

Copyright © Willie Watson, 2015

***Published in 2015
Prague, Czech Republic***

also by Willie Watson:

155 Sonnets

Pink Snow

Rheets 2014

Rheets 2013

Twoems

What Do Children Like to Do? (with Lenka Brožová)

Uncle Willie's Very Silly Animal Poems

The This of the That

Tarot Poems (with Marie Brožová)

The Alchemist's Notebook

Four Syllables on Water

The Guru Kalehuru and Other Poems

Poems from Prague

Some Notes on the Writing of this Book

One day in 2013 a friend gave me a call out of the blue and suggested we meet for lunch. We met at my favorite Chinese restaurant, the place on Slezska Street right across from the back of the big, pink shopping center, where they have the biggest spring rolls I've ever seen. I was surprised for a moment when he ordered in Chinese, but then I remembered he'd been to China. After lunch we went for a walk in Riegerovy Sady, one of the most beautiful places on this green Earth (in the city park category). Most of it is on the long side of a fairly steep hill, well wooded but with a magnificent sweep of lawn running down the center and, as you walk along the footpath at the top, you look out and over the town and across the river and there, on the crest of the opposite hill, is Prague Castle, lit up and magical at night but equally impressive and magical kingdom, fairy tale-ish in the daytime.

We stopped and sat on a ledge and he said "I read on your blog that you want to write a book," and I thought "Ah hah, so that's what this is about."

"I'm not a writer," he said. "Actually, I've tried but it never all comes together but I've got a lot of great stories about China, Amsterdam, my farm in America, you name it, I've met some crazy people and I've done some crazy shit and I think it would make a great book, I've got it all written down in my diaries, I'll get it to you."

And so he did. I was skeptical at first, everybody thinks they've got a book in them and most of them are just bullshitting, but I figured I should at least glance at the diaries before I refused.

There were two things he was definitely not bullshitting about - first, not being a writer. He is a fantastic talker, a raconteur, he is James Joyce in a pub, he is Sam Clemens in a saloon in old Calaveras County, but his spelling is shit. Not only are lots of words misspelled, but he often didn't spell them the same way twice. He wrote about importing turquoise from China and I didn't know if he was talking about Thanksgiving poultry or some automobile part. He must have spelled it 7 or 8 different ways and all of them wrong. Grammar mistakes, redundancies up the wazoo, cliché metaphors, pretty much every writing faux pas you could make, he made it.

Second, he really did have a lot of great stories. So, here they are.

I've decided to change the names of almost everybody in the story, and in a few cases physical descriptions. He wasn't happy about that at all, but there are reasons. To the reader, I don't think it will make a great deal of difference. But, as much as I am sure that every word he wrote down and every story he told me is true, I also know that truth is a subjective thing and other people might not see things the same way, so I'm trying to avoid lawsuits. Also, a fair amount of the stories in this book involve activities that are illegal in varying degrees and, as much as I don't want to get into trouble, I don't want to drop anybody else in the shit, either. The only names I haven't changed are a few names of famous people. They're public figures; they just have to deal with the fact that people's perceptions of them are part of the public conversation. Don't have the fame if you can't take the blame, that's what I say.

Also, I've changed the names of a few places, or just left them out, because some of the action takes place in small towns and rural areas where everybody knows everybody and, just by giving the name of the town, I'd be giving away the name of the person.

Obviously, places like Prague and Shanghai I've left the same.

Willie Watson

A special thank you to my lovely wife Helena, without whom this book would never have been completed, and to Steve Giglio and Bill Karneges for their comments and corrections.

Introduction

*I haven't seen any gods yet but I pray to them all just in case.
– Guru Sharab*

I am a lucky guy. Disasters turn to gold for me. My fuckups are monumental, epic, world class fuckups but somehow I always come out in a better place than I was in at the start.

I lost everything in the States; my farm, my house, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and, boy, don't ever let anybody tell you that divorce is not a war because it is.

My wife got full custody, I left America in shame and disgrace, but that was merely the beginning of my journey and this is the story of my life and my travels in Holland and the Czech Republic and China and a few other places and the wonderful people I've met and the lessons I've learned along the path to enlightenment, or at least enough enlightenment for a crazy old Hippie like me. I am crazy Jack, the Shit Guru and this is the story of my search for truth, this is the evolution of the dragon.

Chapter 1

If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family.
– Baba Ram Dass

I'm just a typical American, working class, Catholic boy from a typical American town, right smack dab in the heart of the Midwest. I've got five brothers and I am the second oldest. My big brother Dom is a serious prick and always was. He bullied me terribly as a kid. Not his fault, I suppose, kids learn by what they see and hear and he saw how verbally abusive our Dad, Dom Senior, was to our Mom, calling her a dumb Pollack all the time. Dom emulated Dad as faithfully as a bear cub mimics its mother's hunting techniques, carrying on the cycle down through the generations, but for Dom I was in the subservient role. He called me Chink; I guess because I am short and have squinty eyes.

We were a second generation Italian family and one thing about my Mom is that she assimilated to that Italian-American-ness, learning cooking from Grandma Pazzo, who was actually from Italy. Grandma Pazzo was the head of our family which, with her two sons and two daughters and all of their spouses and offspring, consisted of almost 30 individuals. We spent all holidays together and relished her spaghetti, calamari and her 'secret recipe' cannoli, with a snow of powdered sugar on top. I was lucky to be part of this Italian culture.

It wasn't until I arrived in the Czech Republic that I realized, as in the awakening of a long repressed memory that my mother was actually from this part of the planet, that I am as Slavic as I am Italian.

The last time I was back in the States, Dom was bitching about how he'd lost half of his money, he was down to his last million and I said "Hey, try losing it all." He's totally lost sight of where we came from, it's like he doesn't remember our childhood at all.

After me there's Louie. Dom is just sort of overbearing and obnoxious, but Louie is the one who's truly a psychopath, no concern for anybody else in the world. My mother called him the terrorist. One day he brought his pit bull over for her to dogsit and of course she agreed, she never said no to any request from us kids, not even after we were all grown up. Like any normal person, though, who lives in society and is aware of things like

neighborhood children, mailmen, and liability laws, she put him on a chain in the back yard, so he wouldn't kill anybody.

When Louie got back and saw this he was furious. He went nuts, somehow he wound up on the roof jumping up and down and screaming at the universe and Mom in particular, and that's how the police found him, because she'd called them. Blood is blood, but there's something to be said for self-preservation as well.

Then came Carlo. Carlo was the sweet one, the nice one, the one who was really the enlightened mystic I am still striving to become, the one who was always the best to our mother. He was also the gay one and he died of AIDS while I was in jail in the Czech Republic. Actually it was suicide, because he was also manic-depressive and taking drugs for everything while he was wasting away and it was all too much so he decided to end it all and Mom actually helped, she gave him the fatal pill. She asked me later, tearfully, if she'd done the right thing and I said "Mom, how can you even ask that, of course you did, he was in pain, you sacrificed your child, your best child," and to tell the truth I did see something totally saintly about her action.

The police report said he died of AIDS. Easier that way. They couldn't have cared less.

Then there's Mike, who is as devoid of ambition as Dom and Louie and Brian, the youngest one, are full of it. All he wants to do is grow marijuana and fish. He's my brother and I love him but he is a fucking moron, that's just the plain and simple truth. He grows some kickass pot, I'll give him that, but he keeps growing even though he's already been busted a couple of times and probably will keep growing until he winds up in jail for life. Forget three strikes, if they had ten strike laws some people would still strike out, and my brother Mike's one of those.

One time he came to Amsterdam to buy some seeds and do it up right. I told him I'd meet him at the airport, give him a place to stay and show him around town. I said not to worry if I missed him at the gate, just to wait for me at the "Meeting Point," because there's no way to miss somebody at a point called "Meeting Point" or at least you would think so. I caught a tram to the airport the night before because there wasn't one early enough to meet his flight and then he never showed I even waited a couple of hours after his flight came in but eventually I went home, because there was nothing

else to do.

I got a call 3 days later from my Mom, saying “What the hell is going on? You were supposed to meet your brother at the airport.”

Mike was in the hospital. He’d bought some seeds; just seeds, easiest thing in the world to hide, you can leave them in the lint at the bottom of your slightly scruffy carry-on bag and you’ll never get caught and have plausible deniability if you do. But Mike put them in some balloons and swallowed the balloons like he was a big time heroin smuggler or something, and then panicked at the airport on the way out so they took him to the hospital and Lord knows how they got the balloons out of his stomach but once they did they gave him a letter he could take to the airline if he wanted to avoid the fee for changing his airline ticket and Mike is such a fucking moron he was going to show them the letter, even though it clearly stated that he was admitted to hospital because he was trying to smuggle drugs like a dumbass. I asked him why he didn’t wait for me at the meeting point and he just said “Oh, I was in a coffee shop near there. I waited for you.”

Then there is Brian, who also got absorbed into the hippie movement but reached a point where he took a hard right turn. He decided that he’d rather be middle class and respectable than smoke all the dope in the world and think about philosophy all the time. He’s a Republican but I can forgive him for that because in many other ways, he’s the best of the bunch, the only one of us who turned out to be worth a damn.

We were a tight, proud family growing up but we’ve turned out to be just about as disparate and dysfunctional as a family can be. The one thing we have in common is that we all can make a damned good spaghetti sauce from scratch.

Chapter 2

My story isn't pleasant, it's not sweet and harmonious like the invented stories; it tastes of folly and bewilderment, of madness and dream, like the life of all people who no longer want to lie to themselves.
– Hermann Hesse

The TV is a box. Think outside the box. – Guru Sharab

When I was 9 years old our TV died and it was a turning point in my life. No more Wagon Train, no more Ed Sullivan, no more “Johnny Yuma, was a rebel, he roooooamed through the west.” At first, I was totally traumatized. It was like losing a parent. But, there are five stages to acceptance, although I didn't know that then: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Once I hit acceptance my world expanded beyond the flat screen and out into the 3D world where the real story is happening and truth is, if not always stranger than fiction, still pretty damned strange and far, far better than fiction because it's the truth.

When I was 11 Dom and I went to work at our Dad's used car lot. I soon got my first driving lesson when Dad bought a car at auction and asked me “Do you know how to drive?” I said no but I was thinking “What the hell are you talking about, Dad, I'm 11 years old, are you crazy?” He plunked me down in the driver's seat and said “You're going to drive home.”

Well, actually he was towing the car, I was just sitting behind the steering wheel, barely able to see over the dashboard and with no real responsibilities but scared half out of my wits, let me tell you.

I learned a lot about cars working there, and a lot about people, too. Daddy was a wheeler dealer, a dealer in wheels, an entrepreneur. He never finished 6th grade. He lied about his age to join the navy, where he wheeled and dealed like Milo Minderbinder, and manned a gun sometimes.

He dabbled in a lot of things: used cars, Christmas trees, fruit and vegetables and slightly illegal things like a bar with a poker game in a back room, stolen credit cards, and insurance fraud. He prided himself on being a little Mafioso.

But the big show was Hollywood Motors. It was built, as so many car lots

are, where the land is cheap, at the site of an abandoned railway terminal. The building was a huge, one story construction, big enough for 40 cars. The lot outside went on for blocks. Dad would let the old winos sleep in the cars. He figured that way there was at least somebody keeping half an eye on the place, and it only cost him a bottle a night.

There was one who we always called Jakey. I just assumed that was his name because it's what everybody called him and one day I overheard him complaining to my Dad "Even your kids call me Jakey" and I found out that was a slang word for wino.

Dad was a funny guy, loved to talk, always quick with a joke. He had some mannequins, and him and the guys would hang them up on a noose or put one in the back seat of a car, with a wig on, and drive around just to see the expression on people's faces.

All of us working there laughed and made dirty jokes about the naked mannequins but I was turned on. They looked like women; slender, perfectly formed women with tiny noses, clear eyes and sweet, tempting lips. There was an extra in a closet at home. One day when I was home alone, a rare occurrence in our household, I took her out and I was just staring at her, dreaming of women, and I had the most gigantic godawful boner of my young life up to that point. I brushed her skin and dreamed of all the women whose skin I wanted to touch, I sat her on the couch beside me and told her how beautiful she was and how much I wanted her and she smiled, I leaned over and kissed her, I kissed her with my eyes open, I kissed her with my eyes closed and, by this point I was hooked, I was well past the point of no return, I stripped down and got on top of her, dry humping like a madman. It was awkward, there is no insertion point, and I had to finish off with my hand and jizz all over her stomach, her perfectly flat stomach. Then my sense of guilt - Catholic guilt, not so much over fucking a mannequin, just over fucking at all and being naked in the living room - and my fear of getting caught took over and I cleaned her up real quick and put her back in the closet. But, nobody came home and pretty soon I took her out and did it again. That happened a few times. To this day, I still have a fondness for mannequins in my heart.

Another time I fucked a vacuum cleaner. That sucked.

Oh, it worked all right, I shot a big old wad of pecker snot right into the

hose, but it was not without pain and I never did it again. It was mechanical. It did not have the sweet romantic feel of my latex lady, her sweetly smiling lips, her laughing eyes. Not at all.

Sometimes, when somebody came in with a car that was damaged, but not quite damaged enough for the insurance company to pay out, we'd take a hammer and do a bit more damage. Whoops. Ha Ha! Dad hated insurance companies, always taught us that it was O.K. to rip them off because they were ripping everybody else off.

With bald tires, we would use a blowtorch and a scalpel to carve some new treads. It was quite an artistic thing, really. They looked as good as new even though, obviously, there was a bit less rubber on them than before. I was learning a profession. I was proud.

One memory I still carry with me from that time was when a wino puked his guts out and died on the office floor. He drank too much wine and he sniffed too much paint thinner. He knew he was dying. He was sad about that. I felt his sadness, like a disembodied spirit, enter into me.

But the most interesting thing was the crazy people. Tony Cavallo was a hunched over old man who lived at the mental institution that was just up the street, but he was harmless, not a criminal psychopath; perhaps a danger to himself but not anybody else, so they pretty much allowed him to come and go as he pleased. He loved Dad but I couldn't understand why. Dad and his cronies would sit him down in a chair and set off firecrackers under it just to hear him whinny like a horse, which had them all doubled up in stomach clenching hysterics. We all laughed. It was funny. Another time they sent him to the bank across the street with a stick-up note and showed him how to hold his hand in his pocket like he had a gun. After something like that, we wouldn't see him for a while, but he always came back.

By the time I was 13 I actually owned my own car, a 1962 Chevy 2 convertible but back then you didn't just push a button, you had to move the top back manually. It didn't have any plates but that didn't stop me, I drove it all over the place, even off the lot. Dad did, indeed, have some connections with the police and I never got into any real trouble.

We had some wild characters working there. There were the crazy redheaded twins Andy and Randy, who bragged about eating a pizza that was topped

with uppers on one side and downers on the other. It wasn't Four Seasons, more like two completely different states of mind. They also told me how they fucked a junkie once but put ice cubes up her pussy first.

One other time a scrawny , little woman, probably 20 but looking 40, strung out on heroin, offered my Dad a blowjob for 25 cents. Dad threw her out, but I was thinking I'd have done it; had to be better than a vacuum cleaner. Dad always said "Don't trust niggers" but more than half the people working there were black, and they were some of my favorites. There was Big Luther, 300 pounds if he was an ounce, he was a paint man and he was just the most amiable guy in the world. I loved hearing him talk about how he'd get a hooker to give him a blowjob every Thursday and how he knew some girls who would suck a guy off for 50 cents, and he had a voice like Barry White and I started to love black music, Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, but also I was thinking about women all the time and I'd go into the bathroom of the shop and jerk off 3 times a day, sometimes more, and I'd confess to the priest every Sunday. I even told him about the mannequin and the vacuum cleaner. I wonder if priests like that about their job.

I was sure I was bound for hell but I couldn't stop, I'd be jerking off again the next day.

Chapter 3

Hippies are just people who've decided to be Hippies. – Guru Sharab

You can get more stinking from drinking than you can from thinking but the feel is for real
-Sufi Joe Miller

I went to a Catholic High School but wasn't a great student. I'm dyslexic as fuck and a terrible speller to this day; for a while the nuns actually had me thinking I was stupid but I got over that.

I was a member of the Future Priests Club which was, perhaps, a foreshadowing of the future because priest, guru, what's the difference? In spite of mediocre grades I got into college. It wasn't exactly Ivy League but it was a good college, one with a bit of history and tradition, but my mind was elsewhere. The hippie movement was sweeping the nation like a psychedelic tsunami, and I wanted to surf that wave.

The classwork was boring and didn't seem relevant. I was learning about life in the dorms. I met some guys from New York and they seemed so different than the goobers down at the car lot; smoother, more knowledgeable. Josh Freedman, Danny Chavez and the ring leader of the group, Kevin Bennet.

Irish Kevin used to walk around the dorm with one towel wrapped around his privates, another around his head like a turban, and a mop, saying "Hail, how art thou?" and you had to answer "fuckin'geth well" or you'd get wacked with the mop.

He enjoyed lifting things from shops, the old five fingered discount we called it, and I became his eager and avid student in both the philosophy and technique of that ancient art. I am quite skillful at it, if I do say so myself. I'll bet I could even pick pockets but that is a step too far, an ethical abomination. But, from a shop, what the heck? Nobody's going to get hurt. The thrill was never monetary gain, more that there was a bit of competitive fun in the novelty of the items taken. Once, Kevin found a bear, a live brown bear, in a cage in front of a shop, some kind of promotion. Freeing the bear was a piece of cake, fitting him into the car proved to be completely impossible, and, mild mannered as he was, we could see the bear was beginning to get irritated, so we put him back in the cage and left.

We also got really good at getting into concerts for free, a skill which has served me well in life, granting me free access to everything from pro basketball games to ballet and opera.

They turned me on to pot and LSD and I grew my hair long, that's what drugs do, and went crazy over all the new music; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Jefferson Airplane, stuff like that. I was a particular fan of Motown but, contrary to popular opinion, that's not what being a Hippie was all about. If it was just about the music it would be no different than the punk 70s, the Glam 80s, and whatever the hell the 90s were. This is where all the journalists and the pundits get it wrong.

It wasn't about the music, even though the music was great and it felt cosmic to be in the park, gyrating with thousands of other people, some of them even girls. The drugs were great, too, but it wasn't about the drugs or we'd still be in that era and we're not. Lots of people are doing drugs these days, but few are trying to expand their consciousness.

The thing that made the 60s different than other decades, the Hippies different from other trends in fashion and music, was that there was actually a philosophy that went along with it. Love, Sharing, Freedom, Liberte, Egalite, Fraternitie, If it feels good, do it, free your head, we're all brothers and sisters in the family of man, from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs, you can live on love, all you need is love, all you need is love, sweet, sweet love. It was quite an anarchistic philosophy. There is no need for governments and laws and rules when everybody loves each other and everybody helps each other, and the love that is in each heart pours out into the street, into the sweet hippie air at the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.

Another thing that was different about the 60s is that the 70s, 80s, and every decade since has just come and gone and the people who grew up in them didn't keep the tag, but a lot of Hippies from the 60s stayed in the 60s, and that's true of me, too. I have gone way beyond the midwest, I have traveled in the great capitals of Europe, spent time chilling out with Bedouins in a tent and fled from the police on the dark nighttime streets of strange Chinese cities, but I am still a Hippie and it is still the Summer of Love, it will always be the Summer of Love.

I was stoned on hash one day in philosophy class. I was getting dizzy

from the spirals on the ceiling that spread out throughout the air and my consciousness and the universe and always came around to the same simple question: Why are we living? Why are we living?

