weeks ago?” said Jake after a few minutes.

“Claudia?”

“Right.”

“What about her?”

“She came by the office today to pick up a copy of the article and I told her—”

“You fired me?”

“I don’t think I used those exact words. Anyhow, she wants you to call her. Said she’s got something to tell you. Something important.”

“From the other side?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Hey, at this point I’ll take help from *any* side.”

The sun disappeared into the ocean.

If there was a green flash, I didn’t see it.

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## Chapter 2

The next morning I called the number Jake gave me and Claudia told me how to get to her place in Hermosa Beach. We agreed to meet at noon.

The psychic's place was two blocks from the ocean—a one-bedroom apartment it would have been difficult to share with anyone, except maybe a very small pet. I figured her for a cat person, but she had a black Chinese Shar Pei named Ace. She said having a Chinese fighting dog gave her a sense of security. I could see why. He was nice to me, but probably just because Claudia was nice to me. He continued to watch me while we talked. I got the sense he was trying to figure out whether or not to let me live.

"Thanks for the article," she said. "You were very kind."

"You're welcome." She was a loyal advertiser and every couple of years Jake assigned a writer to do an article on her. Last month I'd met her in a local café and interviewed her. This month, in addition to the quarter-page ad she always ran, the magazine published the one-page article I wrote. More pages meant more business. That's the way the game was played.

"You told Jake you wanted to talk with me."

"Yes. After our meeting, I looked you up on the Internet. I read your poetry. I even bought a couple of your books."

"Thank you."

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“I also attended one of your shows last week.”

“I didn’t see you there.”

“You seemed busy. I didn’t want to impose.”

For years I’ve been doing performances. Mostly in the South Bay, but also in greater LA when the opportunities presented themselves. I made money from selling books and CDs, not from admission fees. Those went to the coffeehouse or bar owners providing the venues. A typical show consisted of poetry readings, readings from my novels, songs, some multimedia—appropriate stills and video—all strung together by narration. I called it a “Storyteller Evening.” I could usually make a thousand a month from the shows, but that wasn’t nearly enough to keep me in my Palos Verdes condo. My regular paycheck with Jake’s magazine, plus my Storyteller work, kept me a few hundred ahead every month. Without the magazine income, I was in deep trouble.

“The reason I wanted to see you,” explained Claudia, “was because I’d like to do a reading for you. Free of charge. I’m really connecting with your work. After listening to your CDs and reading your books, I’m getting something very strong from you, but I need to read you to figure out what it is.”

“Read me?”

“Just sit down with me. Relax. I’ll do the rest.”

“And just so we’re clear, it’s free.”

“Yes.”

“No implied hundred dollar tip.”

“You’re funny,” she said.

Probably because she thought I was kidding.

“Okay. When?” I had nothing to lose.

“How about now?”

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“Now?”

“We’re both here. It won’t take more than a half hour. I’m sure you were planning on spending that amount of time anyhow.”

She was right. And besides, I had nothing else to do till... Well, technically, forever.

“Okay.”

“Great. Let me close the drapes.”

A thought flashed in my head. I wished that instead of writing about psychics I’d been assigned to write puff pieces on the massage therapists who advertised in the magazine. Not all freebies were created equal.

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## Chapter 3

Claudia held my left hand in her left hand and she stroked my palm with her right hand. Instantly I became relaxed. She looked me in the eye. She didn't blink. It was as though she were looking not only *at* me, but *into* me.

"I see a man with a beard," she said.

Thoughts of Grizzly Adams, Santa Claus and Amish men filled my head.

"I'm not asking you to identify this person," said Claudia, anticipating my question. "He's a poet and a newspaper man."

That could be me, I thought. But I'm clean shaven. Usually.

"I see that the Civil War impacted him greatly."

That was definitely not me.

She continued for another twenty minutes or so, rattling off details about a time and place that was clearly in the 1800s, occasionally pausing and taking deep breaths. Finally, she said, "We're done."

She opened the curtains. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"Just one. I'm driving."

"Chardonnay okay?"