Later, out on campus, on the green and pleasant campus, I ran into my old grade school buddy Seth, who said “Whoa, Jack, you’re a Hippie! That’s far out, man. Come back out to San Francisco with me, I’m living with Dave and a freak we call Black because he always wears black. Nobody knows his real name, nobody needs to know anybody’s real name, it’s total freedom, you’re going to love it, Black’s kind of weird but he’s cool, we get high all the time and everybody’s dancing in the street. Man! It’s San Francisco! It’s the 60s! This is our moment in history!” Or words to that effect. So, we went.

I wrangled a ’63 Chevy Impala from Dad, the plan was to resell it in San Francisco and make a profit. It got us all the way across the country just fine but then as we were driving into San Francisco, as we crested the hill, the brakes went out and I threw it into 1st gear and yanked on the parking brake and leaned on the horn but we were still coming down the hill like Steve McQueen in ‘Bullitt’ and narrowly avoided death several times due to the alert reflexes of seasoned San Francisco drivers and coasted to a stop just a few feet from the bay.

Seth was rigid, his body plastered to the seat back, with a look of absolute terror on his face. “Welcome to San Francisco!” I said, even though I was the one who was there for the first time.

Sold the car, but didn’t make a profit.

The first thing I noticed about our pad in Berkeley (we called it Berserklee) was a coffin in the middle of the living room. It was clear, from the coffee cups, drug paraphernalia, and books on top of it that it was not being used for its intended purpose. It was a cool place, and everybody there told me it had been Owsley Stanley’s acid factory, which is like the Hippie version of “George Washington Slept Here,” because Owsley turned thousands and thousands of people on to LSD, he was the father of our psychedelic nation.

I lived there a few months, tried Peyote, and talked to trees. I still talk to trees sometimes. You can have a real good conversation with a tree, if

you're listening.

Then, I went south to Santa Cruz to be with a hippie family on a farm. While I was living there I got a phone call. The police had found an abandoned Mustang in L.A. that belonged to my dad, so I had a car and a reason to go home. I was having a great time but I had learned that being in California was not the key to being a Hippie. I could do that anywhere.

I bought some mescaline and pot, hid it in the driver's side door, and headed back east but the car blew up and I had to call my uncle Steve for help. He lived a bit out of L.A., up in the hills but not the rich hills. He let me store the "snake medicine" in his refrigerator while he put a head gasket on the car. I was there a week or two and then on the road again.

I was stopped by the police for a loud muffler before I even got out of California but they waved me on because they could see from the license plate that I was a car dealer.

I'd taken to wearing a tie-dyed dashiki type shirt, multicolored overalls and pillbox hat, and that was my hippie uniform for years and years. I had a dog who was always by my side, a brown and yellow mutt named Bruthah, and I also got in the habit of carrying a stick, which was a prop and a handy multi-use device. I was already working on the guru look.

I returned to college, but on different terms. Tuition? Meaningless. Trading money for a degree, it's just paper for paper, so I started just showing up at the classes I was interested in and the professors never objected, especially as I was often the most enthusiastic, certainly one of the most talkative and participatory students in the class. I took philosophy and art, and learned a lot. I was using drugs to open my mind and the university to fill it with knowledge, and I was having a blast. I even took part in a takeover of the administration building, which was maybe a bit over the top since I was studying there for free, but it was a hell of a lot of fun.

Kevin and Josh and Danny and I got a house off campus, and decided to become vegetarians because it seemed like a hippie thing to do and we were living off rice and chicken bouillon cubes, not exactly purist or anything, but it was cheap. I don't know about the other guys, but I'm still a vegetarian. One other thing writers who wax nostalgic about the hippie era get wrong

is that not all people, not even all young people, were Hippies. It was never over 50% until well after it was all over (maybe that's the tragic, inevitable result of any rebellion. Once it hits the tipping point, everybody wants to join, even the most pathetic, conformist types in the world, and then it's not cool any more) so there was a great sense of solidarity among those of us who identified as such. One day, during an anti-war demonstration when a lot of us had our faces painted white, a Jock threw a glass of milk in my face. That's what passed for humor in his crowd, I'm sure, and I became somewhat of a hero and celebrity among the Hippies on our small, Midwestern campus. Another day I was tripping and, in a moment of inspiration, I bought 500 pieces of bubble gum and passed them out on campus, one by one. People called me bubble gum Jack after that.

It's good to be famous.

Then came the march on Washington and my life changed again.

Chapter 4

There are things you do, and things done to you, and they both become a part of your story, they both become a part of you – Guru Sharab

It's always better to be a participant than a spectator, life is meant to be lived, not watched, and it's better yet to be an organizer. If you're throwing the party, you get to meet everybody at the party. So when I decided to go to D.C. for a demonstration against the Viet Nam war, I got right into the organizing, and it was at a meeting organizing a Catholic mass at the Pentagon that I met the priest who knew the congressman who was putting up a few of the protesters at his posh northern Virginia home. The congressman had an intern, a tall, blond Scandinavian type boy about my age but otherwise everything I was not.

Adam seemed to take a particular interest in me and I was pretty sure he was gay. Of course, Hippies believed in acceptance, letting everybody do their own thing, and on an intellectual level I had embraced that, but spiritually I wasn't quite there yet, so I was a bit weirded out but also a little bit flattered and that night, while I was sleeping on the couch, I had a dream that he was sucking my dick and I woke up and HOLY FUCKING SHIT he was SUCKING MY DICK! Never in my life, before or since, have I had such a swarm of contradictory emotions hit me all at once. Shock, surprise, anger, outrage, fear, disgust, shame, embarrassment and...pleasure. One thing I felt right away was pleasure, and I was surprised that I felt this, and ashamed, but there was no doubt about it at all, it felt good.

Fantasizing about sex is great, and having a boner is great, and jerking off feels wonderful, but having your dick inside somebody else's mouth, somebody else's moist, viscous mouth, inside that dark cave of mystery, the pseudo vagina on everyone's face, feeling their tongue massaging your most sensitive organ - that feels amazing, electric, and a man's mouth is no different from a woman's mouth. I put my hands on his head and part of me was trying to pull his head off but that was not the part that won. My fingers were resting in his soft, blond hair and he felt encouragement and picked up the pace and increased the pressure of suckage, no longer worried about waking me up, and it wasn't long before I came in his mouth, I could feel a big wad of jizz shoot out of my pecker like a rocket, and he just swallowed it down like an oyster.

Next thing I know, he's kissing me all around the pubes and moving up my stomach and I could see what was coming next. I did not want to kiss him and I certainly did not want to suck his dick. I put my palms against his shoulders and pushed him abruptly away. He fell back on the floor, a bit surprised, but maybe not so much. He looked hurt, but quickly a shy, yet triumphant, smile spread across his face. He knew I'd never tell anybody. He'd sucked my dick and gotten away with it and maybe even more than that. Maybe he felt like he'd scored a convert.

For once, words failed me as he stood up and left the room.

The next day we had the mass at the Pentagon and a whole bunch of us got arrested which I found a bit ironic, because despite all the shit I'd pulled in my young life, all the dodgy cars and the shoplifting and the drugs and never being all that discreet about most of it either, I'd never spent a night in jail before.

We weren't in jail long, they just held us until after all the demonstrations were over and the crowds had started to leave town and the journalists were done, we were no longer a story so they just let us go and we all went our separate ways.

Chapter 5

*We were having a majalis at our favorite zawiyah,
a tekke in the meadow and the whole turuq was there,
and we danced, and we danced without a care – Guru Kalehuru*

*There are many religions, but they all have the same goal: the truth, the
meaning. – Guru Sharab*

My way led to upstate New York, Woodstock as a matter of fact, near where the great, world changing festival had been the summer before. This was on my itinerary, part of my plan, the big demonstration in Washington and then a Sufi camp with Pir Vilayat.

I had met Pir Vilayat (Pir is not a name, it's a title, like Reverend, or Guru) at a lecture he gave in Cleveland. He taught me how to get high naturally, which seemed like a very useful thing to know.

It was a back to nature moment; the camp was up a steep hill, (a mountain actually, it's the Catskills, the green and pleasant Catskills), with no electricity. I enjoyed the Earth Walks and the lessons on Attunement to the Planets, but I absolutely loved the Sufi dancing. I have always liked dancing. I even enjoyed High School Dances.

I was not a Hippie yet in High School. I was what they called a Greaser, with greased back hair and a love of Motown music. They say that the girls only go for the football players and such, and it's partly true. Little guys like me got ignored a lot, but I found that if I just jumped out on the floor and started moving around I would occasionally find myself in the proximity of a girl and I could inhale their floral essence and even be brushed by their soft, flowing hair, their cool, smooth skin, and a few of them would even talk to me afterwards.

One thing people don't realize about me because I talk so much is that I'm actually a shy guy, I care very much what people think of me, I approach new social situations with a bit of trepidation, but I've learned that the best way to deal with that is to push through it, faint heart never won fair maiden, be straightforward, break on through to the other side, and I apply that with women and all other relationships. Embarrassment is an anchor, fuck embarrassment.

Sufi dancing is a simple circle dance done while chanting the mantras of 7 different religions. All religions are a way of seeking enlightenment, all religions are a way of seeking love, we dance in a circle, the world spins around, and it's good to feel a part of that, to be as one with all people around the world.

The camp was having a problem of theft and, just as you have to be a good listener to be a good talker, a good reader to be a good writer, so it takes a thief to catch a thief and I volunteered my services. The kitchen, where I was working, kept perishables in a box built over a small creek. It was a natural refrigerator, rather ingenious actually, but food had been disappearing.

My solution was simple. The box was big enough for a person to fit inside, so I slept there one night and was woken up in the middle of the night by a hungry raccoon! Both of us were a bit surprised, but the raccoon ran away and the problem was solved.

I was given the name of Aja Gara. On the night it was my turn to run the field kitchen I orchestrated a grand spaghetti dinner, chanting my spirit chant "Allah mu barrack", over and over, blessing the spaghetti, and it was a huge success.

These camps (I was to attend many more) were a Hippie's dream come true with heaps of hugs and massage. I was introduced to Yoga. It felt to me much more personal and hands on than the Catholicism I'd grown up with. Christ was up on a cross but Sufi Sam had spent time in Haight Ashbury and was here, walking among us. He had no objection to marijuana being part of the path, he was just about happiness and joy and jumping up and down with a goofy grin all the time.

A little bit from here, a little bit from there. It was a guru named Samsur who gave me a personal initiation to the seventh level and the simple practice of breathing ten times each day through the left nostril.

Little did I know at the time how important learning a simple chant or phrase from each of the seven main religions would become for me. I did it, I thought it was fun, but later, as I traveled, I would find that touching the hem of someone's religion in respect, just knowing a bit about their belief system, would open doors around the world.

The best thing about that first camp for me, though, was a sweet, young Earth Mother named Selene. She was thin, skinny in fact, pale complected with long, light brown hair that was curly, bordering on frizzy, and soft brown eyes. We were both virgins (was I? I didn't quite know what to think about that, and certainly didn't want to talk about it), and for hours we touched fingers and looked into each other's eyes and I didn't know if anything was going to happen so, by the time it eventually did, it was sort of anticlimactic and not nearly the stars and fireworks experience I'd hoped for in my first time with a girl. I'd had that on the couch with Adam.

Still, she was my first and I felt great about that, my confidence was restored, I could score with women and I'd even found, in Sufism, an m.o. Here's a tip to all the young lads out there, from the old Guru. As I've gone through my life experimenting with different religious beliefs and paths to consciousness, I have found that all of them are also a path to getting laid.

Ever since that night with Selene, I have felt perfectly comfortable having sex with women, or men, or whoever I felt like whenever I felt like it and whenever I could and, I can say without even slightly bragging, I've done all right in my life, I've had plenty of loving, more than my fair share.

Chapter 6

Craziness didn't start with our generation, although we've done better at it than most – Guru Sharab

It was a cultural explosion, there were festivals happening everywhere, and another thing not enough writers get right about the 60s, one thing you have to remember, is that the 70s, the 80s, the 90s all followed the 60s, whatever trends and fads they had, minds had already been opened and hallucinogens poured in, liberation movements had begun, there were alternatives, there was choice. The 60s followed the 50s when T Shirts were white and didn't have anything written on them; when men's hair was worn short, always, when I was a kid it just seemed to me that men's and women's hair grew differently; TV was still in black and white and so were the morals, bad guys wore black hats or talked with funny accents and the good guys always won and no variations were even considered.

I remember standing in line at a bus station in Pittsburgh and there were two chicks in front of me with nearly see through T Shirts that said 'F – U – C - K Me' on them and my mouth was hanging open and my mind was reeling, I didn't know if I was coming of age, or it was the whole world. It was the 60s everywhere you went, space is wrapped up in time and I had every intention of riding that wave as far as it would take me.

I hitched down to Louisiana (I had a car, but why not hitch? It's free and you get to meet people.) for what they called a Festival of Life and got picked up by a bunch of freaks in a van painted with flowers and they had a big old tent on the top and some white powder, they called it 'real THC,' Lord knows what it was and who cared, it was some wicked shit for sure and one of the girls was a redhead named Dawn and we went for each other right away, Free Love, baby. The festival was near Baton Rouge, right on the banks of the Missisloppy River. There were mud pits and it was cool, we were diving in them and rolling around and getting covered in mud and our two bodies were slapping up against each other, sliding off, sliding on and pretty soon we were doing it like crazed salamanders, dirtiest sex I ever had and I was ready to live with her forever but when I got back home with her in tow my parents took one look and said 'No way, get that girl out of this house right now.' I was a bit taken aback by their reaction, but I put her on a bus and then followed her back east in my little, red, Fiat Spider convertible.

She lived in some town near the Massachusetts/New Hampshire state line. It was late at night when I arrived. I guess she'd told me she had kids, but I wasn't prepared for the neglect; two dirty little toddlers, one kind of sad looking with a cleft palate, and the place was a fucking mess. But, the thing that weirded me out was her skin color – she'd gone totally yellow with hepatitis. “Don't worry about it, you can get a shot in the morning,” she said, so we went to bed and fucked like rabbits, the kids were obviously used to entertaining themselves. In the morning I went down to the clinic and, just like she said, the doctor gave me a shot but also some weird looks and a lecture on common sense and basic caution in choice of sexual partners.

I went back to her place and a guy friend of hers was there, a junkie who was trying to talk her into a scam where she would go out and spend phony \$20 bills he had. I tried to talk her out of it even though they were pretty convincing bills, looked just like the real thing except one where he had his own picture on it, that was funny but if we'd tried to spend that we would have been laughed out of the place right away, but it didn't matter, the cops had his number anyway. I agreed, in the end, to give her a ride, how could I say no? We went to one place, it worked, another place, it worked but then the cops were waiting for us in the parking lot and we were busted.

First offense and all I'd done was drive the car so I basically got sent home with a warning, but my parents were furious. My Dad insisted on cutting my hair, as if that was going to change anything. I moved back in with them and still helped out at the car lot when I wasn't at school but a few weeks later, at the lot, I dropped a bag of weed on the floor and Dad went for his gun. He was kind of nuts and wasn't at all pleased with ‘all this goddamned, crazy, hippie shit.’ I split to Grandma Pazzo's house, she lived nearby and she told me “Jack, never trust a man!”

I was glad for her support, but a bit surprised. Maybe I shouldn't have been. Grandma Pazzo came over on a boat through Ellis Island around 1910. My Grandpa had sent for his cousin to marry but she was taken. Sophia, my grandmother, was a last minute substitute. Grandpa had been married once before but abandoned his first family after his son killed his daughter by accident, with his handgun, in Buffalo. He never married my grandmother because, technically, he was still married

That was the time of the depression, and prohibition, and the only work he could find was brewing illegal beer in the bathtub. He got caught, plenty

of times. Grandma eventually got sick of it and, after aborting what would have been her 5th child, she threw him out and went and got a job herself.

My mother was also 1st generation American. Her mother came over as a small child from Czechoslovakia and her father came from Hungary. Her mother was an alcoholic and, in a funny coincidence, was never married to her father because he'd never divorced his Hungarian wife. I come from bastards on both sides.

I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd actually taken Grandma Pazzo's advice. But I didn't. I am, deep down, a very trusting guy and, despite the risks, that has its rewards, too.

Right then, though, I needed to get away from home. I found a group of Hippies starting a group house in a quiet, suburban neighborhood of large, wooden homes with porches and big lawns, and joined them. We called it The Yellow House. I stayed in the attic and hung a rope from the large oak tree right outside my window so we could swing from the porch roof out over the busy main street. We covered the inside walls with graffiti, mostly, in an homage to Stanley Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange," giant penises and vaginas all over the place.

I've always liked markets, they are exciting places and business is taking place at a personal level. I met a guy named Giacomo, who had a vegetable stand, and I helped him out in return for some veggies to take back to the house. Everybody's got to pull their weight. Then Giacomo gave me a great suggestion. When I explained our situation to him he said "Hey, you guys could get food stamps," so we all applied and then, between us, we were doing fine.

Louie the terrorist lived there for awhile, we didn't call him that yet but the seeds had been sown; there was the dwarf girl in the wheel chair; the token straight guy who had his own room and wouldn't smoke pot with us but 'doing your own thing' has to apply to people who aren't doing your thing, too; Loyal and Bruce who'd grown up in a half-way house down the street and they'd both moved in with us as soon as they turned 18, Bruce a couple of months before Loyal and they were actually a bit more emotionally experienced, more adult than the rest of us, and they also had the best weed connections; Kathy who was really not a terribly attractive girl but she compensated for that inconvenient fact by having lots and lots

of sex with guys, and not setting a lot of conditions; and many, many others who came and went.

Not all Hippies were exactly the same, of course. There were political Hippies and druggie Hippies and music Hippies and spiritual Hippies and I started hanging out with the Hare Krishna Hippies getting high with them on rose water in the park. It's just distilled rose petals in water, no alcohol in it; they don't do that kind of thing. They use it in their food and it gets used in perfumes, but there was definitely something there, in the water or in the chanting, or in the good vibrations in the air, but when I say getting high, I mean getting high.

They invited me to go to New York with them and meet the great master Swami Podobed. So I went. The event was in a building they'd converted into a temple, which the locals weren't happy about. There were actually protesters out front and guards at the door which struck me as a bit out of line. Whether you like the Hare Krisnas or not they are the sweetest, most non-threatening people in the world. They just want to wear orange robes and eat vegetarian food and chant all day. There was a huge crowd inside, way over capacity. It would have been crowded even for a rock concert.

We made our way through the mob outside, past the guards at the door, and there we were. Boom. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, and I could feel it, it was actually setting up a vibration in the air, it was an amazing feeling of power, an electrical current surging through the room, a thousand people thinking as one but in fact not thinking at all and there are only two ways to react to an elemental force like that. You can let yourself be sucked in totally, go with the flow, get into it, or you can run like hell. I chose the latter, told my friends I'd catch them later, turned and walked out the door. It was scary. I was shaken.

Outside the temple I met a strange character named Dennis McDavid, who was in his late 20s with a blond 'fro and horn rimmed glass. He looked like Freewheelin' Franklin from the Freak Brothers Comics. He never said much except "FAR OUT" and "Wow, did you see that?" He seemed like he was on LSD all the time, with that far away look in his eyes like he was seeing far more than he could communicate.

I found him fascinating and wheedled his story out of him. People think

I just talk all the time and it's true, I am a rather loquacious sort, no doubt about it, but I'm a good listener too and, to tell the truth, the two talents go together.

He had had a sand candle business in North Carolina but freaked out and ran away. I took him back to the Yellow House and gave him a bed in the basement. That was cool with the people there; nobody questioned that, not even for a second. I could have showed up with a 3 headed man and they would have just said "Hello, Three Headed Man. Nice to meet you," because we were Hippies and we accepted everybody, that was part of the hippie creed.