I nodded and she poured us each a glass.

"What did you get from the reading?" said Claudia as she sat on her couch opposite me.

The truth was, I didn't really get a lot from it. I wasn't a "past lives" kind of guy. I knew about reincarnation, had read

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about it and knew people who not only believed it but professed to have experienced its truth firsthand. I hadn't. When the silence began to become awkward I said, "I don't know what to say."

"I believe you're the reincarnation of someone famous. But I suppose you know that. Deep down. Perhaps you're even afraid to acknowledge it."

"I really don't know who you're referring to," I said.

"Do you want me to tell you who I believe you were?"

I wanted to say no, but before I could stop myself I said, "All right."

"Walt Whitman."

"Walt Whitman? Really?" I said, as though it were a rational question.

"Yes," she said, as though it were a rational answer.

"What does that mean? I mean... What does that mean?"

"How can a two-year-old child who's never played piano or taken a lesson, sit down at a piano and start playing famous symphonies?"

Just because I didn't have an answer for that particular phenomenon didn't mean that such anecdotes made reincarnation a fact.

"I appreciate the free... 'reading.' I know that *you* know I just lost my job, and you might think this is a way to cheer me up, but—"

Claudia held up a hand. "Please. I consider the work I do here to be sacred. I don't just say what people want to hear."

Before I came to Los Angeles I was the editor of an alternative newspaper in Toledo, Ohio. We did a feature on six local psychics. I contributed to the piece by getting a reading

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from the most revered local seer. It turned out I was a famous biblical personality and the person who accompanied me to the session was also famous in a past life. Later, when I interviewed several of the psychic's other clients, I discovered that they too were reincarnations of famous people. I had to conclude that either a disproportionate amount of famous people were reincarnated in Toledo, at the same time, or that the "you were famous in a past life" strategy was good for business. Because she was such a nice person, and because I understood a little about psychic phenomena, I considered a third possibility. It was possible that her gift was being able to see mental image pictures surrounding the client. It could be that the client, knowing that part of the session was about "past lives," created mental images of people they thought—or wished—they had been. The psychic may have seen or intuited those images and misinterpreted them. I was young then and gave most people the benefit of the doubt.

I was a different person now.

"Look," said Claudia, "I know you don't know what to do with this information. All I ask is that you be open to it. I've read your work. Obviously, I'm not saying it's an exact duplicate of Walt Whitman's writing, but I can see it being a logical extension of it."

"I appreciate—"

"I know you appreciate it. All I'm saying is please be open to the possibility. That's all I ask. Haven't you ever felt a 'kinship' to Walt Whitman?"

"Look, I've got another appointment—a job interview," I lied. As soon as the words were out of my mouth I regretted it. If she really was a psychic, then she knew I was lying. If she

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knew, she let it slide. We stood, Claudia gave me a hug, and she showed me out.

I walked down a couple flights of stairs and back to my car. I knew she meant well. I knew she probably believed she was helping me. Giving me something I could use when I was down.

Maybe, but I sure as hell didn't know what it was.

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I felt like a nap by the time I got back to Palos Verdes. I had a Storyteller show at nine. I usually had a light supper on nights I performed. And a little wine just before and during my performance. Just enough to take the edge off. Not enough to get drunk. I learned that lesson a long time ago.

I tossed my keys on a table just inside my door, locked up and went to my bookshelf. I had an old copy of *Leaves of Grass*. It was an edition with hand-pasted pastel drawings to complement the poems. I hadn't been completely honest with Claudia. My interest in, and affinity for, Whitman was much stronger than I had let on. When I was in my early twenties I had an experience I'd heard described as a "cosmic consciousness" experience. Essentially it was a spontaneous enlightenment experience. Something that completely changed my life and the way I saw the world—figuratively and literally.

Many amazing things happened immediately following that experience and the feeling lasted for about six months or so. I had experienced a complete lack of ego immediately following

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the experience, but eventually my desires and ego needs returned.

I had done nothing to bring about the experience. I wasn't meditating, nor was I a particularly religious or even spiritual person. I wasn't reading any inspirational books. In fact, I had been incredibly depressed. To the extent that on the day preceding the experience I had written down ten reasons why life wasn't worth living.

That night I'd sat down with a friend and started passing the idea that "nothing is as it seems" back and forth like a joint. And we'd gotten higher than we'd ever imagined possible.

About eight hours later we had innocently decoded the universe, stripping significance from everything we perceived. We had observed, not theoretically, but *actually*, that nothing—no event, thought, thing or person—had any significance besides that which we attached to it.

It had been a life-altering experience. And though the exhilarating feeling of freedom and relief eventually dissipated, I could always return to it for inspiration and strength.

The day after I had that experience I came across the book I now held in my hands, in a used bookstore. I didn't have much money and it should have cost a lot more than it did. I bought it and carried it around like some kind of holy book for a long time.

This afternoon I lay down on my couch and started reading the poem "I Sing the Body Electric."

And fell asleep dreaming about Walt Whitman.

## Chapter 4

I used Facebook to connect with my modest “fan base,” mainly to remind them of upcoming appearances, or to post something I wrote that I considered inspiring or noteworthy.

Tonight I saw a Facebook email from someone identifying herself as Brook-Lynn—I remembered accepting a friend request from someone by that name about a week ago. She had said she read my books. Tonight she wrote the following message: *My name is Brook-Lynn—yes, I know the name is unusual, but my folks had a thing about that part of New York...and I’ve learned to like it. You don’t know me, but then, maybe you do. I recently started reading your books. But as much as I like your work, I get the feeling there is something more between us. Don’t freak out, I’m not a whack job (although I should probably leave that to others to decide). I just get an incredibly intense feeling that we might have known each other from... Well, not this lifetime, okay? I’m not a lunatic, really. I guess it sounds like I really need you to believe that. Anyhow, I’m going to be at your show tonight. I won’t tell you how to recognize me (I think the red carnation gag is too theatrical, don’t you?). Either you will recognize me or you won’t. I won’t give you any hints. This is not a setup and there are no sexual overtones to any of this. It’s just that I’ve been going through a lot of things lately (not really relevant to tell you at this point, or perhaps ever), and your works speaks*

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*to me. If you don't recognize me tonight or if you do and choose not to speak with me, you will never hear from me again. I'm not a stalker and I am—in every other outward way—stable. LOL. So, if you don't get the same vibe I'm getting, no harm, no foul. I wish you well in any case. Love your work. All the very, very best. Brook-Lynn.*

I received the usual amount of crazy email and collected my share of “odd” fans. I took the position that an eccentric fan was better than no fan. Still, I had never read anything like this. It scared me a little.

But I felt something else too. After what the psychic had said, my sense of “connection” to Walt Whitman all these years, and my own experiences and recent talks with my father, I had the sense that...

*Something* was happening.

It didn't happen often, but a couple of times in my life I felt a part of something bigger than myself. As though I was being swept up in events that moved me in a direction over which I had little or no control.

I was open to possibilities. Especially now.

I knew that when you looked for something and really believed it would appear, there was a good chance it would. Where that theory broke down was that even though people *wanted* something to happen, they really didn't believe it would. And what they *really* believed—which was often the opposite of what they wanted—happened. I figured that what you *really* and truly believed pretty much always happened by default. It was like a “belief-to-reality machine” that just kept on churning out moments of real life.

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Today, as I looked out over my life—past and present—I realized I was in a unique position. I no longer had much to lose. I had no job, no money, no significant other and my last living relative, my father, was living on borrowed time. Being in my mid-forties was not a plus in this, or most any other, job market.

I was open to possibilities, if for no other reason than my possibilities seemed to have dwindled down to nearly nothing.

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## Chapter 5

I put the hose in my mouth...and breathed in slowly. I felt a sense a relaxation, peace... And I just let go.

“You all right?” said Carly.

I looked up at my friend looming above me, removed the hookah hose from my mouth and breathed out a fragrant plume of smoke. I thought I could detect a slight scent of strawberries.