Dennis was as strange as he had appeared at first but he was, indeed, a good candle maker. So, we started a sand candle business.

Life with him was never boring. One night I asked him to wash the kitchen floor and woke up to find it painted pink. I made the mistake of joking that wood fungus was mescaline and then caught him sniffing it obsessively. When I told him I was just kidding he said "Yeah, but it really works." He would swallow any pill without question.

We were at a club one night and I especially noticed a plumpish redheaded girl with short hair who was totally the star of the dance floor, she was working it wild and had a better than natural instinct about her own center of gravity, but I was just enjoying my beer and ogling and for a change Dennis was working the crowd. He came back to me after a while and said "We gotta go, I got us a woman!"

"Where?" I asked, and was stunned when he pointed out the redhead. My thoughts had gone out to the universe, and the universe had offered up its sweet bounty. We took her home, gave her a luxurious bath and then we were both in bed with her, all naked, and she asked if either of us had ever had a disease and I blurted out the honest answer, which was that Dennis had had gonorrhea. So she would only fuck me and I was laughing hysterically as I banged away and Dennis was lying in bed next to us naked with a boner, pleading for a turn.

Another night we were downtown and I made the mistake of trying a qualude with a few beers. The sum can be greater than the whole of its parts and so it is with alcohol and drugs, you get way more than twice as stoned. So

I had to let him drive home, ignoring the small detail that he didn't have a license. We had a VW bug borrowed from Hollywood Motors, with a single plate dangling from one pathetic little screw on the back, and no papers, of course. To top it all off you needed a screw driver to turn the ignition switch.

As we were nearing home I told him he'd just missed a left turn so he immediately hung a left from the right lane and just as quick and reflexively as he'd responded to my suggestion, that's how quick we heard the siren and had to pull over. When they asked him to turn off the car he told them he couldn't find the screw driver. They put a gun to his head and asked us both to step out. As we got out, I managed to quickly throw a joint under the seat.

As we were being booked the police asked me to identify the brown substance that they had found in Dennis' pocket. I told them the truth: whole wheat bread crumbs. Encouraged by the softball question, I said "You may as well check this out," and I pulled out what I thought was lint from my pocket and threw it on the counter but it was a roach, the burnt butt end of a joint. I looked at them and calmly picked it back up and ate it.

I was not in the same cell with Dennis but I could yell out to him. "How do you like your room?"

"I love it, it's very comfortable!"

The next morning when they questioned me, they told me Dennis had admitted to being addicted to heroin. I just laughed.

I suppose I should be thankful we got the judge we got because when we went to court the next morning we just had to pay a small fine, but the guy was a total dork. He put on this whiny, baby's voice and said to Dennis "Just pwomise me you'll nevah dwive again." Judges and fucking dentists, always think they're funny.

The candle business was going well and we were turning them out at a very businesslike pace in our little basement workshop. It didn't make us rich but we managed to make thousands of sand candle turtles and whales. Gay men loved our penis candles, so we had a regular market there. He could work when he was not distracted, but he was easily distracted. He

really could only focus on one thing at a time. This was his genius. This was his insanity.

One afternoon about 4 o'clock, we were in the kitchen, directly over the basement. We noticed some heavy smoke in the room which we didn't think anything of at first because we thought it was just from the bong we were toking on, clouds of smoke in the living room were not an uncommon occurrence at the Yellow House, but then we saw flames coming from behind the stove. We rushed downstairs to find that Dennis had left all of the melting vats on top of the stove, and the stove was all the way on, and flames were shooting up all over the place. I threw sand but Dennis threw water which had the opposite effect – it spread the fire!

We ran out of the house, thinking it was lost! I jumped over the front porch railing with my balls hanging down like a pair of piñatas, naked under my bathrobe, and yelled to the elderly neighbors to call the fire department. They looked stunned but apparently they did, though by the time the fire truck arrived the sand had put the blaze out.

That was the worst fire Dennis started, but not the only one.

The Yellow House was near a lake, one of the Great Ones, and it was frozen over one winter evening when we took some LSD. Dennis took a look across the ice and thought it would be a really cool thing to walk to Canada. Unfortunately two young kids, who we didn't even know, followed him out. Hippies just believed everything. That was the beauty, and that was the fatal flaw.

Theoretically it was possible although it would have been a long and bitterly cold walk. If somebody with outdoor survival experience went for it, it would make total sense, but a bunch of young, urban stoners strolling around thinking they're in Narnia, maybe not so much. I had to go out there and bring them back and the scary part is, the lake wasn't frozen solid all the way to Canada, they'd reached a point where the water was lapping up against the ice, we were quite lucky to get back to solid ground without falling through.

Another time I was asked – recruited, you could say -to make love to a woman who liked two guys at once, but I hurried my part, just came and went, because Dennis was waiting in the car. When I got back to our parking

place I found him holding a puppy. He named her Incense and loved her very much.

It was while I was living at the Yellow House that “Be Here Now” came out. People were calling it The Hippie Bible and it sort of was. It was by Baba Ram Das, who had originally been known as Richard Alpert, so I felt we had something in common right off the bat. I read it and, like no book I’d ever read before, every word rang true. It was the tale of his spiritual quest and a guide to becoming a yogi. That became my ambition.

The book said to free yourself by giving away your possessions so I gave everything away, I even gave my little Fiat convertible to Louie, which I regretted later because he turned out to be such a raging, ungrateful asshole and I don’t think it helped my enlightenment at all.

Some of you reading this book may get the impression that I am less than an upright, law abiding individual and you’d be partly correct, but I will say this: I mean what I say and when I say it I feel it with all my heart. With the minor exception of a little creative dissembling to the police and other oppressors now and again, which is part of the game and necessary self-preservation, I go with the truth. I may not have a Ph.D. like Baba Ram Dass, but I have lived an interesting life on this green and beautiful Earth so, just as he shared his experiences with me, I am sharing mine now with you, in the hopes that they will illuminate your life a little bit.

Chapter 7

The best place to find God is in a garden. You can dig for him there.
– George Bernard Shaw

I continued to go to Sufi camps the whole time I was living at the Yellow House. I learned a lot more about Yoga and became proficient in the art of massage. Everybody should know how to give a good massage, the more people massaging each other the better life will be, physically better, and psychically better just follows on from that.

Of course it's a great way to get close to people you'd like to have sex with, but as long as you're cool about that and not a pervy creep, it's all good. Sometimes you just savor the pleasure of the touch, and that is beautiful, too. As you walk through the garden of earthly delights, you don't get to pick every flower.

I met a lot of people, and sometimes I'd be pulled into their orbit, and sometimes they mine, the streams of time of our different lives were flowing parallel, but pulled a bit this way and then that.

At one of Pir Vilayat's meditation seminars I met a raven haired beauty named Diana Wood. She wore it long and dead straight, which was popular at the time. She had cheerful, light blue eyes, pink cheeks and a warm, sweet, ready smile. She was a Hippie from a rich family and had lived at 'The Farm' in Tennessee, Stephen Gaskin's place, the most famous hippie commune in the world, and studied midwifery. It was love at first sight from my end.

We were from the same city, albeit different sides of the tracks, and shared an interest in Sufism and, it seemed to me, had a lot in common. It wasn't love at first sight from her side, but she didn't hate me and I kept coming around.

Then there was the couple from New Jersey who I met at a Sufi camp in New York. They were an ex-stockbroker and his girlfriend and had a farm in West Virginia, and I followed them down to get in touch with nature, dig my hands into the Earth, and connect with reality in as visceral a way as possible.

I had bought 8 beehives to start with and I headed south with them in my trusty, old, Ford Econoline van. But I didn't have the boxes tied down well enough for the bumpy dirt road, and they fell out of the the back of the truck and the hives burst open and there was no hope for getting the bees back in. I was lucky not to get stung, and I abandoned that dream. I hope that, somewhere in West Virginia today, there are bees that are the descendants of my bees, pollinating flowers and making honey, and holding the line for the natural world against the monolithically evil petrochemical and agribusiness corporations. Go, little bees! Be blessed!

I loved it there, I loved the green mountains and the views over the valley, I loved working in the garden and putting seeds into the ground, being a part of the cycle of life, I loved the rhythm and the natural pace of life in the country, but I got bored. It was just me and the two of them and I needed more human companionship, lots of weird and crazy people to interact with, and I needed Diana.

It was a rough time in her life as her father was dying, so all I could do was to be there and be patient. Then he died and she and her brother inherited a property of his in a lushly wooded area which is now a National Forest. Their mother wasn't very interested in the place. There was plenty of work for me to do there, and I still helped out at Hollywood Motors for cash. After six months we got married – 3 times!

First, in a hippie ceremony at the Sufi Camp in New York that meant so much to both of us, and then at a more conventional ceremony later, to satisfy our parents and the law, and then with all our friends at a big party, so once spiritually, once legally, and once socially, we were committed to each other. I was 26 years old, and she was about the same.

The Sufi wedding was an amazing moment in time. It started when my West Virginia farmmates asked Pir Vilayat to marry them and he said sure, why not, and the whole camp got really excited about it because, in any culture, even in a counter-culture culture, there's nothing more beautiful than a wedding, a celebration of love, a celebration of that moment in two people's lives when they commit to moving forward together, becoming one unit, maybe having kids and continuing the line, the long line of human beings from the deep, deep past on into the glorious and unknown future. Old people dance again at weddings, people fall in love at weddings, hard-as-nails, cynical men cry at weddings.

Soon, there was a mob of us who wanted to wed. I will never forget the conversation where we asked Pir Vilayat to marry us. It was telepathic. His thoughts were so clear that we were communicating without speech at all. So, the next weekend there were 14 people lined up to get married and we were among them.

She had a white blouse, I had a white T-shirt, we made two rings out of twigs, and the whole ceremony took place under a wood-frame geodesic dome which, like our evolving relationships, was incomplete. It had totally collapsed once during construction but nobody was hurt, and it was fine on the day, that magical day, and I'm sure that all of those 14 couples have had many magic moments, and some had children, probably even grandchildren by now and some of them might even be together still.

We went back to the place in the forest and it was fine for a while; it was an idyllic spot. We tried to make it work as a farm but we were just learning. The dogs killed the goats and we soon found that a forest was not a good place for a garden. I wanted a real farm. So did she. We had a lot of idealistic, romantic notions.

So we set out in our bright yellow V.W. beetle to find one. We had no plan other than LAND! We did not even think much about what the house should look like, or what it would be near. We began our search in West Virginia because West Virginia is the closest place on Earth to heaven, at least as far as physical appearances, but the few places we found for sale were more than twice as much per acre as we'd planned on spending. I had recalled it as being much more affordable, and I'd only been gone about a year. After a couple of days of fruitless searching, we turned around and headed west.

Chapter 8

*A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring – Alexander Pope*

Farming is more complicated than it looks. People are even more complicated than that – Guru Sharab

A quick word is necessary at this point, regarding American geography and demographics. If you look at a map, or learn a bit, and only a bit, about history, you might think the borderline between the North and the South is the Ohio River. In fact, it is a bit north of there, and not nearly so sharply defined. The country along the north bank of the Ohio River, the southern counties of Ohio, Indiana and even Illinois, are hilly and full of Hillbillies; hound dogs on rickety wooden porches, moonshine stills hidden deep in the woods, and a vigorous contempt for outsiders and the law. They are, in many ways, more southern than the South.

It was just after we crossed the Ohio that we stopped at a local store and the man there told us about two places that were for sale. Our deflated spirits were instantly reinflated, and we set out to look, as excited as we were when we first set out. The first was a tobacco farm, and there was nothing there that inspired us or made our hearts beat faster.

Still, one more on the list and it wasn't far. The man in the store had said it was a long drive up a steep hill and it sure was. As it turned out it was the highest point in all of Jackson County.

As we drove up the gravel driveway past three old oak trees we were greeted from the porch by a tall, simply dressed man in his 50s. This was Darell Flaherty. I was impressed immediately by his unassuming manner. He spoke calmly, slowly, and clearly but his accent and choice of words said Hillbilly loud and clear.

He would become my spirit guide. Not the Indian Guru I had been seeking, no flowing robes or face paint, just a sweet, simple nature that radiated kindness. They needed to sell the place to pay for his wife's heart operation. They could have switched the property into their kids' names, claimed indigence, and got the operation for free but that would have violated his sense of ethics and wounded his pride. "Just wouldn't sit right," he said.

He invited us in to meet his wife Penny and their nearly grown sons, Darell, Jr., Billy and Lee. It was a strange looking place, with a hanging white ceiling and fake wood sheathing on the walls, but the structure was solid. About 30 chicks were being hatched out next to the coal stove.

There wasn't much negotiation. It was a steal at the price they were asking and we were in love with it at first sight. This would be Gaia Farm, our paradise in the country.

Penny was just like Darell in her simplicity and plain spokenness. She was always helpful, never quarrelsome, but she had a bit of a sarcastic streak. She was not particularly impressed with my Sufi name of Aja Gara so she called me Itchy Kaka. Then she would laugh and laugh.

We would watch her go through many operations in the coming years. Eventually she lost her legs to diabetes. She was like the incredible disappearing woman, losing a bit here and a bit there but never losing her sense of humor, and then she died of a heart attack a couple years later. Darell hung on for many years and eventually died under one of the oak trees which were so iconic to that farm. Everything means something.

When we moved in, they moved into a trailer next door and never seemed envious of us. In the coming years he would teach us to become farmers, lend us the use of his garage to start my body shop, and help us in a thousand little ways, while asking for little in return.

Chapter 9

When you build a house with your friends, you are not just building a house. You are also building the friendship. Work carefully. Work with love.

– Guru Sharab

After the Yellow House had broken up, which had been awhile, Dad gave Dennis a job at Hollywood motors, and a place to stay in a house next to the lot he owned. He was still his old, not-quite-on-the-same-planet self as always, but he was a willing worker as long as the job wasn't complex and the directions were very specific. Dad liked him and he liked Dad so Dad wasn't happy I was taking him, but I needed the help.

So, he came down and joined us at the farm. He helped me tear down a 200 year old barn for the lumber to build my auto body shop. But the region was filled with temptations.

I'd told our new neighbors not to give Dennis any marijuana, that it sometimes didn't work out so well, but they thought I was being a bit of a prude. Then I got a call from them early one morning. Dennis was there, had been there a while, was refusing to leave and was sprinkling pot leaves that he'd stolen from their patch on his corn flakes.

It wasn't long after that that Dennis and I were working down in the root cellar, repairing a water tank, and he was stoned out of his gourd, as usual, Lord knows I can't get moralistic about that, but then he snapped off a coupling just by carelessly pulling too hard, and I snapped, too. I should have known better than to lose my temper, it was very unenlightened of me, but any normal person would have just shrugged it off. We've all been called dumbass, and shit for brains, and retard. But Dennis just took off down the road, and neither I nor anyone I know has ever seen him since. I hope he's O.K.

Chapter 10

The World is perfect as it is, including my desire to change it
– Baba Ram Dass

There are no two people on the face of the Earth who can't smile at each other and share a laugh – Guru Sharab

In these fast paced times, in this world of high mobility, different cultures are rubbing up side by side all the damned time, everywhere on Earth you go, and it leads to some beautiful fusions in music, cuisine and interpersonal relationships, but it leads to some clashes, too. To say that some of the Rednecks in that part of the country weren't too thrilled with all the Hippies moving in and buying up land is an understatement.

They didn't like the long hair, they didn't appreciate the hippie music, and they sure as hell didn't approve of the lifestyle, but once they found out that growing marijuana was even more lucrative than operating a moonshine still, common ground had been found. Some young Hillbillies even started to grow their own hair long, and then came The Allman Brothers, and Willie Nelson.

We Hippies made accommodations, too. Personally, I got along great in that culture. Folks were a bit uncultivated, but they said what was on their minds and they weren't shocked or offended when I did the same.

Those were golden years. We had 200 acres. We had people coming in and out like at the Yellow House, but in the country, in the middle of mixed pine and deciduous forests, with a lovely little pond. We built, we added, we grew, we bought, we sold and eventually we had 350 acres and 6 houses along the side of the road, we were dealing in cars, wood stoves, horses, dogs, guns, marijuana, property rentals, organic vegetables and honey, sweet, sweet honey. At one point there were 7 horses, 17 dogs and 7 children all running around and having a great time on the green hilltop under the big blue sky. We had Sufi gatherings, sometimes with as many as 150 people, chanting and dancing and finding enlightenment like crazy. We truly did find paradise on Earth before we lost it, which led to me finding it again, and losing it again, and finding it again, and so on.

The first thing I did was set up an auto body shop, sort of as an extension of

what I was doing at Hollywood Motors. We planted an organic garden, and bought a few goats. I tried the bee experiment again, with even a rockier start but ultimately with quite a bit of success.

Here's how it happened: When we heard of some neighbors that just wanted the bees removed from their shed, Louie and I went to get them. Their problem was to become our resource; it's the principle of trade. Good business is what's good for everybody. The whole world could become a paradise in short order if we could just communicate a little bit quicker and better, shift things around, move them from where they aren't wanted to where they are, but some people just want to hang on to everything they've got just to make sure nobody else gets it and so much human energy gets wasted on just trying to hold others back that we never move forward.

But that day was one of the good days, when things worked out well for everybody. Sort of. In the end. We cut through the wall from the outside and just removed the whole section where the bees were, and got them into a box and the box into the van and that was the easy part. Louie was driving and I was in back.

Well, it was sort of a replay of West Virginia except the bees just got loose in the back of the van, and I was scooping them up and putting them back in the box as the little fuckers were stinging the shit out of me. I must have gotten about 40 stings; I was swollen up for a couple of days but no serious damage. I just knew I had to remain calm and get them back in the box so I concentrated on working as slowly and methodically as I could.

I'd heard that once you got the Queen in, the rest of the hive would follow, but I had no clue which one the Queen was, and no time or patience to try and figure that out, so I just kept scooping and replacing and eventually got them all back in, and we were in the bee business, which meant many years of sweet, sweet honey, and a bit of a side income, even though home made honey was not exactly a rarity in those parts.

We had a daughter, named her Cara, and felt connected to the Earth and the Universe and the long, long chain of human existence. She was born in a tent at The Farm, Diana's communal alma mater, with a whole coven of hippie midwives around her. She had her mother's sweet, blue eyes.

Then, my father died. He was barely over fifty and he could have survived

but the crazy old Italian son of a bitch really meant it when he said he'd rather die than wear a colostomy bag, and so he did. Pride. Embarrassment. Fuck that shit. What the hell is wrong with people?

My Mom took over Hollywood Motors and actually managed it pretty well; she turned out to be a feisty, take no crap person herself when the chips were down. When some punk thug pulled a gun and tried to rob the place she pulled out a tire iron and just started wailing away with it, he was ducking and putting up his arm to try to protect himself and hold on to his gun but he could no longer aim and he turned and ran like the scared little child he undoubtedly was, appearances aside.

My Dad always used to tell my Mom, in his mockingly abusive, thinking he was funny way, "After I die, you're going to fuck a nigger" and his racist karma did come back to bite him on his dead ass, because that's exactly what she did.

Ray moved in and he had a different vision of Hollywood Motors than Dad had had. Whereas Dad was a small time crook, a mini-mafioso, Ray converted the place into a full on chop shop. Whereas my Dad had skirted the law a bit, Ray just fucking broke it brazenly.

When he got arrested, Broadway Motors was on TV, the most free publicity it had ever had. There were piles of motors and stacks of all sorts of auto body parts strewn about, it was obvious what kind of place it was, and there was my sweet, little mother standing in the middle of it shaking her head and saying "I didn't know anything, I had no idea," and it was totally believable.