“Not really. Sit down,” I said and patted a large pillow next to me on the floor. Bobby’s Hookah Lounge was filled with about thirty large—four feet by four feet—pillows, all of which were encased in Indian design material. There were about a dozen tables and a hookah was placed in the center of each. The table tops were round, approximately four feet in diameter, about three feet off the ground and appeared to be a dark-stained wood. Each patron received his own hookah hose mouthpiece, for sanitary reasons.

Bobby’s Hookah Lounge was a place I went to unwind, even when I wasn’t performing there, which I was tonight. The music was acoustic and mellow. It relaxed me. A squirt of Oxy Bump, an oxygen nasal spray, and a hookah bowl of shisha (flavored tobacco) had a way of evening me out.

I scanned the room for Brook-Lynn. Who was I looking for? A blond bombshell? A black-rimmed glasses type with no makeup. A man with gender issues? An accountant-by-day-

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poet-by-night? A cyber stalker with a knife in her purse? My thoughts provided a smorgasbord of paranoia.

“I heard about you getting fired.” Carly was a close friend. We had known each other for nearly ten years. I had published a few of her poems when I had my monthly magazine and she had introduced me to the South Bay coffeehouse scene, which included clubs in Redondo Beach, Manhattan Beach, Torrance, Hermosa Beach, Palos Verdes, San Pedro and Long Beach.

I had never dated Carly and I believed that was one reason we had remained so close over the years. I had met her parents—each was working on his or her second spouse. Carly’s mother had a condo in Brentwood and hosted the best parties. She was having an affair—that her current husband knew about—with the conductor of one of the lesser-known-but-real “Los Angeles area” symphony orchestras. People turned out for her parties with the “maestro” and they dressed for the occasion. Really dressed. Black ties and tuxedos. It was like being in the middle of “March of the Penguins.”

But I genuinely enjoyed being invited to Carly’s mom’s parties. Carly always made sure her mother introduced me as a “great American poet.” I figured the hostess could have tossed in labels like “undiscovered,” or “cutting edge”...or if she had to comply with truth in advertising laws, she could have used words like “broke” and “destitute.” I always showed up underdressed. In my mind it was a way to distinguish the “talent” from the “spectators.” I usually wore a sports coat with a black t-shirt underneath.

“I think it was awful of Jake to fire you,” said Carly, as though she were spitting out something foul.

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“It’s not like that,” I said, taking another hit from my oxygen spray. “Jake gave me a job when no one else would. And he kept me on beyond the point he needed me. I owe the guy. The economy’s fucked. My own magazine closed years ago. He’s not the enemy.”

The “enemy” to people like Carly—trust fund babies who never had to make their own money—were people who didn’t spend lots of money on people, politicians and causes their parents’ money allowed them to spend money on. If I needed advice about how to spend my own money, I’d call my college roommate who was now a Certified Financial Planner. If I needed help spending someone else’s money, I’d call Carly.

“If you say so,” she said begrudgingly. “But I still don’t think he should have fired you.”

I thought about saying that she could have invested some of her parents’ money in either my magazine or Jake’s, but there was no point. “Thanks.”

We both relaxed into the moment and I took another hit of fruity shisha, while a guitarist performed a classy version of the bluesy tune, “Hollywood Heroes.”

A few moments passed.

I scanned the room again for Brook-Lynn. There were a few women who sat by themselves and occasionally we made eye contact, but no one jumped out. Which, I suppose, was exactly the way she wanted it. From her email—if I could believe what she wrote—it was important to her that I make the connection.

“So, what are you going to do?” asked Carly finally.

“About what?”

“Work. Money.”

“I don’t know.”

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“I think this is a blessing in disguise.”

This was something that people with options—and lots of money in the bank—said when things didn’t go their way. I didn’t look at it that way. “Well, if that’s the case, I’d have to say it’s a brilliant disguise because it looks like a big pile of shit to me.”

“No seriously... I’m getting a good feeling from it. You know my gut feelings about things,” she said with a knowing smile.