Meanwhile, back at Gaia Farm, our son Caleb was born. He was taking his time about it and I was hanging around and nervous and all the women wanted me out of the room, so when a man showed up to buy a car they were glad to see me go and he had the cash and knew exactly what he wanted and then another guy showed up and bought a stove, and when I went back in it was just in time to see Caleb being born, tiny, purple headed Caleb who looked like he was having trouble breathing at first but then it was fine.

It was as close to a perfect day as there has ever been in the history of days.

Chapter 11

Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray – Rumi

A whole lot of interesting and bizarre people came and went during our time at Gaia Farm. There was Benny the Biker who built his own house by the side of the road, he made his permanent mark upon the land but then one sunny day, with perfect visibility, he got creamed by some asshole in a car and that was the end of Benny.

There was Tom Frost, who everybody called Obi-wan because he believed in extraterrestrials. Some people loved Tom and some didn't. On the one hand he was totally dedicated to recycling, a bit fanatic about it really, he reminded me a bit of Dennis in his single mindedness. He would pick up a piece of old rubbish and his first thought was 'what can we do with this,' every old tin can became a planter or an ashtray. I loved him because he slept in a derelict old trailer and never complained about it.

On the other hand, he would sit in the sweat lodge with a big old stoffie and not even try to hide it and he seemed to like the little girl children more than what is average for an adult male. Diana didn't like him at all.

Diana didn't like a lot of the people I liked and we had a lot of debates about what kind of people we should allow in. I voted for everybody, because to me inclusiveness seemed to be part of the hippie ideal, but Diana had a more practical outlook. She brought up a whole bunch of her friends from The Farm, about 15 or 20 of them, and they were sort of the core group for a long time.

Brother Carlo came down from Cleveland with his black boyfriend and his boyfriend's 6 year old son and the boy was amazed to find out that milk comes from cows. "I'm going out to get milk from the cow," I said.

"Are you crazy? Cows don't give you milk. You have to go to McDonald's."

Then there were Sarah and Juan, who would become important people in my life, guides along my journey, the reason I wound up in the Czech Republic and if I'd never gone to the Czech Republic I'd have never gone to China

and I would be a very different, and perhaps lesser, person than I am today.

Diana and I had gone down to Texas for a midwives' conference/seminar/conclave thingie. I was just along as a driver and no more use to her there than tits on a bull, so she suggested I go down to Mexico and meet this guy she'd heard about, a Canadian doctor living in a poor village up in the mountains, doing the work that needed to be done. So, I flew down to Mexico City and made my way back up a bit northwest of there into the mountains by bus.

The doc was a cool guy, his main thing was making sure the water was purified, to fight cholera, so he spent a lot of time testing wells and he was a big believer in clay jugs. He was not a real doctor, although he had a couple of years of medical school behind him. When he'd stopped in the village and volunteered to help out at the clinic they said "Hey, you can run the clinic" and so he did.

In addition to the good doctor, there was his wife and a young couple, Sarah and Juan. She was from Austria and he had recently got out of prison, where he had been on a murder charge, but it was all bullshit.

As he explained to me, he'd been hiking and camping with some friends and a young guy wandered into their camp one evening. They'd chatted a while, given him some water, and he'd gone on his way. Later, when they heard that he was missing, Juan went to the boy's father and offered to help in the search.

The boy's father went with Juan to the police where he immediately turned on him and accused him of killing his son. Since he and his mates were the last to see the boy alive, and since his mates were long gone, and since the boy's father was a man of some influence in the region and the police were exceptionally eager to please him, Juan became suspect #1, and as suspect #1 was presumed guilty right off the bat.

Now, some tourists visit the Cathedrals and monuments and museums, some prefer to just hang out on the beach and go drinking in the evenings, but Sarah was the type of tourist who would visit a prison, and then do volunteer work at a clinic in an impoverished village. She fell in love with Juan when she saw him there and heard his story and, after a couple more visits, managed to switch ID tags with him when the guards weren't looking and they just walked out together.

We got along well right away, and I invited them up to Gaia Farm. A couple of months later, they showed up.

Chapter 12

The spiritual journey is individual, highly personal. It can't be organized or regulated. It isn't true that everyone should follow one path. Listen to your own truth. – Baba Ram Dass

*The Bodhi tree is a sacred tree
As is every other tree
Underneath the Bodhi tree
The earth, the air, the sun, the sea
The universe, infinity
In glorious complexity
Flow through you, and flow through me
Now and for all eternity – Guru Kalehuru*

I loved Diana and I think she loved me, too, but we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things and there came a time when she said she "needed her space," so I went off to India seeking enlightenment with Pir Vilayat and a group of about a hundred followers, who were mostly old women.

I suspect Diana "needed her space" so she could do the hippie mambo with a skinny, young dude who looked a bit like Roger Daltry from The Who with his long blond hair. He was a carpenter and I'd hired him to add on a back porch, but then he did more standing around with his shirt off and a goofy grin on his face than working, and Diana had her eyes on him like a cat on a tuna sandwich. You do a guy a favor and he fucks your wife. Well, what are you going to do? That's life. He did finish the porch.

We toured sacred sites including the tomb of Vilayat's father Hazrat Inayat Khan, in Delhi. I've never got that. Tombs. Death does not make you sacred. Everybody dies. Either his teachings lead to enlightenment or they don't, either his spirit is eternal or it's not, but the body is a body and it's rotting in the ground, and it slowly decomposes and is eaten by the worms and becomes part of the soil and the trees and flowers grow and the world turns around, and that's the same for every average Joe from the midwest who's never even tried to become enlightened, as well as the holiest of the holy Sufi sages.

Still, respect.

I was enjoying the trip even though it was clear that I wasn't going to hook up with any hot women – I was, after all, still married – and I was no closer to true enlightenment than ever which meant sometimes there, sometimes not, first there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is. But the old women all liked me and pampered me and I was keeping everybody entertained with my dancing and my patter, so it was all good.

In Bodh Gaya, the place where Buddha had gained illumination, we planned to spend the night meditating under a Bodhi tree. Now, a Bodhi tree is a kind of a fig tree with broad branches, but it's the fact that Buddha gained illumination under one of them that is important and the Bodhi (which means enlightenment) trees which have been planted in front of temples and monasteries around India are all descendants of that original Bodhi tree. They are sacred in the way that a sliver of the original cross would be sacred to a Christian, but this is actually a living thing. There is a tremendous sense of continuity, and closeness to nature.

However, after a couple of hours of twisted yoga-sitting anguish, my physical discomfort overrode my desire to find enlightenment, so I got up. I broke character. I left. I felt true to my inner feelings, but a failure at discipline. In the morning, as I talked to fellow seekers, I was relieved to see they actually admired my decision. This was a good time for me to understand my gift of intuition. I have always followed my heart, or really, more accurately, my gut, in its struggles with my mind.

Later, we would have the opportunity to meet an enlightened being. His followers carried him on a wooden platform. He was an emaciated old man with crazy rasta hair wearing only a loin cloth. He just burped and farted and let himself be paraded around. People were brought up to his pallet and he blessed them, with outstretched hand and goofy smile. I feigned respect but I was laughing inside.

This was it? The man was totally unaware of anything further than he could see, and probably not all of that.

I still craved enlightenment, but was starting to question why I felt that craving. Was it just that I did not feel comfortable in the consumer society that I was raised in? Was it my self-centered desire to be different, to stand out? Was it a sincere need for truth and clarity?

Pir Vilayat and all the old ladies went back to America but I stayed on for a while with Tushar and his wife and son. Tushar was a wannabe Guru who my fellow Hippie and truth seeker Sam Patton had introduced me to, back in the Yellow House days, and Tushar had been there to bless Cara's birth.

His son was skeptical about his father's holiness and sounded just like an American teenager when he said "Him? He's just bullshitting everybody."

The first week I was there Tushar was busy so he sent me with a servant up to Lucknow and we stood the whole way on the train because the servant didn't tell me that for an extra two dollars we could have had seats. He didn't want to waste my money.

Then, we all went together to a meditation center and it was really nice there, the families stayed together. It wasn't as cultish as some meditation centers where they arbitrarily put people into artificial groups, although some of the meditations were sexually segregated. It was clean, and green, and beautiful and we spent many days giving blessings to the energy of the sun.

The trip to India raised more questions than answers for me, but that was O.K. I was on the way. I am still on the way.

Chapter 13

Sometimes those who say the least, understand the most – Guru Sharab

I did come back from India with my head cleared a bit and ready to throw myself into work. Enlightenment is lovely but there are still things to be done. ‘Small is Beautiful Motors,’ was going well and I was real busy with the wood stove business, too. I had about 30 of them in the barn ready for sale at any given time, I was wheeling and dealing in a dozen different things, even guns for a while which might sound strange for a Hippie, especially a Hippie seeking enlightenment, but it seemed a very reasonable cultural adaptation in that time and place.

The secret of my success was trade, barter, pre-currency economics. People in those parts didn’t all have a lot of cash and I made it very clear that I would trade anything for anything. I once traded a car for a house!

The problem with business, almost any business, is that people are people and people have different expectations. For example, there was the time I found the baby blue Subaru in a field by the road; up on blocks and missing a few parts, like the wheels, some of the doors and windows, and the engine. I found the farmer, gave him 50 bucks for it and had it hauled back to my workshop. Over the space of a couple of weeks I put a new motor in, cleaned up the body which is what I was always best at, threw some new doors on it, a new set of tires and presto-change-o, it was a new car and I sold it for 2,000 dollars.

A month or so later, the buyer came back to me and asked how much I’d paid for it, which is probably the fault of me and my big mouth bragging about my profit margin all over town. When I told him straight up he started accusing me of cheating him and (although he didn’t have a legal leg to stand on or even a legitimate moral case that I could see because the car was a fair enough buy at two grand in the condition I sold it to him) started bad mouthing me all over the county.

Another time I asked one of our neighbors, Redneck Roger we called him because that’s what he was and that was his name, to fix a bad connection between the clutch and the engine on a VW Caravan, he’d done a lot of work with me over the years and was usually real reliable but he screwed it up once and I asked him to do it again, and he screwed it up a second time

and I took it back and said “Look, I want this fixed and I want it fixed right and I want it fixed tomorrow.” That night my barn burned down. He denied that he’d started the fire but it was just as obvious as a Hillbilly’s boner at a family picnic that he had.

But, such is the nature of my life, disaster turns to opportunity. I knew the insurance company wouldn’t pay up if they knew about the wood burning stoves I had in there because then it would have been a shop and not just a storage facility as it was listed on the policy. So I hustled them all out of there and then when the insurance adjustor came he said “All you’ve got here is a bunch of old wood,” and that’s all I intended to claim for, I had resigned myself to taking the loss, but the adjustor was a creative sort, he said here, this was a bed and here, this was a closet and he made it up to quite a respectable total and I got the feeling that, totally contrary to the rules of capitalism and common sense, he was somehow going to get a larger commission on a larger settlement and, in the end, Redneck Roger did me a favor and I got enough to build a whole new, better barn, although relations between the two of us were somewhat strained after that, to say the least.

I also started to dabble again in marijuana around this point. One time Sheriff Earl got called out because of a long, long strip of marijuana growing up and down the hills and through the valleys like the Great Wall of Hippilandia and he just laughed and said “They ain’t no way Pazzo planted this, it goes all the way into Woodfield” because he figured that, as much as I loved my marijuana, I was far too lazy for a large scale project like that. Sheriff Earl talked like a dumbass Hillbilly, but he was no fool.

They *were* my plants, though (well, mine with eight partners), a parade of 15,000 beautiful females. I was glad to not be suspected, but it was still painful to see them uprooted.

There was another local cop who was a member of the John Birch society, they were Teabaggers back before that was a thing, and basically he figured any kind of government was the same as communism, which was kind of strange as he was a government employee but, to paraphrase Walt Whitman “do we contradict ourselves? Very well, we contradict ourselves. We are legion! We contain multitudes!”

The first time I met him was actually the second time I met him. He asked

if I remembered an anti-war demonstration at a certain University and he said “You were wearing a round hat and like a funny colored robe (it was a tunic but close enough) and you had a dog with you.” He’d been one of the riot cops, hidden behind a visor and helmet and about 10 years younger so there was no way I could remember his face but he remembered mine and that was damned impressive. So, we became friends despite still being on opposite sides of the law.

Of course, there were lots of people in the area dabbling in pot, some growing and some dealing. There were my neighbors who’d freaked a bit when Dennis sprinkled the pot leaves on his cornflakes, and there was the Swedish couple who had a little 5 acre patch, but it was a landlocked piece, so to speak. They had no access to the road and had to walk across my property to get to theirs but they were cool with that. They set up a white tent for a home and planted a pot field. I came home one day to find them being busted and I right away called a lawyer friend and he said I should get down there right away with a camera and take pictures to prove it wasn’t on my land or otherwise I could lose the farm, but the cops grabbed my camera and threw it down and stomped on it and told me to get the fuck out of there, so I did, and it was all a big drag but fortunately I did get left out of any legal proceedings and didn’t lose the farm.

One of the cops, who didn’t believe me and didn’t like me much, told me, in a sneering voice “We’re going to burn your marijuana at the county fair grounds,” which they made a big show of doing, but I noticed there were no buds. I confronted him about it, shouting out “Where are the buds, where are the buds?” as the flames consumed all the stalks and leaves and useless rubbish and the anti-marijuana portion of the public nodded and was satisfied, but I know those fuckers kept the buds for themselves and smoked it all, if I know cops, and I do.

There were Nick and Liz, a Hippie couple who’d spent a couple of years in Texas and they showed up with a whole bunch of peyote in the back seat of their car, we spent an afternoon taking the prickly hairs out because they’ve got strychnine and that’ll fucking kill you, but then I was eating it like orange slices, everybody else was puking their guts out and we were tripping for about a week, Nick and Liz and Diana and me, and a few other people, on top of the world, looking out from the peak of the highest hill in Jackson County.

I went into business with a guy called Dave Graves, who turned out to be a seriously unsavory character but he was always good to me and a steady business partner. He told me straight up that he'd killed a man, a federal agent who'd followed him into the woods, looking for his still and they were dodging around in the trees and Dave shot him and he died. I found out later that he'd molested his daughter, too.

One guy I'll always remember was Kenny. He was an uncomplicated man, and the salt of the Earth. I first met him when he saw me cutting up a car and he told me I was doing it wrong so I gave him a job with Small is Beautiful Motors but he always wanted to work in his own yard. We became good friends, He'd come over to the farm with all his kids and he had a slew of them, and pitch in to get the work done because he knew a lot more about farming than me, too.

Our specialty at Small is Beautiful Motors was to take two VW bugs, one totalled in front, one totalled in back, cut them in two and weld the two good parts together. One day some Iranians we'd sold a car to came in and wanted their money back. I just begged them not to smoke because I could smell leaking gasoline. Kenny apologized, one of his son's hadn't clamped something together correctly, but still I said, "No, we're not going to give you your money back but...." and I wasn't sure what I was going to offer exactly but right then Diane poked her nose in and started screaming "Give them their money back right now," not out of business ethics but because they made her nervous and she wanted them out of there. It worked out O.K. because we sold the car a week later for \$400 more.

We could tuck 10,000 dollars into Kenny's shirt pocket and send him down to Florida with absolute, complete confidence that the suppliers would be paid, the drugs would be delivered, no questions would be asked and not a word would be blabbed. He never complained, even though he wasn't getting paid anywhere near what he was worth, in view of the risk he was taking.

I did a few of those runs myself. That was in the time after my divorce, so I was free to travel and I would fly down to Miami on my own, and meet my old buddy Kevin and a tall, skinny, master of the lifestyle named Chuck and we had parties on his yacht with his adorable, tiny Thai girlfriend named Susie, and the cocaine was as common as Halloween candy.

It's strange. I've smoked a ton of pot, and hash, and freely taken peyote and LSD, allowing the chemicals to course through my bloodstream and steer my mind down mysterious and potentially insanity inducing pathways, but I passed on the cocaine. It was a bit like that time in New York with the Hare Krishnas, once I got a whiff of the serious power; the good angel on my left shoulder took charge and told the little devil on the right to back off.

Susie did the coke, Susie did plenty of coke, but she also had a better sense of detachment than Kevin or Chuck, of being able to look at this fantasy from the outside and recognize the risks. One night we were on the mainland, clubbing, and Chuck was ordering bottle after hundred dollar bottle of Dom Perignon, pearls before swine in my case for sure, I couldn't taste the difference, and at about the 5th round Susie took the bottle, shook it up and stuffed it down his pants. It was a great joke but it was her way of telling him to stop.

I saw Kenny again, many years later, after I'd been back and forth to Europe and China a couple of times, and half expected him to be bitter and angry, pissed off from being ripped off, but he said "I'm really grateful to you guys, you set me up right."

As it turned out, we were the minor players in that great drama and the high powered Colombian drug lords we were dealing with had recognized the value of Kenny's sterling character right away. He'd gone on to a career of riding around on jet planes and staying in fancy hotel rooms. Probably still underpaid, but living a pretty darned good life for a Hillbilly boy from a small town along the Ohio River. All of his kids got a good start in life. One even graduated from university, and not just any old university, one of those that people's eyes open a little wider when they see it on a resumé.

Chapter 14

The future is a land of endless possibilities, once you let go of the past
– Guru Sharab

I knew we were through as a couple when we were having an argument, I don't even remember about what, and she reached out and yanked at my prayer bead necklace, and beads went flying all over the floor. Shocked, I pushed her back and she immediately started screaming bloody murder. She called the police and claimed I was beating her and then checked into a women's shelter, with the kids.

When divorce became inevitable, Diana and I agreed that it should be amicable, and fair, mostly because of Cara and Caleb, but also just because we still meant something to each other, there had definitely been love once. What I didn't know was that she'd already lawyered up and he'd advised her of a tricky little tactic which I didn't even see happening, although it was happening.

She moved out, with the kids, to Arcadia, a little University town one county to the north, but that one county put it into a different world, where they didn't think much of us folks down in Dogpatch. Six months to establish residency, and she'd have a much more favorable court.

When I got wind of this one of my lawyer friends said I should serve papers on her first, she still had a couple of months to go, but I didn't want to do that, I wanted to be up front, so I confronted her and then both of us spent the next couple of months avoiding anybody who looked like they might be serving papers, and she got her friendly court.

Looking at life from this end of that long road, I realize I should thank Diane for leaving me. If it wasn't for that I wouldn't have been with Carol, Claudia, Janet, Bijali, Parivara, Natalie, Klara, Aga, Bara, Wang Bo, Hui Bo, Lisa or any of the others.

I hooked up with Carol just about as quick as the sun shines, there was already an attraction there and as soon as Diana was out of the picture, Carol was in it. She was into Transactional Analysis, and that's how I'd met her. TA is the whole "I'm O.K., You're O.K." thing, which was all about sitting cross legged across from the other person and staring into their

eyes, and role playing the situations in each other's lives, and they say that rule number one is not to fall in love with your T.A. partner but of course everybody does.

Carol was taller than me, and skinny, with long, black hair like Cher. She had 5 kids, two girls and 3 boys. Merle, the oldest, was already sniffing glue and in trouble. Her kids and my kids got on great.

We were together for over a year, but the reality was different than the dream. There were small differences, which seemed like big differences at the time. She said she'd quit smoking. I wanted her to quit smoking, but she didn't quit smoking. Also, her daughters were growing up. And they were smoking hot. I needed to get out, before there was trouble. Weird trouble.

I was on my own for a while then. It was maybe a month before I started in with Claudia. Claudia had originally arrived at Gaia Farm with her bricklayer boyfriend, and was a real close to the Earth type. She had wild, curly brown hair like a lion's mane and she was into building sweat lodges.

She eventually lost \$10,000 in a business deal she blamed me for, I'll tell you more about that in a minute, but when it happened she tossed me out and within a week I was living with Janet.

Sweet, sweet Janet; wholesome child of the Midwest with blonde hair that grew straight and then curled lower down, as if it were trying to behave but just couldn't. She had a quick smile, laughed a lot and everybody loved her. She saw all my faults and loved me anyway.

I'd sold her a stove a while back. The chimney hadn't fit quite perfectly. It needed a liner, so I sent Obi-wan over to do the job, one beautiful sunshiney day. I got a call later that there'd been an accident. He'd fallen off the top of the ladder reaching for something, fell three stories and he was damned lucky he'd cleaned up the bricks on the lawn. He broke his pelvis, was in hospital for quite a while and still walks with a limp. He'd been distracted, thinking about Janet's cookies. Spacey fucker.

One day, after we'd been together a couple of months, I got a phone call. It was Claudia, sobbing and saying she'd made a mistake and asking me to come back. I was ready to go but choosing my words carefully as Janet

was in the kitchen, listening to my side of the conversation and apparently figuring out the rest. Women are a lot smarter than men that way.

As soon as I hung up the phone she turned to me and said “If you walk out that door, you walk out for good. I won’t take you back. You have to choose now,” which I thought was unfair in the extreme because, of course, I wanted both of them. I was in love with both of them. I was in extreme sexual desire of both of them, but I figured a bird in the hand was better than beating around an old bush, so I stayed with Janet.

Janet had some Chinese boarders, which was a window on a different world. One was An, from Shanghai, he was brilliant with numbers. Janet refused to play Gin Rummy with him.

Then there was Radovan, an old Serbian guy. I’d known his son, a film maker, at college. He moved in with Janet and me and helped me drive a car out to California one time which was kind of a catastrophe. He told me lots of cool war stories but he didn’t know shit about cars.

Chapter 15

You can do whatever you choose

But it's smart not to bet, what you can't lose – Guru Kalehuru

You can meditate without closing your eyes. – Guru Sharab

I have had many failures in my life, but they have not been ordinary failures. I was a victim of the famous Nigerian Businessman Scheme back before anybody was on the internet, back when there was a real, flesh and blood, Nigerian Businessman involved.

Kwance Maciji had been my accountant for over 3 years, and I had no reason at all not to trust him. He came to me one sunny summer day along with Paul Phelps, a local plumbing contractor. I'd met Paul a couple of times, through other friends, but didn't know him well.

Kwance was a smooth operator. He was 34, dressed sharp, and talked educated. He was born in Nigeria but was totally American. African blacks are so much blacker than American blacks that it really stands out, and his white teeth were polished to a shine, they shone from his face like the single light shining from a starving artist's apartment in a skyscraper at 3 a.m. He kept his head shaved, like Kojak.

He asked me to help him save a computer deal from which he was to receive 15 million dollars. He reminded me of the international trade mission he'd gone on the year before with the governor of the state. That had been in the news and everything. He said that it had resulted in a 70 million dollar deal that just needed a hundred and fifty grand to be completed.

I told him I wasn't interested because I didn't have any extra money for investments, which was true, but I had no reason to doubt his story.

Kwance taught accounting at the University in Arcadia, and his wife, Karen, worked in admissions there. She was an American black woman, a bit on the plump side, and well liked. Between them, they had already attracted over a dozen investors, but I didn't know about that at the time.

He told me that none of the banks in Arcadia would lend him the money (shades of racism), and so it was through a combination of sympathy,

perhaps a bit of greed although I wasn't investing any of my own money yet, and my usual desire to be in the middle of things that I hooked him up with my friend Danny Smith.

Danny always seemed to have money. We sat in his living room and I told him I'd known Kwance for 3 years, he was my accountant and I trusted him. Kwance explained the deal.

Danny's girlfriend was a mystic hippie who said she'd had a dream the night before, about a deal gone bad, but nobody, not even Danny, paid any attention to her. I guess she was used to that. She didn't break down in hysterics and beg him not to do it.

He came on board for \$150,000, and Kwance said he'd get twice that back in less than a week. After we left the house he wrote me out a check for \$250,000, just as a finder's fee, a little bonus, but told me not to cash it until the deal was done. I was stunned. I was ecstatic.

We were euphoric for a day and then, as the glow wore off we began to get nervous. Kwance called again. "Just a little more to get it done," he said. I relayed this message to Danny, who said he had the cash but this made him suspicious.

I suggested we go to my friend, Dennis Barr, who was a lawyer, and get his advice. We picked up another friend, Mike Frye, and went over. Dennis seemed a bit evasive, but he didn't tell us not to do it. "Listen, you should treat it like an oil well. There is a risk. That is why the reward is great. Do you trust Kwance?"

I wish he would have just said "No contract, NO money!" That would have been the best legal advice but we never even discussed a contract and you get what you pay for. Dennis wasn't on the clock or anything; we'd just stopped by unannounced and asked him as friends.

Years later Dennis told me that his law partner, Dennis Brickman, had already been sucked in and was angling for a spot on Kwance's board of directors. He'd vetoed that instantly, so we know he had had some foreboding. Instead, the position went to Jamie Sonderleiter, an old Hippie friend of mine who'd cut off his dreadlocks a few years ago and gone back to school to become a lawyer.

Danny decided to hang in there. We went back to his farm and lowered a pail down his well. It came up with the cash, another \$75,000. “Sheee-it,” I thought. “Either that old boy’s dealing in the good herb or else he murdered a leprechaun.”

We had to deposit it in amounts under \$10,000 because more than that and the bank has to report it to the police, and time was short so there we were in the same bank, standing at separate windows sending \$9,999 to the same account. We waited, we worried, we were disappointed again when Kwance called and asked for still more money.

Meanwhile, Danny had asked Kwance to buy Bob Green’s farm. Green was an old Hillbilly, a bit like Darrell Flaherty, who loved telling stories of his relatives who fought for the Confederacy. So Danny, Kwance, Kwance’s 14 year old son Johnnie, and I went to meet him and take a look at the farm. Oh, what dreams come into your mind whenever you’re looking at a property for sale. I wasn’t even the buyer and I was imagining where I’d put a garden, where I’d build a barn, how I’d remodel the house...

Bob and Kwance hit it off great and Kwance said he’d be happy to buy the farm when the cash arrived. Kwance calmed our nerves by saying his family was monitoring all actions on the spot in Nigeria and that we could never lose the money because it was all legitimate business. There was a contract. When we asked to see it he told us the Nigerian government prohibited copies and held the original in a bank in Lagos. It all seemed to make sense at the time.

I still hadn’t put in any of my own money but I was getting involved. I moved in with Kwance and Paul Phelps during the day, into an apartment belonging to Kwance’s mother-in-law which served as the temporary office. I saw the faxes and talked to contacts by phone. It all seemed legit to me.

Although we had been disappointed twice already, and more times that I was not told about, we felt pretty confident, even arrogant. We were on the inside and we were going to be rich! I let this excitement go to my head and bragged about it on the street. This would cost me dearly, especially with my daughter.

I talked to the contact in Lagos myself and he assured me all was fine, we just needed one more kick. We were so close now. When we needed just

another \$18,000 I thought that I could just write a check on my account and pay it off when the funds arrived the next day.

Without telling Kwance my scheme I gave him a check and started sweating it out but after a few hours I realized my mistake and leveled with him. He was livid. He was shouting about how we couldn't do anything illegal. He found the cash to cover the mistake, miraculously, but again the money did not come.

We were passing the days getting stoned and being paranoid in the apartment. Then my brother Louie came in with \$18,000 and some friends wanted to invest another \$5,000. It seemed so easy. It was exciting just seeing those amounts of cash trade hands. All cash was given directly to Kwance.

Kwance and Paul wanted expensive cars when the big load arrived and argued about the advantages of a Mercedes over a Range Rover. Kwance even showed up one day in a new Mercedes that a dealer had let him take home on a try out.

Jamie added legitimacy to the deal as he was the lawyer on the board of Kwance's company.

But the tension was getting to me. We were all suffering. One day I was walking by an open door and saw Kwance sitting up in bed, arms out to his side and thumbs touching index fingers, chin up and eyes raised to heaven, muttering soft prayers, and I panicked.

“What are you praying for?!” I shouted. “We need concrete steps, not prayers.” He gave me a dismissive response, something about patience, and I blew up and threw an ashtray at his head, hitting the wall, and stormed off.

About a week later I was home, scared, in bed and alone when Kwance called with good news. He had found the last \$250,000 we needed but he needed land to put up as collateral. “Could you put up your farm?” he asked. My loyalty was being tested. I felt a responsibility to Danny, to Louie, and to every other friend who'd put up cash.

My farm was in a land trust in my kids' name, but I took it out and put it in the deal. I should have consulted Dennis Barr again.

Jamie made up all the papers. When we were in the office to sign I met Fred Keeler. He was the lawyer for Mitch Altgeld, a coal mine owner who had more money than any of the nickel and dime pot dealers in the whole southern part of the state, and had done more environmental damage than 10 million Hippies. It should have made me suspicious that he was involved in any way.

Jamie was ready with the papers. He asked me if I really wanted to do it, but he should have said “don’t do it.” He was in the middle and did not want to piss off Kwance.

Again, no cash back, and the cycle went on. I became depressed. Bob Green called. He was anxious to sell his farm and do some traveling, that was his lifelong dream. I told him we still needed more cash, another \$300,000. He said he would be willing to put up his farm if he could get double back.

I told Kwance, who went back to Altgeld and asked him to lend him the money, with Bob’s farm as collateral. Fred was very skeptical, but Mitch wanted to go ahead. I had promised Danny when he made his second investment that if things went bad I would give him my wood stove inventory.

Now Fred wanted them thrown into the deal because he realized that the estimate of \$250,000 for my farm was inflated and could not really cover the previous loan. I called Danny in Hawaii where he was vacationing and asked if we could use the stoves as collateral on the new loan with Bob Green. He reluctantly agreed.

Bob had 350 acres and another acre where his house was. He wanted to keep his house out of the deal so he would have a place to stay no matter what happened. Jamie did the land search in a hurry and missed the fact that the deed was incorrect, there were fewer acres of land than expected, but in all the confusion Bob signed. He would end up taking my place as the main source for new funds.

Still, no money. More stress and waiting. I was now staying at Claudia’s place in Arcadia. She saw me suffering and could not stand it. She put in \$10,000 to save the deal. I stayed away now. While I was away, Bob got more involved and took out more loans to send more cash. The wheels were spinning. It was a never ending cycle.

After a few months of silence I was beginning to come to grips with the fact that I would have to give up my farm. Bob came to me with a request. He wanted me to put up my farm machinery as a guarantee toward a loan for another \$30,000. I told him I thought we were just pouring more money down the well. He was still fooling himself, and I reluctantly agreed to put up the last of my possessions to help him. Paul and Kwance would be flying to Lagos to settle things once and for all.

I needed to sign on the loan and did so with the understanding that if things went bad I would be going bankrupt and could give up my tractor and other farm machinery. I had pretty much nothing left. Bob agreed.

Paul and Kwance did go to Lagos but they were in fear the whole time. As soon as they arrived Kwance was told if he made waves, his family would be killed. They stayed in a 'hotel' with armed guards. Paul kept a knife on him at all times. Kwance went to a voodoo lady every morning. Tom had talked to a CIA guy who'd warned him not to go or he might not come back alive. Nothing was accomplished by this trip. Nothing was ever going to happen. We would eventually lose over \$600,000 in cash!

Finally, even Bob had to admit that we had been taken for a ride. He went to the Jackson county prosecutor who happened to be my old lawyer, Rick McCullough. I had warned Kwance that if the deal went south the Hillbillies would bury him alive. Now they had their chance.

Meanwhile Kwance's house had been foreclosed on and Karen had quit her job at the University and moved to a city two hours drive away. The family filed for bankruptcy. Kwance's whereabouts were unknown. He did not call me.

I was taken to court by Altgeld and had to give up my farm and wood stove inventory. My farm machinery was confiscated and auctioned off in my front yard. This was a lot to lose, but there was more to come. Not one friend called or came by to ask if I was O.K.

With the matter going to criminal court I knew that Danny would be in a difficult position. Nobody ever complains about somebody having too much money when times are good and they're occasionally buying a round of drinks, but in court he might have to answer questions about where it came from. We didn't want to see him get nailed for tax evasion or anything

like that.

I kept Danny covered by keeping my mouth shut. But, a funny thing happened. While I was protecting Danny he was badmouthing me like crazy with the Hippies and Hillbillies both. Somehow he had me bringing Bob Green into the deal even though I hadn't even known Bob until we went over to his house with Danny.

This behavior was not a surprise to me. I had seen it with other friends of Danny's who became enemies after a deal went bad, but I was stunned at how evil he made me out to be, and how quickly. I became the face of the scam as if I had something to do with it other than helping people make business connections. I was warned by the district attorney to stay away from Kwance's criminal trial. I was shocked to hear that they were considering indicting me!

Bob Green, to his credit, stood up for me in the investigation.

Kwance had been indicted but was nowhere to be found. He had to show up for his bankruptcy hearing, in the city Karen had moved to, in order to keep her from being responsible for the company debt. She was on the board of directors and had handled the cash when we needed to deposit it in amounts less than \$10,000.

To my great surprise, Bob did not object when Karen said that she was not involved in the business, that she was ignorant of the facts. When I asked him why he had let her slide he told me he felt sorry for Johnnie and didn't want him to suffer any more. The debt was dismissed.

Bob did tell the judge, though, that there was a warrant out for Kwance in Jackson County but the bankruptcy judge said that was not his business. "Out of my jurisdiction," sounds very polite and legal, but his tone of voice said "I couldn't give a rat's ass what you Hillbillies get up to."

Here, we had a bit of luck. Kwance ran a red light as he drove out of town and the warrant popped up in the routine check. They locked him up.

Now, for the trial. I was not allowed inside the courtroom because I might need to testify and I was still in danger of getting indicted myself. Kwance was being prosecuted under the RICO act, which dealt with conspiracies. I

could be charged as an accomplice. I found out that Kwance had not gone to Nigeria with the governor, after all.

The scam was hot news in the small community and I was hounded for interviews. I knew that I should give my side of the story but I felt that I had a moral obligation to protect Danny from the IRS, and worse, so I kept my mouth shut.

Kwance was convicted and sentenced to 20 years, although he continued to insist that it was a legitimate deal and the money would soon arrive.

Chapter 16

Nature is not mute, it is man who is deaf – Terence McKenna

You meet the nicest people in the world when your car breaks down – Guru Sharab

I started to move things from the farm. My tractor and farm implements that I had pledged to Bob's loan were foreclosed on and auctioned off in my yard. I moved my horses to a patch that was in my mother's name and asked Obi-wan to keep an eye on them for me. He was living in one of the last dwellings I had left, a run down trailer I had bought from Merle Flaherty.

One day I got a call from a Hillbilly friend who worked for the county. He told me that my horses would be confiscated the next morning by the animal protection officer because they were malnourished! I called my vet and had her give them a check up. She verified that they were in fine condition. Then I called the appropriate office in Jackson and they agreed to drop the case.

It was Obi-wan who had made the complaint, without really thinking things through. Another time he turned himself in for not having a proper septic system. It was the normal over the hill system, and the authorities never said anything about them unless somebody complained. Obi-wan's free lawyer from social assistance had advised him to do it. Now he had managed to have his own trailer condemned, and had to move out.

The yard was full of garbage. Obi-wan had taken in a lot of the neighbor's garbage, all he could haul away, he had had big recycling plans, but there it sat.

The silence on the farm became oppressive to me. I slept for a month. Then I began to stay away from the farm. My paradise turned to ashes. I was lucky to have the support of Janet, and I was staying at her place up in Arcadia. I let a Hare Krisna family use the main house and asked them to be careful not to burn the new rug. They burned the rug.

I went to court to save the farm and found Fred Keeler, the lawyer who was taking it away, consoling me. "Everybody likes you, Jack. Even your

enemies like you.”

Those words have always stuck with me, although they seemed strange at the time. Diana was being vindictive, turning my kids against me.

Danny Smith had gotten stung plenty bad in the deal, so maybe it was appropriate that I gave him all my bees, for free, before some other greedy bastard got them.

Then he turned around and stole all the wood stoves. Obi-wan called and said he was there and taking the stoves and I told him to tell him that he wasn't stealing my stoves, he was stealing Fred Keeler's stoves, but he took them anyway. Then I had a talk with Fred and he called Danny and said get those stoves back right away or you're going to prison, and Danny brought them back.

People who owed me money would not buy me lunch.

Then there was the son of a bitch who killed my dog, my best dog, a beautiful big hound, at least part Alaskan Malamute, named Wolf.

We'd always been on good terms before, he rented from me and I'd lent him money to buy tools and even a car, but I'd warned him when he moved in not to have any small animals, because of my dogs. The dumbass started in raising rabbits and then got angry when Wolf acted exactly as you'd expect a dog to act, and shot him right in my front yard, with a bunch of kids watching and everything.

The trailer, the one that Obi-wan had had condemned, got burned down. A couple people tried to kill me, but they were crazy hitchikers I'd picked up, and it wasn't directly related to the other problems. Things were just not going well.

I was tired of all the responsibility. I let the front lawn grow wild and began to feel like just another weed. I realized that the weeds were at home, they would truly be the ones to inherit the property, they were the ones who belonged there, who were home.

I prayed to God and God works in mysterious ways, Allahu Akbar, everything I owned would be taken from me within the year and I would be left with nothing and no reason to stay and that is exactly what I needed.

I started spending a lot more time away. I would buy a car, drive it out to California and sell it, buy one there and drive it up to Seattle and sell it, buy another there and drive it home to sell it, making a nice little profit on the way.

Driving long distances became like a meditation technique for me, but I'm not recommending that. I fell asleep at the wheel a couple of times, plowing into a snow bank in North Dakota once.

It was at Janet's place that I told my son of my decision to leave. I sat on her sofa with tears in my eyes and told Caleb that I had to leave or else I would go crazy. Cara wasn't even there, nor was she particularly bothered. She was a bit older, and had other things to deal with.

Chapter 17

If things aren't working where you are, then go some place else
– Guru Sharab

By 1991 I had had enough of trying to re establish my career in America and decided to go to Europe. Radovan's son told me conditions would be good for importing American cars to Belgrade, so I wanted to scout things out. I scraped together the price of a ticket, but landed in Europe with almost no money.

I first flew to Vienna where I visited Juan and Sarah. My Mexican ex-convict friend was becoming quite the cosmopolitan, his German was quite good and he'd found a job repairing old statues. Sarah's mother had helped them buy a nice house in the country just 45 minutes from Vienna. He was, on the down side, having a hard time adjusting to Austrian racism.

From Vienna I took a train to Belgrade. Trains are great. You can meet people on the train. From Vienna to Belgrade I got to know a Yugoslavian girl who needed help with a visa to go to the USA. I went with her to the American embassy, thinking I could be of some help but I wasn't. They told me if I married her she could get a visa but I wasn't ready for that commitment.

What surprised me, though, was there were no Americans there. The embassy was manned by locals, 100%. The first clerk we spoke to looked at me and said "Where do you want us to send the body?"

I would hear that a lot, but people appreciated my presence. They figured if I was American and I was there, they were safe from being bombed. I found myself welcomed into every home like a celebrity. They were warm, they were generous, they were fun but I could see the pain on their faces as their modern economy slowly slipped back into the stone ages.