I did. And the truth was, her gut was no more predictive than an Eight Ball with answers that floated up to a tiny window after you shook it. I also knew that when Carly suffered adversity she had the kind of money that made most modern problems disappear. A friend of mine explained this principle succinctly: *Either you got “fuck you” money, or you don’t. If you don’t, then you’ve got “fuck me” money.*

Carly and I possessed different kinds of currency.

But I didn’t feel like arguing with her. “I hope you’re right,” I said honestly.

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At precisely 8:30 I took the stage carrying a cup of Sonoma Cutrer Chardonnay. I had splurged and bought a bottle of my favorite chardonnay on the way over to the club. Bobby’s Hookah Lounge didn’t serve alcohol—a little of which I required to get up in front of dozens of people and feel comfortable.

My Storyteller Evening consisted of about 10 songs, give or take, depending on the audience reaction. I had a “master

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board” that controlled about fifty slides and two videos that were projected on a screen behind me and were appropriate for the song I played or a reading I did from one of my books. The readings consisted of poetry, excerpts from my novels, and setups to songs I was about to play. The master board was controlled by a foot pedal, as were some rhythm and “sweetening” tracks that backed up my live guitar and vocals. The sweetening tracks weren’t overproduced and I’d recorded all but a couple piano tracks myself.

Three of the recurring themes in my novels were that “nothing has any significance besides that which you apply to it,” “It Is What It Is,” and that “one way to penetrate and experience the mysteries of life is to understand paradox.” With that in mind, I usually started my show with the song “It Is What It Is.”

*Give me a hint  
Baby, give me a clue  
I want to know  
If it's really true*

*Does it all make sense  
Is there a rhyme or a reason  
I'm burning up  
Baby, I'm freezin'*

*Nobody knows  
It's a great paradox  
Nobody sees  
In a world run by clocks  
So we search for the key  
To the locks  
On the Magic Box*

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*I take myself with me  
Wherever I go  
I try to relax  
And enjoy the show*

*But the drama keeps coming  
Again and again  
(‘Cause) the curtain is falling  
I just don’t know when*

*It is what it is  
Nothing more, nothing less  
Nothing good, nothing bad  
Nothing left to confess  
Nothing more to add  
Or possess  
No one left to impress*

*The past and the future  
Now bleed together  
Mirrored in a moment  
Echoing...forever*

*I see the wheels  
Going round and round  
I’m back at the beginning  
Feelin’ lost...and found*

*Nobody knows  
It’s a great paradox  
Nobody sees  
In a world run by clocks  
So we search for the key  
To the locks  
On the Magic Box*

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## Chapter 6

The set went well and elicited enough applause for an encore and I obliged.

On a table next to the stage I had set out my novels, a poetry collection, and a couple of music CDs—even though I knew that most people, including me, downloaded music from iTunes and Amazon. The CDs made the music “look legit.” As I took a seat behind the sales table, again I scanned the room looking for Brook-Lynn.

“I have every book and CD,” said a woman. She had an accent. I couldn’t tell whether it was Irish, Scottish or British.

“I appreciate that. But if you have all the books, why are you buying more?”

“Gifts. I want to turn people on to you.”

I nodded, smiled, autographed the books, and gave her a free CD to go with the three books she purchased.

Still, I sensed this was not Brook-Lynn. And I could not find her in the club.

I closed down the electronics on stage, putting everything in an equipment box I could carry to my car in one trip, along with my guitar. I was my own roadie.

As I closed the last lock on my Ovation guitar case I searched the audience again. The only person looking at me, besides Carly—who did so occasionally when not arguing with the waiter about something—was a middle-aged woman

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holding up one of my books and CDs. I'd seen her before and I was certain she was not Brook-Lynn. Maybe Brook-Lynn really *was* a whack job. Maybe she wasn't really here. That made sense, in a way. That might be what a real whack job would do: set me up so that now I would forever be looking over my shoulder. *Maybe she lived in Cleveland and...* I stopped myself. I could be a little obsessive.

"I've got a free pass for two weeks of unlimited hookah privileges," said Carly when I sat down next to her.

"What?"