I fell in love with a petite beauty named Biljana, whose light brown hair was cut short around her pixie face. She had huge, deep brown eyes, like an anime doll. I followed her around the whole time I was there but nothing ever happened.

I looked up Radovan, of course. It turned out he'd been the chauffeur to

somebody pretty high up in the military, who'd served as their liaison with the Americans. He introduced me to his ex-boss, who said he was very confused as to how his country's good ally had become the enemy. He had the famous Belgrade military museum opened especially for me and gave me the tour himself and then we walked to the famous Belgrade Bridge where convicts had been left to die in the days of Turkish rule hanging from a wooden spear which entered from the ass and pierced their shoulder. A slow, agonizing death was greatly appreciated by the Turkish authorities. This country's history of suppression goes back to way before the Nazis.

I loved walking around the open air markets with the beautiful Biljana by my side, past the outdoor cafes of Belgrade, where the old men would sit and play chess for hours. These were my first impressions of Europe.

I met a young, upwardly mobile Mafioso who invited me out to dinner. He picked me up first and then we drove to collect his beautiful girlfriend who was a journalist. In the restaurant he kept teasing her by saying that she spoke better English than him, and making sly jokes about how much I'd love to fuck her, which was for sure true but I was not looking for any trouble.

About halfway through our meal there was a commotion at the table next to us, cameras all around filming that party and a murmur of hushed, excited voices throughout the room. It was, my host explained to me, the Prince; young Prince Alexander. I'd been in Europe less than a month and I was dining with royalty! Well, in the same restaurant as royalty. Same thing.

Later students involved in the protests against the government of Slobodan Milosevic asked me to address their rally since I had been in the Anti Vietnam protests. I figured between my big mouth and my relative ignorance of the situation there was a good chance I'd get us all shot, so I declined that offer.

Everyone wanted to be with the lone American in Belgrade, but I was gaining weight like crazy because every time I said "No, I'm not hungry!" people would bring me more red wine and white cheese, Kashkaval, Shar, Sirene, as like as not made from goat or sheep's milk as cow's, heavy, a bit salty, sharp and delicious. I gained 10 pounds in a week!

I returned to Vienna very unsure about the future.

Chapter 18

*Around and around the world you roam
Wherever you wind up is home – Guru Kalehuru*

It's good to be different. People notice different. – Guru Sharab

Juan was running a marathon for Sri Chinmoy in Brno, Czechoslovakia, so Sarah and I tagged along, any excuse for a road trip, road trips are always fun.

Now, one difference between Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia is that even when both were Communist countries Yugoslavia had had some American tourists and the reason there were no other Americans when I went was the war. So, I was an oddity, but they'd seen Americans before. Czechoslovakia, under Communism, was almost totally closed to the West. So, I was even more of an attraction. Even Sarah, from just across the border in Austria, was a novelty. And Pedro was off the charts.

It's a beautiful country, a portal to the past, with castles planted on the mountaintops, and villages with old town squares, each one with its church, its bell tower, and several pubs. It seemed every building was adorned with angels and bare breasted women. I suddenly remembered, like some kind of long repressed memory brought out by hypnosis, that my mother was from this part of the world, that I was as much Slavic as Italian. Some people go on a quest to find their roots; I had just wandered blindly until I stumbled across them.

We met some people who took us out swimming and I was stunned when all of the girls just stripped off as casual as you please, and most of them really hot girls, too. My heart was pounding, my mind was racing, my eyes were wide with the wonder of it all, and the Czech boys were acting like it was no big deal.

It seemed to be an unpretentious, easy going, open society. I saw mothers leaving their babies in strollers parked out in front of the shops as they nipped in to get some food for dinner.

The busses and trams were all crowded, and I loved rubbing up against the hot, little bodies of young Czech girls, who would smile flirtatiously and

shift a bit to give me a better view.

The day after the Marathon, driving back in the direction of Vienna, we stopped in the town of Hloupovice, where they were having a mini-Olympics of silly games: three legged races, pass the orange, tug of war over a mud pit, stuff like that. I struck up a conversation with a girl at the information booth, who spoke a bit of English and that's probably what she was doing in the information booth, not a lot of people in Czechoslovakia spoke any at all, and the next thing I knew she'd invited me back to meet her family. The three of us stayed with the Brzobohatý family a few days, and I stayed on a little longer. There was Julie (pronounced Yuli-eh) and her sister Karolina and their Dad, Lumír, who was in the trucking business and convinced me that this would be a good place to import cars to, and Mom, a simple country woman, always cooking, always hospitable.

Through Lumir Brzobohatý I met Tonda Svoboda, a mechanic who was to become an important character in my life. He was a drinker and would take me from pub to pub, where there were long wooden tables so you wouldn't just sit and drink with your friends, you drank with the whole village, and they put a beer in front of you as soon as you came in, you didn't need to order, it was just assumed that since you were in a pub, you wanted beer, and nobody'd heard of second hand smoke yet because everybody still smoked first hand and a cloud hung in the air indoors but everybody was used to it. The first Czech words I learned were ještě jednou, the j is pronounced like a y, the s with a hook is pronounced sh and e with a hook at the end is pronounced nasally, yeshtye yednou!, one more! It's what people shouted out when their glass was empty and even though they were really big glasses, somebody's was always empty; ještě jednou rang out through the pub, through all the pubs, every night, like the drunkards' battle cry.

Chapter 19

Everybody wants something different. That's what makes business possible
– Guru Sharab

I went back to the States to rustle up some cars to sell and after about a year of hustling I was back with five of them. I met a Nigerian kid while I was there who was wheeling and dealing like me. At one point we were driving along and I was holding the cash and realized I could leave him in a snowbank and me and the Nigerian race would be quits but it was a momentary thought. I'm not that evil.

Juan was in the states at the time and with his help we moved two VW diesel Rabbits, a Mazda pickup truck, an Alfa Romeo Spider and a VW van to the port in New Jersey. Then we flew to Amsterdam to wait for them. None of them were in great shape, and the paperwork was dodgy. I'd found the license plates in the garbage. You can find anything you need in the garbage.

Eight miles above the Atlantic, Juan struck up a conversation in Spanish with an older Surinamese woman. She invited us to stay with her at her apartment, where she lived with her two grandchildren. Her three daughters were prostitutes and only dropped in occasionally. In the morning Juan got me to one side and said "We've got to get out of here, she's driving me crazy," so we said our good byes hurriedly and were on our way. Nice lady, she just wouldn't shut up, even for a second.

We picked up the first two cars, the VW diesels, and drove to Czechoslovakia, or maybe it was the Czech Republic by then, the transition was made with such an incredible lack of fanfare. It was perhaps the best example ever of problem resolution at the international level, a model for how things should be done. The Slovaks said they wanted independence and the Czechs, in the person of Václav "The Bob Geldof of Presidents" Havel, said "Well, O.K., we're not going to fight about it or anything," and that was that. To this day Czechs love vacationing in Slovakia, hiking among the steep, majestic High Tatra mountains and eating *halušky* (halushky) with *brindza* cheese and Slovak kids all come to Prague for the jobs and opportunities, pulled like a magnet, like Midwestern small town drama students are all drawn to New York. American guys like me were going to Prague, by the thousands and tens of thousands, for the beer and the babes, but the Slovaks,

the Ukrainians, the Russians, the Central Asians and the Vietnamese had realer reasons.

I met a Lebanese guy, Khalil, who agreed to buy one of the cars for three grand, and I'm talking in dollars. He worked for the U.N. and had to go down to Florence, Italy for a conference and suggested we make a road trip of it and he'd buy the car from me in Italy so we went and stopped in a lot of small, mountain villages where we were invited in by strangers and wine and dined and he bought about fifty liters of olive oil. Some people get really obsessive about olive oil.

In Florence he checked into his hotel, while I slept in the car. Early the next morning, I was still groggy but it was time for me to get going, I went into the front desk and asked if they could ring him up. He came down and, right there in front of the hotel, he said "What about the price of the car?"

I blew up. "What about the price of the car? You agreed about the price of the car!" Apparently, we had a basic disagreement about the meaning of 'agreed' and, now that he was where he wanted to be, he had a much lower figure in mind. Much, much lower. I punched him in the face, hard, which was sort of ironic, being at a peace conference, and we shouted at each other a bit more and eventually he gave me some money to go away but didn't buy the car.

I drove up to Vienna and it didn't seem as if my luck was changing until I found a weekend car market. Since I didn't speak any German, I just stood there with a sign that said "Verkauf," but that was enough. Communication isn't too hard when everybody is thinking about the same thing.

Two big Ukrainians, like Sumo wrestler big, and a smaller friend said they liked the car and asked in sign language to try it out. I sat in the front passenger seat and got a little nervous when I realized how easy it would be for the big guy sitting behind me to kill me with a necktie move.

But, that was all my overactive imagination. When we got back they led me to an American, who was the USA Olympic weightlifting coach, and he explained to me that these boys were champion Ukrainian weight lifters in town for an international competition. They agreed to buy the car as long as I would ride with them across the Hungarian border, which suited me just fine because I could go to Budapest, city of broad avenues, palaces along

the Danube, saunas and goulash, and catch a train from there.

They did well in the competition so I spent the evening celebrating with them, but I was celebrating, too, toasting my first sale in Europe with Ukrainian Vodka.

I now had enough cash to pay for the C.O.D. shipping for the next three cars scheduled to arrive from the U.S. I took a bus from Budapest to Hloupovice and then drove in the lesser rabbit, the serious oil-burner, back to Amsterdam with a local kid who was just getting his kicks driving across Europe, a teenager experiencing the power of being in the driver's seat, the freedom of the open road, and traveling across Europe through land that had so recently been forbidden to him. We forged some papers for the cars in a library in Amsterdam, parked the smog monster in the long term parking at Schiphol airport, and went to pick up two more cars, the Alfa Spider and the VW van.

The van had a bed big enough for three people and I'd driven it across the USA from Oregon with a taped in windshield and plastic over the side windows. The top was kind of crunched down, since it had been rolled. I'd straightened out the frame and put new doors on it back at Kenny's place, there's nothing like welding outdoors in the country on a beautiful day, and then drove it to New Jersey.

Now it was headed to the Czech Republic where I would do a bit of Bondo work, slap some paint on it, and sell it at a nice profit. That was the plan. We drove back to Hloupovice and the cars definitely had an impact, especially the Spider, but they didn't sell. Nobody had that kind of money, but beautiful women would stare at me in my Alfa spider even after it had broken down completely and was being towed on a rope!

I wasn't too bothered with the lack of sales, I was having such a great time being a sort of celebrity and getting tours of old, crumbling castles and so many of the wine cellars which were as thick in that part of the country as dandelions in a Moravian meadow in springtime. They had plain, old, brick walls or sometimes just rough stone, curving up into an arched ceiling. It was a darker, cooler world just a bit below the ground; and many of them were like little hobbit holes, carved into the hillside, with grass and clover growing over the roof.

Moravia is an oasis of vineyards in a beer country, the most adamantly beer

drinking country in the world. It struck me as comical that there was a red Moravian wine called “Blue Portuguese.” There’s also a stuffed beef concoction that’s called “Little Spanish Bird” which makes no sense, but languages don’t need to make sense.

Janet came over and her friendly smile and open, country ways fit right in. Everybody loved Janet. We traveled to Italy when the Brzobohatý family needed parts for a broken down tour bus they were running, and basked in the Mediterranean sunshine, bobbing along in our little rubber raft next to the yachts of the rich and famous along the Italian Riviera.

Janet was perfect on the road, a true camper. In Vienna, in the rain, we couldn’t find a reasonably priced room and wound up sleeping in an Indian stranger’s bed where everybody was taking turns sleeping in four hour shifts.

Back in Moravia, we were in an old farmer’s wine cellar when she was told that it was traditional to always finish the pitcher of wine. She took it literally and kept on, even though they kept discreetly filling up the pitcher. She didn’t want to let the side down; she carried the team colors long after most of us had flagged. We had to stop the car twice on the way home for her to puke and she asked me in a shy voice afterwards if I thought anybody had noticed.

Czech people may not have as much cash as Americans, but they are richer in some ways. It is not at all a rare thing for a family to have a home in the country, a cottage they can retire to on weekends or through the summer. The Brzobohatý family had a place like that and they let me and Janet stay there. We were having a party one night and, late in the evening, when the beer drinkers were bored with their beer and the wine drinkers were looking for something with a bit more zing, the exotic drinks came out. There was some dark, brown drink, so alcoholic you could smell it as soon as the bottle was opened, the aroma escaping like an evil genie. Janet went for it.

She ran out into the back yard, needing oxygen, and came back in shouting “The grass is on fire! The grass is on fire!” The grass was not on fire. Everybody had a good laugh at that one. Damn, Czechs can drink.

Chapter 20

Everybody's a tourist someplace else – Guru Sharab

After Janet went home I started thinking about going back myself. There were a few reasons. Janet. The cars weren't moving, anyway. I had a court hearing coming up, all about child support. And, I concocted a plan to justify it and pay the Brzobohaties back for their kindness.

I suggested that Julie accompany me to the States (I didn't offer to pay for the ticket, just to provide room and board stateside) Julie was totally excited about the idea but her Dad was skeptical and would only agree if someone went with her; that is, someone besides me. Tonda Svoboda, the cheerful, drunk mechanic, suggested that his niece, who was also named Karolína, same as Julie's little sister, go with us and so it was agreed.

We made plans to fly to New York where we could stay with my old college buddy, Kevin Bennett, on Long Island, before heading back to my neck of the woods.

The day of our flight Karolína was late and missed the plane. She would catch up to us on the next flight possible. Julie was not unaccompanied, though. Her boyfriend, Tomáš, came with us, which I didn't get clued into until we were actually in the boarding area. I'd thought he was just there to see her off. My position as 'chaperone' was impossible right from the start.

Kevin met us at JFK and drove us out to his place on Long Island, in Freeport, right near where 'Goodfellas' was supposed to have taken place and Kevin said he knew a lot of guys just like that. It was the first time either Julie or Tomáš had seen an ocean. March, it was way too cold for swimming but we walked along the beach and they were ecstatic. The next day I took them into Manhattan, and they were just as amazed at the huge skyscrapers, constant parade of traffic, and surging, multi-hued crowds of people, as they had been at the mighty ocean but this time there was immersion. I could feel that they were in over their heads and they were sticking as close to me as puppies, in and out under their mama's legs. I had a sudden, cruel inspiration and turned into a porno shop, knowing they would have to follow. I think Tomáš was amused but Julie was quite upset with me so, to make it up, I took her to a make-up salon. She was stunned

with her makeover, the new her, so much that she cried. She was, truly, a beautiful young woman.

Karolína did arrive the next day and it wasn't more than a day or two after that before we found a drive away car (there were a lot of agencies doing that then, it was a way of delivering cars and all you needed was a driver's license) and headed west in a big old Buick. At my mother's home the girls were surprised at how cold the house was. Raised with coal or wood stoves, a roaring fire or nothing, they were not used to the large open ranch style house and its central heating. My mother was not used to hearing a foreign language and after a couple of weeks pulled me aside and said she couldn't take it any more.

I had expected to have them all stay in Arcadia with Janet and me, which would have given them a view of America most tourists never see but they balked at living in such a small town so Dom offered them work at his apartment building in exchange for rent and he paid them an hourly wage for work after the rent was covered. It wasn't exactly in the best area of town but they had their own place and a bit of spending money and would still get a serious dose of the real USA.

Knowing what a tight-ass, manipulative prick my brother could be I saw trouble coming and warned them to make sure they got paid every week but they laughed at my concerns because Dom seemed so much more generous than me, and prosperous; so much more in keeping with their image of what an American should be. I hurried back home to Janet, it was only a couple of hours drive away.

In Arcadia I had two court appearances to make. The first one was with Diana about my inability to find a steady job, and the second with a guy named John Easton, who was the child support lawyer, on the same subject. He wasn't Diana's lawyer, he wasn't my lawyer. His job was to look out for the interests of the kids, but he was Janet's ex-husband, coincidentally, so one thing he and Diana had in common was that they both hated me.

He knew about my European travels but frowned on all my ideas of exporting cars, importing ginseng vodka, (which did turn out to be a flash in the pan get rich quick scheme, I'd seen it on the shelves once in Brno and thought it was a brilliant concept but apparently the fad didn't even catch on in the Czech Republic), and car sales.

An entrepreneur who traveled the world on a shoestring and slept on people's couches did not fit well into his vision of things.

The Czech girls came down one day to verify my Czech story. Again, the real experience. How many tourists get to see the inside of an American courtroom?

The Judge was a women's libber who found all men guilty of everything. I was representing myself again. Diana's lawyer, Bill Sellers, was an old friend of ours who we'd both smoked pot with; very professional and all, but still a stoner.

While I was in Amsterdam I had sent Caleb a marijuana postcard and written "Grass is legal here!" As the case opened, Bill presented the card as evidence. I objected "Your honor," I said, feeling like a proper lawyer, "this case is not supposed to be about morals." I was overruled.

When Diana took the stand and it was my turn to question her. I asked simply "Do you smoke pot?" The judge was outraged and said I was out of order. "But Bill introduced marijuana into the case," I pointed out.

"Keep it up, Mr. Pazzo, and you will be charged with contempt of court." I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"You smoke pot, Diana, and Bill, you do, too," I said but then I did shut up, because I could see that the judge hated me, and probably had her mind made up before she stepped up to her throne.

After that there was a one hour break before the second hearing, about the child support payments. Diana confronted me in the hall and threatened to expose all of the trips back and forth to Florida and all of the growing, which was outrageously hypocritical because she was as involved in the growing as I was but it didn't matter, she could obviously lie her ass off and the court would believe her and I'd wind up doing serious time so I had to agree to give her custody.

I could also see John talking with Bill just outside the courtroom door. I wasn't close enough to hear but he asked Bill a question, Bill shook his head 'no,' and John was obviously bummed out about it.

He had wanted Bill to testify that I had told him I was having some success in my auto ventures and that if they would give me a little slack I would be able to start making regular payments. That would have given John the chance to hang me out to dry because, according to the law, all cash I earned had to be turned over to Diana immediately, which would have left me with nothing to work with.

I was particularly bummed because before I'd told Bill that I'd said "I'm representing myself, so I'm talking to you now lawyer to lawyer" and I figured that meant it was confidential but, no, since I was not actually a lawyer, it didn't mean shit, and I was nervous.

Maybe my outburst had had the desired effect after all, or maybe he'd just decided to be a decent human being for the day, because he'd decided not to testify about that.

We had a different judge for the second hearing, a man, but Bill made the mistake of asking him "What are we going to do about Jack's bohemian lifestyle?" I thought quickly and said "Your honor, I object to this prejudicial statement! I live in Bohemia!" That threw them for a loop but in the end they gave me 10 days in the county jail, because I'd borrowed cash from my son to pay his support.

After the court appearance I had to meet with another guy from child services and some lawyer. They acted like I wasn't even in the room. "What are we going to do with this guy," the lawyer said, and the child services guy's answer was music to my ears. "I just hope I never see him again."

My Czech kids had come down to Arcadia to testify but in the end didn't need to, and they were mostly relieved. On the one hand, it would have been a truly unique American experience. On the other, it's really not as dramatic as it is on TV. The courtroom was in a really nice, old building, with beautiful wood panelling on the walls, but it paled next to the grandeur of centuries old Czech buildings.

"Where are the castles?" Julie had asked me one day when we were still in New York and I wasn't sure exactly where on the scale of serious/sarcastic that question was meant to be.

They enjoyed a day wandering around the small town, had lunch in the

diner on the square and went straight back to the big city. So far, they were still happy working for my brother.

I don't know how they found out, maybe through Tomáš' parents and a bit of connecting the dots, but after about a month in the U.S. Julie's parents found out that Tomáš was with us and they demanded that he come back straight away.