"I complained to the manager that there was something wrong with my hookah hose, and they wanted to keep me happy."

I thought about saying something clever, but I bit my tongue. It was one of the ironies of life that Carly received all kinds of free stuff even though she could afford more than most. I think it was one of her missions to make people pay for what she perceived as life's imperfections.

She handed me the coupon she had extorted from management. I'm sure she meant the gesture to be a show of our friendship. And a recognition of my recent descent into hard times.

"Loved your set."

"Thanks."

"I still can't believe Jake fired you. And on a Sunday!"

"That'll teach me to work weekends."

"I texted him a few minutes ago and scolded him."

"Thanks."

"It's the least I could do."

I figured that was about right.

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“He texted me back that you saw Claudia this afternoon. What did she say?”

Carly knew Claudia and liked her. After seeing Claudia, Carly was convinced that she was Cleopatra reincarnated.

I told her what happened.

“Do you really think you’re Walt Whitman reincarnated?”

“I don’t know. Even if it were true I don’t see how it means anything now. If reincarnation exists, it seems to me that it’s a little like football. Each incarnation is like a separate season. I can’t take touchdowns I scored last season and apply them to *this* season’s games.”

“Carly!” I heard a voice behind me.

“Albert,” said Carly with a smile.

A man who looked to be in his mid-forties made his way to our table and sat on a pillow between Carly and me. He was portly, not fat. He wore a sports coat, jeans, and a white shirt open at the collar.

“Albert’s a lawyer. One of the good guys,” she added quickly. “His parents and my parents were friends back in the day, and we’ve known each other since high school. He’s an entertainment lawyer. He might be able to turn you on to some people now that you’re unemployed.”

One of Carly’s worst qualities was also one of her best: she was unfiltered and blunt.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I know your work,” said Albert, reaching across the table and shaking my hand. “I’ve read your books and I was planning on catching your show tonight. I had a meeting run late. Anyhow, maybe we *should* talk.”

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I didn't feel like pursuing the matter at that moment or putting the man on the spot. He gave me his card and I pocketed it.

Carly's phone started vibrating. She withdrew it like a practiced gunslinger, looked at the screen and said, "I gotta take this."

"I'm going to pack up and get going," I said. "Nice to meet you, Albert."

"Likewise."

Carly leaned a few feet to her right, kissed me on the cheek and said, "Things are gonna get better, Michael. I've got a feeling."

I sucked one last inhalation of strawberry-flavored shisha, and then went back to the stage to retrieve my gear.

Stephen Smoke

## Chapter 7

I finally accepted the fact that my Facebook friend had been some kind of prankster. There was no one in the audience that could possibly be the mystery woman. It was a fun fantasy, but it was over.

When I drank, I never drove. Which meant that whenever I performed, I always took a cab or arranged transportation with a friend. Tonight it was a cab.

I put my equipment in the trunk, got in and settled back into the cracked faux leather seats.

I told the driver my address.

“So, how’d it go?” said the female driver.

“Sorry?”

“The performance.”

I thought that was incredibly perceptive until I immediately realized that the driver had watched me walk out of the club with a guitar case and other equipment.

“Good. I read from my novels and poetry and play some guitar and sing.”

“Sounds cool.”

That was the last communication I had with the cabbie during the ten minute trip up the hill from Redondo Riviera.

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## I, Walt Whitman

“You need some help with that?”

“No,” I said. It was just the guitar case and a box filled with not-so-heavy electronics. “I got it.”

The woman closed the trunk and took the ten dollar bill I handed her. She pocketed it and said, “I liked that song.”

I was fumbling with my keys, but she got my attention. “Sorry?”

“I like that song.”

“Which song?”

“‘It Is What It Is.’”

“I didn’t see you inside the club.”

“I downloaded it from iTunes last week.”

My eyes locked with the cab driver’s eyes. She didn’t flinch. She was waiting for me to recognize her.

“And you are...” I said reflexively.

She just looked at me.

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. “You’re Brook-Lynn.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said with a disarming smile.

I didn’t know what to do. Should I ask her in? She didn’t seem dangerous, but the verdict was still out on that. Still, I didn’t want her to go. At least not yet. “Look, I’d like to talk with you...”

“But you don’t want to let me into your place because you’re still not sure if I’m some kind of psycho.”

“Close enough. Admiral Risty’s just a few blocks away, down the hill. Why don’t you let me buy you a glass of wine?”

“You’re my last fare. I could do with one for the road.”

## Stephen Smoke

I took my guitar and equipment upstairs to my condo and when I returned I got in the front passenger seat, while Brook-Lynn drove to Admiral Risty.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was about ten-thirty when we were seated in the Admiral Risty lounge. The moon was nearly full and we could see the ocean rolling beneath it. Brook-Lynn looked to be somewhere between early to late thirties, but I could have been wrong. She was lithe, toned, tanned and her short hair was black. She was Eurasian. I had always found Eurasian women to be quite beautiful. And while Brook-Lynn was not beautiful in the classical sense, she was very attractive. She looked me straight in the eye. My experience with people who did so was that they were either telling the truth or practiced con men. Or psychos.

She had an easy smile and an iPhone she didn't look at compulsively. She wore a black leather jacket, a turquoise t-shirt, and jeans that neither flattered her figure nor did much to hide the fact that she could clean up nicely if she had the desire to do so.

"I'm at a disadvantage here," I said, sipping a glass of Sonoma Cutrer—I decided not to switch from my "performance drink" I'd downed earlier. "You seem to know a lot about me, but I know nothing about you."

"I don't *know* a lot about you either. Just what I glean from your books and your blog. But I love your work."

"It's possible to love the art and not the artist," I said.

## I, Walt Whitman

“I’ve often found that the more you know about an artist’s personal life, it begins to color the way you view his or her art.”

That was an interesting observation. One which I shared. A “fan” extrapolated much about the artist from his work. Much of it incorrectly. “I agree. I realized a long time ago that I was not ‘the man in my songs.’ In many ways, my work is the best of me. Something to which I aspire rather than how I live my life. For a while I had difficulty with that.”

“Why?”

“I felt like a hypocrite. But the more artists I met the more I realized that most of them were even more hypocritical than I was. I also realized that there was nothing hypocritical about creating inspiring art—even if I was not an inspiring person. I wasn’t starting a religion. I was selling books, not *me*. In my work I never tell anyone what they should do or think. My opinion is that most people have lost the ability to think. They get information—which is not the same as being informed—and they are taught *what* to think, not *how* to think. Ironically, the most programmed people I know are people who are often the most educated. It’s as though it takes a lot of education to completely obliterate common sense.”

“I think there’s an intuitive common sense that comes from ‘under-stimulation,’” she said. “I say under stimulation because I think it’s too much to ask in this wireless world to live a completely unplugged and ‘natural’ existence. But some people monitor their input. I mean, you wouldn’t let garbage trucks dump heaping piles of crap on your lawn. Yet a lot of people allow virtually limitless, unfiltered information into their lives and it can poison the mind and soul just as surely as any toxin.”

## Stephen Smoke

“We agree about that, but it still doesn’t tell me much about you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Give me something between a life story and ‘I Am Who I Am.’”

“Let’s see...” Brook-Lynn wrinkled one side of her mouth, raised her right eyebrow, made a humming sound and looked toward the ceiling. Then she looked right back at me, “I’m a friend,” she said finally.

“Of whose?”

“Yours. I know that raises even more questions, but that’s a start. I’m not a stalker, crazed fan, or someone off her meds. I drive a hack now and then for money. I used to be a...are you ready?”

“Rodeo clown?”

“I was a doctor.”

“Like some kind of New Age healer doctor?”

“No. The old fashioned kind: M.D.”

“And you gave it all up for the glory of driving a cab. Makes sense so far.”

She smiled as though she had heard that before. “I don’t tell most people. No need to. Most people I meet just care that I get them where they’re going on time.”

“Yes, but... Come on, it is a little hard to believe. You gotta give me more than that.”