Tomáš had been real popular with both my mother and Dom. Things were not as good between the girls and my family after his departure and Dom ended up not paying all the money he'd promised. I'd warned them, but still somehow I wound up getting blamed for the shortfall, and held accountable.

I'd left 3 cars in Lumir Brzobohatý's back yard for safe keeping and, as far as he was concerned, they were his now. We'd been in America about 3 or 4 months, and a lot had changed.

Chapter 21

Plants are living things. Respect that. – Guru Sharab

Weed and wine are both divine – Guru Kalehuru

Though relationships between Lumír and I were tense, I was still on good terms with Tonda Svoboda, the cheerful drunk mechanic who lived nearby in Konopiště Zahrada. Also, I'd brought back some marijuana seeds with me from the states and he had dollar signs dancing in front of his eyes. He helped me steal the Alfa Romeo convertible back from Lumír, which involved using boltcutters to cut a lock off the gate. We parked it in back of Tonda's house on the grass.

“Do you think it will be O.K. here,” I asked. I didn't actually have any other options, or any specific objections. It just seemed a bit incongruous, such a flashy vehicle in the backyard behind the old farmhouse.

“Yes, yes, good, not problem”

Well, there was one wee problem. After a couple of days I found something written on the windshield, which I had to ask Tonda to translate, and the convertible top had been slashed. The writing on the windshield said “Don't park on my lawn!” I didn't know whether I should be madder at the neighbor, or at Tonda.

We did find somebody who said they could fix the top, but they just sewed it up and did a shitty job, it was never the same.

Tonda's wife, Hana, was the manager of a collective farm there. There were still a few of those left over from the communist era, maybe 25 or 30 people involved in all. The lifestyle was not destined to last. They had cows and cabbages. Also some pigs.

Tonda was using me as his chauffeur since he lost his license when he crashed my VW rabbit into a bush while hammered on slivovice, a particularly vile and insidious plum brandy which the Czechs consider a great source of national pride, and tried to run away with his pants falling down.

You can see the four huge smokestacks of Dukovany, a nuclear power plant, from Konopiště Zahrada. Tonda told me he'd helped build the plant. I called him Homer Simpson, and I knew he got the reference. Homer Simpson is

probably the world's most famous American. He tells me I am the American Schweik. I liked that. Schweik was a lot like Homer Simpson, I guess.

That was my first experience with Czech TV. It was mostly reruns of old American shows, Dallas, Mike Hammer, M*A*S*H*. I became a big fan of the weather report. Every night a girl would come out, completely naked, and then get dressed according to the weather forecast. Weather, fashion, and a wee bit of straight up porn, but it was not porn. It was erotic, the girls were way hot, but the nudity was only for a second and everybody, even old ladies, liked it.

His mother lived in the barn, with the pigs. She had a stall to herself, with a bed, a small night table, and a TV. She liked being near the pigs. I'd go to visit her and she would give me 5 crowns for a beer, which in those days was about right.

I had no money at this point but I could see better days ahead. We started the seeds in Tonda's basement, but it was obvious that we'd have to find a better place soon. There were far too many people around and my very presence attracted attention. Tonda didn't help on that score as he liked bringing his friends around and showing them the American working in his garden, like I was the Elephant Man or something. Also, there was the Alfa Romeo sitting there.

Added to that, Tonda's wife, Hana, was not at all pleased with the situation. Tonda had been in prison in Communist times over some shady black market deals, but somehow it was Hana who only saw the risk in our situation while Tonda was quite happily dreaming about what he'd do with the profits.

Most Czechs have a place in the city and a cottage in the country but leave it to Tonda to be exactly the opposite. In addition to their place on the farm, he had a house in Starý Hrad, a picturesque old town in the southeast of the Czech Republic, near the Austrian border. It has an old Gothic church and an old Town Hall with a big clock tower. A castle up on the hill is the oldest thing of all; it overlooks the placid, barely flowing river and has been doing so for almost a millenium. Underneath the castle, there are eight levels of catacombs, but few people ever see that.

He said his friend Jaromír, who lived nearby, was a gardener and would love to get in on a project like this, so we drove down to check things out.

I liked the fact that there was a walled garden. The house itself was a bit disappointing; there was no running water, no toilet and no furniture. It was just a shell, four walls and a ceiling, but that was O.K. I'd lived like that before. So I moved in.

Jaromír (who everybody called Jarda) seemed like he would be a good addition to the crew. Tall, thin, and much quieter than Tonda or me, it seemed right away that he might not only provide gardening expertise, but a bit of psychological balance to the crew. Also, he spoke some English. Another good thing about Jarda was his wife and her cooking. Katařina was Slovak, and her specialty was bramboračky (bramborachky), grated potatoes pressed into a patty and fried. Her trademark was that she added plenty of garlic. It was delicious, and it was a godsend for a vegetarian in this meat heavy culture where goulash and thick, greasy sausages dominate. So, I went over there to eat, often.

A couple of times I was invited to participate in a zabijačka, a traditional Czech pig slaughtering, which may seem really weird for a vegetarian but I had plenty of farm experience and am always willing to experience somebody else's culture, so I helped to hold the squealing critter while his throat was cut. The blood was drained, the old grandmothers would stand below the dripping neck filling up jars of it for a special kind of sausage, the organs were pulled out, ground up and pressed into another kind of sausage, and all the sausages were left to dry and solidify on the little concrete apron outside the cottage, as the flies hovered around. Every part of the pig was used.

One aspect of Czech food culture I do love as a vegetarian is the mushrooms. Spring, Summer, and Autumn, (but mostly in Autumn) any time it has rained, people are out scouring the woods for mushrooms. Almost everybody knows a few good, edible varieties and some experts know dozens. I found some of the hallucinogenic variety but shied away from the Amanita, which the Czechs are really weird about. Those are the red ones with white spots, and they're a common theme in Czech literature, you even see them in the cartoons, but nobody will touch them in real life because they are deadly poison, which is true. I know some totally insane Hippies have tried them, but some people are just insane. Peyote, sure, no problem. Amanita, hell no.

We moved the seedlings down, Jarda had some compost, and we started

planting our tiny, green stalks of hope. They were still a bit too young and frail to put them directly in the ground, but we had few containers to put all of them in. My farm experience and Tom Frost's handy hints on recycling came in handy now as I noticed the cardboard milk cartons that were used throughout the country. When I cut these in half I had 2 perfect containers for plants, but we'd still need 1500 of them.

So, I went dumpster diving, which amused my new friends no end. "This is my first experience with international co-operation!" Jarda said, with a sly look as if he'd made the greatest joke ever.

Later, I would realize that this and every thing I did quickly became the talk of the town.

One day Jarda came to me and asked if I would accompany him to his best friend's mother's funeral. This friend was also the Police Chief of Starý Hrad. I had never been to a Czech funeral and I knew that it would be good to know this man so we set off one Saturday in the VW van. I expected there would be a huge crowd, if it was O.K. to bring a total stranger along, but I was surprised to see that it was a small affair, with only about 30 people. Immediately after the ceremony Jarda's friend thanked me profusely and tearily for coming and then insisted on getting into our van, which probably stank at least a little bit of marijuana, and riding with us to his wine cellar where the wake was to be held.

It was the chief's own cellar and we had several glasses of their specialty, a white wine, along with pickles, for which the town is particularly famous, and red peppers. The older women were all flirting with me and promised me many young girls!

My head was spinning. I went and laid down for a nap in the van. That didn't last long. My presence was required. Being American, some of the women decided I must be a rock star. I am, most definitely, not a rock star. They asked if I had any musical instruments in the car and I remembered that, as a matter of fact, I did: an old guitar with only 4 strings that I had found while rooting through the garbage looking for milk cartons. I brought it in and they demanded I play. They ignored my plea that I couldn't play it, so I wailed away and made an incredible noise. They clapped along and shouted "Go, Jack, go!" and I danced like I was Elvis Presley.

As an American in Starý Hrad I received grand receptions everywhere I went. People were fascinated with a traveler from that great country. I was welcomed into all of the wine cellars along the river, and there are plenty of them.

One of Jaromir's friends had a very exclusive wine cellar, and he told us that he had invested over a million dollars in it, which may have been bullshit because that was a huge amount of money in that time and place but it was a nice cellar and the wine was a delicious, dry white.

Life was good but there was a problem with the project. Tonda's next door neighbor had goats. Even though the garden behind the house had a wall around it, there was a hill that overlooked that and when the goats went up there they could see into the garden. When their owner came to collect them, he would be able to see in, too. We had to move the plants again.

Jaromír had an idea. His friend had a place, a villa type house with a large field. We met and he agreed to join the project but was afraid of any open involvement with me and asked that I only visit at night, and seldom. I accepted that. I'm not an overly cautious person myself but I can see the business sense in it and I'm not so thin skinned, so I just explained how to prepare the holes and gave him a formula for the organic fertiliser. We needed phosphorus for that so Jarda took us on a trip to a mine where we stole some from the scrap pile outside.

Plants grow, they do not wait on human being's schedules, and the time soon came to move them into the field of the paranoid farmer who did not want to be seen with me. I asked Jarda to arrange a meeting with paranoid farmer to give him the plants. He had another appointment so I would have to meet the paranoid farmer at the rendezvous spot myself with no translator. I was told to meet him at noon in front of the railway station. I was there on time with 500 of my best plants, but he was not. There was nothing to do but wait. And wait.

Now, I don't know if plants are actually sentient but they certainly have feelings, in the sense of physically feeling things, and they were sure feeling the heat of the spring sun coming through the windows into that stuffy, overheated, VW van and anybody with an ounce of compassion would have understood they needed a bit of relief, so I opened a side door to let them get a bit of air.

An old woman was passing by and, as it is natural for old women to be interested in plants, she stopped for a closer look. She asked what they were and I told her they were tomatoes, because the two plants are famous for bearing a superficial resemblance, their leaves are the same dark green and that's often enough to fool the ignorant cops in helicopters, but she just laughed and said "Those are not tomatoes."

Being a small town, her recounting of this story quickly passed into local lore, the growing legend of the dumpster diving American who puts manure into his car, but I still didn't think too much about that.

When paranoid farmer finally showed up, two hours late, two of the longest hours of my life, he was acting all nervous and twitchy, giving abrupt answers to everything and looking all around, really obviously.

I should have cancelled the partnership right then, but I was desperate to get the plants in the ground. I followed him out to his farm where he had me pull directly into his barn and we unloaded. He dismissed me quickly and I returned to Starý Hrad.

The next time I would see these plants was two months later. His paranoia was so extreme he'd barred me from his property, so I snuck back one night, parked at a distance and crawled through the weeds, which were thick and high because he hadn't done any weeding at all, to find that only a handful of the plants had survived his neglect. It was a total loss.

But, there's no use crying over spilled milk or dead marijuana plants, as they say. Plenty more plants, plenty more places.

Chapter 22

You are no different from anybody else. If you can see them, they can see you. – Guru Sharab

We traveled to Malenka, a small town just outside of Brno, to visit Jarda's brother Jindřich. Malenka is so small it's basically just a bunch of long white houses along the road. There are truck stops which have a greater permanent population.

Jindřich lived alone and had a small garden that had a public walkway behind it. We planted in the greenhouse and in discreet corners. I stayed there a few days to give Katařina a break and got to know Jindřich. He had worked for a company that made tractors but had been laid off, so now he was working at home; he had a little wood shop set up in a back yard shed, and made furniture; basic stuff, not too artsy. He liked the idea of growing pot because he could use the cash to start up his business.

Back in Starý Hrad, Jarda had another new partner for us. Luboš (pronounce Loo bosh, with a long o in the bosh) was a heavy set man of about forty. He could speak better English than either Tonda or Jarda, and stood out among the dour Czechs because he was loud and outgoing and always quick to make a joke. Actually, he seemed a bit mad.

We'd come down in the Spider and his eyes zeroed in on it – bright red, it did tend to attract attention. He was itching to get behind the wheel. "Can I drive? A little?"

I didn't like the idea, but he was, after all, a prospective business partner. "Well, O.K., but take it easy. It's an old car."

He tore out of the parking space like somebody was chasing him, and headed straight for the town square, where he did a few donuts, whooping and hollering and shattering the tranquillity of that peaceful, picturesque old town and making damned absolutely sure everybody noticed him.

Luboř had an old farm villa in a town even smaller than Malenka, just 15 minutes from Starý Hrad, but he had financial problems and was almost ready to lose the farm due to a gambling addiction which he didn't see as an addiction at all. He was constantly telling me that this or that number was

ready to hit and kept haranguing me to get some money and play the lottery. He was divorced and lived there with his step-daughter, Klára, a scrawny 18 year old girl with a quick temper.

It seemed like the perfect setting, an old courtyard with walls all around. Klára was a problem, though. We didn't feel she could be trusted with the secret, so Luboš convinced her to go stay in Zlin where her mother lived, about three hours away, for a while.

There were two watchdogs there, German Shepherds. I met them the first day chewing on the remains of their mother who had recently died. There was room for 300 holes and some manure there in the barn. I moved there with the remaining 1,000 plants.

Unfortunately there were neighbors on two sides of those walls. I tried to block every line of visual access but it was like trying to plug a leaking dike with my thumb. The neighbors were watching and reporting, everyone was watching.

Behind the house, out in the walled garden, there was an outhouse. "Don't leave a doors open," he said. "Dogs go lick you balls."

We needed more fertilizer so Luboš took us to a friend of his, Milan, who had 6 kids and a small garden of his own. We loaded up the van with shit, which was more fuel for the flames of gossip. For a long time afterwards in that region, maybe still today, American Tree was the local slang term for a marijuana plant.

Luboš pissed me off driving out of there. He'd gone nuts with the Alfa Romeo and here we were in a VW van filled with animal poop and he inched over next to the wall to avoid driving in mud and scraped the fuck out of the moldings.

It was a productive trip, though, because Milan asked about maybe putting a few of the plants in his own garden. I looked up at an overlooking window and said "What about that guy?"

Milan told me he was a trusted friend of the family, but he would be the guy who later turned us in. I reluctantly agreed and dropped off 150 plants with him. We were setting up franchises quicker than Taco Bell.

The plants at Luboš' were growing great. Milan's sons had come by to help with digging holes and putting in the manure. I let them drive the VW and they loved the excitement. Then one day, when I was there alone, Klára showed up at the front door. I did not know what to do. She had a taxi waiting behind her. I hoped that she did not see me. She started screaming at the top of her voice. I did not know what she was saying but I was sure it wasn't good. I stayed quiet, hiding in the house.

After a while Luboš showed up and let her in. He had to pay the Taxi driver \$50 for the long ride (and the wait) and we offered her a vacation in Paris if she kept quiet. After a week she left to be with a German boyfriend who wanted to marry her. They had met in a brothel where she'd worked briefly.

Even with Klára out of the scene again, Luboš had become paranoid and kept saying we should just uproot everything. I kept trying to calm him down and eventually he decided just to stay away. So, I had the place to myself. That was weird.

I drove the Alfa over to Hungary one weekend because I'd once talked to a guy there who expressed an interest in it. He wasn't put off by the slashed top, but he was enough of a mechanic he could hear that the motor wasn't that good, so he didn't buy it. On the way home, I saw three cute, young Hungarian girls hitchhiking and offered them a ride. Since it was only a two seater, it would have been horribly crowded but, as I said, they were young and cute. They declined. About an hour or two down the road, I stopped at a gas station and there they were again, they'd gotten ahead of me – not terribly surprising. I offered a second time and this time they jumped in eagerly and were quite apologetic about refusing the ride before. One sat on another's lap and the smallest one squeezed in behind me, with her legs around my neck and dangling down. "Are you O.K.?" I asked. "Is good," she said. "Is hard, but good." Oh, yeah.

Chapter 23

Whether you live in the city or the country, the important thing is to have friends. – Guru Sharab

I was by myself, but the plants made me happy and I was enjoying the easy time. For a while. Jarda would bring me food from Katařina but that didn't last and the coffee ran out so I was recycling the grounds at the bottom of each cup. Luboš would come by now and again to feed his dogs but he didn't bother buying groceries since he wasn't staying there and he got pissed off at me for nibbling at the crusts of sourdough bread he'd left for his dogs. Mangy curs, they were happy chewing at their mom's dead carcass and dried chicken shit.

But, worse than the cash flow problem and the irregular supply of food in the house, worse than the weirdness and paranoia of being in a big, old, empty house alone with a commercial sized cannabis crop in the garden, was the boredom.

It was as inevitable as gravity that I would eventually wind up in Prague. The boredom was pushing me and Prague, like a magnet, was pulling me. Everybody goes to Prague. Ambitious young Czechs move up to Prague to go to University or look for a job. Artists and musicians go to Prague, so they can be with other artists and musicians. Tourists and backpackers go to Prague to gawk at all the beautiful, late Victorian era buildings, explore the ancient castles and palaces (there are structures at Vyřehrad that date back to the Roman era), shop for souvenirs and listen to the street musicians in old town, walk across Charles Bridge by night and see the hauntingly romantic lights glancing off the river, and drink beer in the smoky old pubs or on a sunny afternoon in the beer garden at Letna Park, with a more elevated view over the river. They call it the city of a thousand spires and it is. There are spires and towers and golden domes, but also statues everywhere you go, green spaces, gardens, hidden courtyards that you suddenly stumble across and suddenly your view of where you are on the planet and in time suddenly shifts, and long, outdoor staircases that can take you from one neighborhood into a completely different one, and Prague is a city with a lot of different neighborhoods, with very distinctive characters.

I've lived in many of those neighborhoods, but the first place I ever stayed in Prague was the Pension California, in a big house out in Prague 10, just

beyond the end of the Green Line.

It was a hippie hostel, run by a full bodied and more than amply breasted Moravian woman named Eva, who spoke good, but broken, English. She'd been a nurse in Communist times but when the borders opened she embraced the change, drawing the outside world to her bosom in a big, friendly hug. Travelers would party there all night; playing guitars, smoking joints, and drinking while Eva sang opera, usually something about how painful love is from Dvořak's *Rusalka*, which is about a water sprite who gets turned into a human because she's in love with a prince, just like *The Little Mermaid*.

Czech's are proud of Dvořak, which is justifiable, and they absolutely love stuff about how wonderful and awesome it is to be sad and miserable, because that's just how they roll.

Eva was adored by her guests and she never turned anyone away. For instance, me. I didn't have any money but I offered to help in the kitchen and she was O.K. with that.

She was in her mid to late forties but had no problem at all seducing eighteen year old boys on their first big trip to Europe. She was making up for lost time and bagging as many of them as she could, and there were plenty.

She would conduct weddings in the back garden, which were at least as legal, and no less meaningful, as my marriage with Diana at the Sufi camp had been. It was a perfect, glowing moment in time.

I got to be friends with an American guy named James, who had had some legal problems back in the States, due to an overfondness for heroin, but he was a pleasant, easy going guy who had experience in growing marijuana. Unfortunately, getting away from the U.S., by itself, does not cure anybody of a heroin addiction. Actually, all it does is lower the cost. But, when I first met him, he was cool.

He traveled with me to Jindřich's place in Malenka to check the greenhouse. When we got there we found that we had a monster plant which had taken over the whole place. Unfortunately it had turned hermaphrodite! We pulled it and tied the others down to keep them hidden from the street.

James stayed with me a week and then talked me into traveling down to

southern Bohemia for the first Rainbow festival in the Czech Republic. He had cash for gas so we went. On our way we were stopped by police with machine guns twice. They were looking for some bank robbers but it showed me, very clearly, how easy it was to shut down the roads.