“I don’t, of course, but I think I owe you a reasonable explanation. I was an oncologist. Pediatric oncology.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“I did it for ten years. If we get to know each other better, I’ll get into the specifics. And there *are* specifics. God, way too

## I, Walt Whitman

many specifics. One day I just couldn't get out of bed. I told the hospital I needed some time. They understood. That was about a year ago.

"Now I write in my journal, drive a cab, walk by the ocean, get drunk by myself every once in a while and...write some more. It helps. For years it was like an emotional tsunami washing over me endlessly. I never had any time to process the monumental amount of pain that was my life. Writing about it helps me, if not make sense of it, at least to carve parts of it out of me onto a piece of paper. It's like a biopsy of my soul. When I get it out, on paper, I understand it better. And then sometimes...I just throw the pages in the trash."

Brook-Lynn paused and sipped her chardonnay. She looked up at me and smiled mischievously. "I know you're going to Google me when you get home."

I thought about saying she was wrong. "Well, maybe not till morning."

"It'll check out. There are even some pictures of me when I worked in Westwood and also down here in the South Bay at Torrance Memorial. My hair was a little longer, but it's me."

After a moment I said, "My father's dying. Lung cancer." I didn't talk about this much. It wasn't light conversation and most people I knew didn't know, or care about, my personal life. Suddenly Brook-Lynn seemed like the perfect person to talk to about this.

"I'm sorry."

"I hope that isn't too weird. I don't know why I said that. I mean, you just said you're taking a break from... And I just blurt it out."

## Stephen Smoke

“You said it because you’re in pain and you don’t want to burden other people. But talking to someone who deals with cancer every day just seemed natural. I understand.”

“You don’t look like any oncologist I’ve met.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said.

“So how did you pick me? For the past-life thing, I mean.”

“I wouldn’t put it exactly like that. But I believe I’m a very intuitive person. I think working with children helped develop that part of myself. I was constantly torn. On one hand, the fact these innocent and wonderful children were so afflicted and doomed to a short and horrifying existence, made a strong case for the idea that there is no God.

“Yet almost every parent and most of the children counted on the idea that there was something after death. When I say ‘counted on,’ I mean that without clinging to that hope—some hope—they would go mad.

“Ultimately, I chose to believe.”

“Chose?”

“When it comes to believing in a Grand Design that’s essentially not provable, it really comes down to faith. A choice to believe or not believe. I lived 24/7 in a world that, without faith, there was little point in going on. Sometimes faith was the only thing left.”

“That still doesn’t tell me how you got to me.”

“A former patient emailed me your poem ‘Gravity of Tears.’”

“You know that was about my dog.”

“It was about someone you loved so much that you couldn’t bear to have them gone. There was true feeling in those words and when I read them I broke down and bawled like a baby.

## I, Walt Whitman

And I read the novel in which the protagonist cradled his daughter as she died in his arms. You nailed it, down to the drops of white liquid dripping from the corners of ‘her tiny mouth.’ I knew that you understood my world.

“That’s what initially drew me to you. But the more I read and the more I listened to your music, I sensed that you and I shared a greater understanding. About life... About other things. I may be wrong about that. Like you say, you’re not the man in your songs.”

I was touched by what she said, and genuinely impressed by the person sitting across from me. But I’d felt that way before when I’d bought cars from impressive people who seemed a lot less impressive when I brought my car in for service a few days later.

“I’d like to take this slow.”

“There’s no pressure and I’m not sure what ‘this’ is,” said Brook-Lynn. “I just felt it was the right thing to do to contact you.”

”And when you contacted me you said we knew each other from another lifetime. What did you mean by that?”

She looked at her watch. “Look, I gotta go,” she said. “But I’ll tell you everything next time. I promise.”

We finished our drinks and she dropped me back at my place. We didn’t hug or even shake hands. I just got out of the car and said, “That was interesting,” before I closed the door. I couldn’t get a handle on how I really felt.

But as I saw the taillights of her cab get smaller and disappear in the distance, I had the feeling that I would see her again.

Stephen Smoke

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