Rainbow is a moving hippie fest, it happens all over the world. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people will converge on one spot; one, beautiful, natural spot as far away from civilization as possible, and there they will live together for a couple of weeks on love, non-electronic music and really bland vegetarian food, sleeping in tipis and shitting in the woods. It's like a low tech rave or a funkier version of Burning Man. It reminded me of the good old days.

I loved being with so many Hippies from all around the Czech Republic and the rest of Europe but only stayed a few days, because I was nervous about the plants. I was relieved to get back to my little garden of hope, and all was well there. After a week or so I made a trip to Jindřich's to check the plants there, and they were doing fine, too.

There was nothing I needed to do, though, so I set out for Prague again, but along the way my water pump went out. I had no money at all. I let the van cool down and drove till it was just about to overheat again and stopped. Luckily there are many downhill slopes on the way to Prague and I could let the van coast sometimes. I made it back to Eva's and heaved a huge sigh of relief as I parked.

Chapter 24

*An umbrella can do so much more than just keep out the rain
– Guru Sharab*

James was there, and he offered to buy me a new pump. It would take a week so I went back to Luboš' by train and waited for James to fix the van and bring it down. One sunny day as I sat, just looking out over the back garden and watching my girls grow, I looked up and noticed that a tile had slipped out of its place on the roof of one of the barns adjoining our yard. "Well, that's a shame. He's going to have to fix that," I thought and then it hit me. Oh, shit. As soon as he goes up to fix it, he's going to see the whole plantation, all at a glance.

I found a long stick and got a ladder. I eased the tile back into place and was feeling pretty good about saving my ass and doing a good deed for the neighbor all in one go, but just as I was basking in the warm glow of my awesomeness I was surprised by a helicopter that was flying just a few yards above our garden, and straight down the middle! It was obviously checking things out.

To say I panicked would be putting it mildly! I called Jarda but he suddenly wanted nothing to do with the whole situation. He said he was staying home.

I didn't know what to do. Should I run and abandon everything or should I gut it out and hope the law had better things to do? I spent a terrifying night without much sleep, and assessed the situation. I had still not been raided yet. All I could do was pray, and so I did. I prayed like I hadn't prayed since I was an altar boy and believed in God with a childlike innocence. And my prayer was answered. My miracle showed up around noon, in the person of James in the van. We discussed a plan of action.

There were over 300 plants and each about three feet tall. We put them into bags and loaded the van. Luckily James had money for gas. We went to Tonda's kid brother Franta in the tiny village of Rostlyn. Not only did Franta not speak any English but Tonda informed us that he had a history of mental illness and had been institutionalized plenty of times. But, I knew him a little bit, he was a sweet guy, would sit and watch TV with their mother in the pig sty sometimes.

We managed to communicate everything we needed to through sign language, and he said we could plant some of them in their sister's garden, so we put 50 plants there, and then the rest in a swampy, weed tangled area out back. He led the way and we cleared enough space for the rest among the tall weeds.

Their sister, Renata, showed up, saw what we'd done and started yanking plants out of the ground before we stopped her. There was a bit of shouting, a lot of cajoling and begging and promises to be discreet, and she let the rest stay.

In a way I was relieved that I was no longer tied down to Luboš's house. We drove off to Prague to relax after all the excitement. Back at Pension California, we played chess and smoked grass as Eva sang Rusalka through the night.

After a month I called Jarda to check in and he told me about new problems at his brother Jindřich's place. I went down in the van to find out what was up. Jindřich told me there had been a special announcement over the loudspeakers in the town saying there would be an exercise of the narcotic police dog team in town the next weekend. The plants were big and smelly. They had to be moved. We bagged them and drove them off to another of their relatives'. They were close enough to maturity now that we could just leave them in the bags to bud out.

I went back to Prague. But in just another week I checked in with Jarda again and he told me about a little problem with the last of the remaining crop which had not been moved.

James was really stressed out. He was trying to quit heroin. He asked to go along to find a place to get through his withdrawal pains. There were a couple of young boys from New Jersey who wanted to see the Czech countryside. They all came along and helped me with gas money.

We arrived late in the evening and stayed in Starý Hrad at Tonda Svoboda's house. Jarda came in the morning and I went with him to Milan's place. Milan explained "the little problem" to us. Someone had been videotaping the plants! That was it. We had to move everything. We drove back to Starý Hrad to get my van. When we arrived there was no van! James had stolen it and vanished!

The American boys were just sitting around waiting for us to return. I asked Jarda to go back to Milan's and put the plants in bags. He knew the routine from his brother Jindřich's. I had to save my van. The boys agreed to help with the moving.

I took a train to Prague. I knew that James got money regularly from the Western Union near Národní Třída. It was a rainy day. I sat down in the Pizza shop across the street and waited for 6 hours, wondering what I'd say and do when I saw him and then I noticed that someone had left their umbrella behind. Synchronicity!

I saw James going into the Western Union office. I gave him a few minutes to get his cash and then stormed in and right away started whacking the shit out of him with the umbrella. As the clerk behind the counter shouted that he would call the police, James knelt, taking the blows and shouting back, "No, no police!"

We moved outside. James tried to explain how he was going to come back, and with some cash. I told him to just take me to my van. "Sure, sure Jack, but I need a fix," he said. I let him score some heroin at Mustek metro station and we headed to McDonald's so he could snort it off some tin foil in the toilets, where they later installed blue lights to make it harder for needle users to find a vein, then started charging for the toilets and installed turnstiles. I don't know where the junkies go now.

As we were leaving James ran back down the stairs to the drug dealers, trying to do a runner on me so I screamed out "Heroin! Heroin!" and everybody split, and I mean split is the right word; they went flying in different directions like bowling pins. There was James running down Wenceslas Square with me in pursuit yelling "Thief! Thief!" and people were bumping into him to help slow him down, but nobody actually tackled him.

I caught up to him at the same time the police did. They offered to take him in but I told them that I would handle it. I told him I would kill him if he tried it again. We got on a tram and in a few stops he broke away from me as the door closed. I burst through the closed door and suddenly I had a big rock in my hand, who the hell knows where that came from but that's the story of my life, things appear when they are needed. "Get me my van before I kill you!"

He took me to my parked van. There was newspaper on the windows and the reason soon became clear. The van wasn't the only thing he'd stolen! The plants from the swamp were there as well. "Please, Jack," he said, actually sobbing, "I'm so sorry. Please, just leave me half the plants." "Fuck you! You stole my car when I was within an inch of getting busted, stole my plants, too, and you think I'm going to reward you for it? Are you fucking crazy?"

"Just do me one favor, then. Just kill me."

"Sorry, James, I don't have time. Give me a couple of weeks and then if things are OK down in Starý Hrad, I will try to help you out." And I drove back.

I knew that it would be safer not to go to Starý Hrad but I did not want to leave my partners hanging. I found the two Americans alone at the house and they told me all had gone smoothly. Jarda came in the morning and together we drove in my van out to Milan's, and the instant we pulled in I got a shock. There were 60 plants in bags sitting in the open! I had expected them to be hidden.

There was nothing to do but load and leave quickly. I noticed suspicious men on the street corners and then it was obvious that another car was following us. As we pulled into Tonda's garden we were surrounded by police and they put a gun to Jarda's head. "Why didn't you move the plants earlier?" one cop asked.

I was arrested along with the American boys. Jarda was arrested, too, but taken to a different location. I tried to calm the boys down. The police had no English so a nice old lady was assigned as our interpreter. I immediately took on all responsibility and told the police that no one knew what the plants were but me. The interpreter was obviously on my side and kept interrupting me to say that I did not have to tell them so much.

The boys were released in just a couple of hours.

Chapter 25

When you perceive yourself and others as souls, you bring love, truth, and compassion to your interactions with others. Then you are the mirror of their soul. A soul recognizes another soul – Baba Ram Dass

When all you can do is meditate, meditate – Guru Sharab

I was trying to keep cool outside but I was scared silly. I was successful in my effort to keep from trembling, but inside my nervous system was going nuts. I had no idea how much time I was looking at, how serious a crime this was here, or how the Czech legal system worked.

To my amazement, I found myself educating the police about marijuana. I explained to them over and over that although I liked weed, I was not addicted to it. I could stop any time I wanted to. I thought it might matter that I was growing just for my own consumption so I lied and said that I ate it. They seemed confused by that. They said they would consult a scientist to see if this was an amount for one person.

After a day of questioning I was transferred to Brno to wait for my trial since there was no prison in Starý Hrad. I was placed in an old communist psychiatric prison. It was bleak. It was gray. For me, I thought, this is just a really bad flat. But how must this feel to somebody who is actually crazy? How depressing must it be to someone already suffering from depression? We should be comforting crazy people, holding their hands and telling them the world is not so bad. We should be surrounding them with flowers and soft music and plush toys. Not this. The world is just such a fucked up, backwards thinking place.

Before I left Starý Hrad the prosecutor told me that they wanted to let me wait at home but could not since I had no residency papers in the Czech Republic. She offered me some packs of cigarettes which I foolishly refused. “No, thank you, your honor, I don’t smoke,” as if I thought I would get points for that. I would soon find out that in prison cigarettes were the main currency.

On the way to Brno, I was sitting in the back seat and laughing as the cars in our way would not yield the right of way to our screaming siren. “No respect” I said to the police. I don’t think they saw the humor.

At the entrance of the prison I was pleased to hear a bit of English from a guard but then he told me he was never inside the prison and did not think I would find any English in there. He was right. The only English I was to hear was from a nurse I could only see 15 minutes every other week.

Here's a free bit of advice from the Guru: If you ever get thrown in jail and they ask if you're religious, say yes, even if you're not. You will get to talk to a Chaplain, and when you're in jail, any chance to talk to somebody from the outside is good; it's a break in the monotony, a tie to real life. It's something amid the long days of nothing. The Chaplain was a strange, little old man who looked a bit like Yoda, but it was good to talk to somebody from the outside and he brought small things which helped me and made me more popular with everybody else. He invited me to visit Ráj Hrad monastery after I got out, and I promised I would.

The first night I was put in a cell with a very ugly, old dude. He freaked me out when he rolled up some crumpled newspaper into a piece of burlap to smoke. Oh, my god, I thought. This is going to be bad.

The next day I was put in a cell with three young men. None of them knew much English. One was 26 years old but had become almost bedridden staying in that bed for three years. I helped him with some massage.

I'm not a professional masseur but I'm a damned good amateur, picked up a lot of hints at the old Sufi camps and, when I had the farm, gained the confidence of the horses by massaging them, to the point where I had a reputation around Jackson County for "having a way with animals." Massage isn't really that hard. Whatever feels good, keep doing it. If anything hurts, stop that and do something else. How can you tell? Pay fucking attention, that's all.

Another boy was very nervous, but kind. He taught me to make my bed. The third inmate was a tall, young kickboxer who said he was with the Mafia.

I told them I was a vegetarian. "No problem," they said. "No meat here." I would have a good diet of soy and whole grain bread. The cell was so small that only one person could stand up at a time. There was a sink with only cold water in one corner and the squat shitter in the other. Between the two bunk beds was a table to eat and play cards. Everybody except me smoked.

I had to fight to keep the window open just to get some ventilation. It was winter, so there was the choice: cold air, or bad air.

The boys told me to address the guard as Pani Bužerant (Mr. Homo). It sounded right to me, so I did. He was not amused.

I still had no idea how long I might be there. I had not seen a lawyer. After a few weeks I had my first visitor. It was an American man from the U.S. embassy. He told me not to worry and that the offense was not severe enough to get a long sentence and quickly left.

It was strange, but I found that I actually rather liked having a routine for a change. We woke up early every morning and had a slice of rye bread with jam and a cup of coffee for breakfast. Then, for the big meal at lunchtime it could be dumplings with dill, which tasted great to me, or soya and rice. Once in a while we got fish. Only a few meals were inedible, because of meat. I would find out later that each prisoner had to be fed on only 16 crowns a day, which even way back then was next to nothing.

My cellmates were surprised that I liked the food so much, and were perfectly happy to give me their soya, which they did not want. “That is no real food,” they would say.

I was stuck with nothing to do so I entertained the guys with some disco dancing, just to get some exercise. We were supposed to get an hour a day in the courtyard to exercise but it was often overlooked. When we did get out the inmates would laugh at the idiot American who jumped around like a monkey. They would just stand in a circle and light up cigarettes. Once a week we could shower all together for 15 minutes. No big deal. It's not like we were going out to a fancy restaurant.

The guys took advantage of having an American in the cell to get extra toilet paper.

When I asked what people were in for I kept hearing the word podvod, which sounded a lot like pervert to me. It seemed strange; they didn't act like a bunch of perverts. Eventually I found out that podvod is Czech for fraud.

I stayed in bed and meditated under the sheets. It had been a long time

since I had spent so much time meditating. Too long. It turned into a great experience. I was amazed at the depth of contemplation that I reached.

I found it rather strange when my roommates encouraged me to eat sugar to reduce my stress! They appreciated it when I gave them my coffee grounds for a second filtration.

One day the “Mafia kick boxer” started teasing the young boy who had been so helpful to me. He was jabbing him with some small stick. I wanted to say something but I was scared. The kid went a bit crazy and put his hand through the window. He was taken away to the psychiatric ward and replaced with a fat boy who shat a lot, before and after dinner. Later in the day the kick boxer who was below my bunk started pushing on my back from below. I lost my temper, jumped down and grabbed a chair. I shouted “I will fuck you up if you mess with me, asshole!” I doubt he understood my words, but he understood my tone, and the potential use of metal chair as weapon. All was cool after that.

I was meditating, I was surviving, I was getting along, but jail is still jail and every minute of every day was a struggle against negative emotions. Embarrassment and humiliation at finding myself in that situation; I’d been chased out of my Gaia Farm in shame and disgrace and instead of becoming a huge success abroad like Ernest Hemingway or Tina Turner, I was sitting in jail on a pissant charge of marijuana growing. Depression at the confinement, like a dog in a cage; I am a beast who was born to roam, I love driving long distances, riding on horseback on high ridges, feeling the wind and seeing the wide sweep of the great Earth all around. Depression because of the gray walls and the iron bars; we do drugs to seek enlightenment, bright colors, bright lights, and here everything is brought down, down, there is as little stimulation for the senses as it is possible to have and still be conscious. They imprison the body and do their damndest to imprison the mind. Bitterness and anger. Why in the world is marijuana illegal? How can it be that our society is so twisted and insane that good is called bad? Frustration, and loneliness; I’d learned to get along with my cellmates, but we couldn’t communicate, I had nobody to actually talk to, no women to flirt with, no children to laugh at my antics. Nervousness, anxiety, and fear. Yes, fear. The days had turned into weeks, the weeks were starting to stretch into months, and I had no idea what was going on, how the legal system worked, no way to get any information on that. What if they kept me in here forever? What if they just forgot about me? I was

meditating. I managed not to flip out, but it was not easy.

After a few more weeks I was told I had a visitor. When I met her in the meeting room she spoke in Czech. After a few sentences I stopped her and said “Are you American?”

She said she was. I don’t know why she started off in Czech, she said she was trying to practice and maybe she’d misunderstood who I was and my residency situation. I realized that she was, even though she was sent as an envoy from the U.S. embassy to help me out, also a stranger in the Czech Republic, feeling her way.

She called over a guard and we had a brief meeting, she let me do most of the talking, hand signals and such, but in the end he understood I wanted a non-smoking cell and extra yogurt to replace the meat I couldn’t eat. He agreed, or at any rate made gestures of agreement.

I waited two days to be delivered from my smokey cell. On the morning of the third day the guard took me out of my cell to show me the writing on an empty cell just down the hall. I understood that it must say non-smoking. It was a first for the prison. As I was waiting the next day, expecting to be moved over there any time and not understanding the delay, it was a question of opening the door and walking me down the hall, we managed to see from our peephole that they had put four new men in the non-smoking cell. I started screaming and shouted for the guard. He told me that it was now full. I exploded. “Call the US embassy!” They had a second non-smoking cell ready the next morning.

My new room mates had been happy to declare their cell non-smoking because they thought it would keep them together even though one of them smoked. He promised to blow all smoke carefully out the window. I agreed to that, it was a huge improvement from what I’d been living with, and he was, actually, a light smoker. These boys were much cleaner than my first group and one guy’s English was passable. We played chess and managed to exercise a bit.

After a couple of days the lads explained an important cell rule to me. If I wanted to masturbate I was to announce it to the group and then go to the toilet and do it there. Not in your bunk! After a few weeks, we had another conversation.

“Jack, why you not (masturbation gesture)?”

I didn't really want to discuss it with them, for the same reasons I didn't want to do it. I didn't feel like jerking off surrounded by men, I felt no particular inspiration in the environment (we weren't exactly seeing anybody that gave me a boner), and I still hoped I would get out soon.

“Don't worry about it,” I said. “If I want to go jerk off, I will tell you.”

“You.....too many old?”

“No, I'm not too old. I'm old, but I can still hit my belly button if I'm lying down.” This was also accompanied by some gestures.

Maybe they accepted my explanation, maybe they had no idea what I was talking about, and maybe it was more information than they wanted to hear, but they shut up and left me alone after that.

I got a bad toothache and went to the dentist who spoke a little English. Like the noble victims of the reign of terror who would mount the steps to the guillotine and, as they placed their neck upon the block, stare down into a bin of disembodied heads staring ghoulishly back at them, I was shocked when I looked down to see a pail full of bloody teeth. They pulled mine and added it to the pile.

One of the boys was a tattoo artist and asked if I would like one. He needed to practice, and there's really fuck all else to do inside, so I said sure. I asked for a Chinese dragon's head on my hip, and he did a great job, especially in view of the limitations of our current facility. The day he did it I got a letter from Janet telling me that my brother Carlo was dead!

I shaved my head. I didn't know what else I could do.

I enjoyed my stay with these boys and there were never any problems I could not handle. I found Czech men to be very gentle and kind. But, one day, suddenly and without any advance notice, I was told that I was being moved to minimum security. As we said our quick goodbyes, it was obvious that they were all sad to see me go.

Minimum security was a dream! I was put in a large dormitory with some

50 men. Showers were available each day and I could walk freely in the hallway. I did meditative element walks, it's a Sufi thing: walking and breathing and focusing body and mind on one of the four elements - Earth, Water, Fire, or Air - and each one has its own breathing pattern, its own rhythm, its own count, its own mouth/nose pattern, but always toward the one, the perfection of love, harmony and beauty, the only being united with all illuminated souls who form the embodiment of the master spirit of guidance.

There was a real Italian Mafioso who spoke good English. He was being held on an arrest warrant from Italy on a murder charge. He was a hit man but, it seemed to me, a very nice, polite hit man. We were Paisanos. He roamed the dorm in his fancy leather shoes and with a gold chain around his neck.

One of the saddest cases there was a big man, 34 years old, who had been a bodyguard for an important Czech cabinet minister. He had been seriously wounded in his leg and his partner was killed in an assassination attempt. He had killed one of the assassins but because of some communist perversion of the law, he was convicted even though he was just doing his job. At least that was his story and, as long as I was in jail, I believed everybody. In fact, I almost always believe everybody. Life is easier that way and, besides, it's their story and if they believe it there's probably at least some truth to it. His leg was still a big problem and he suffered from severe migraine headaches.

I began to massage his head to relieve the pain. He was so happy that he offered me his yogurt in repayment. Others began to come to me for healing and, wherever massage could help, I obliged them. I was amazed when desperate men came to me to heal ailments like an infected eye.

One day I was by myself watching a nature show about Australia on TV when a big guy came in and switched the channel to M*A*S*H* without even asking me. When I switched it back he made to attack me but I stood my ground and bellowed like a pissed off rhinoceros. He left. I had respect after that.

I wrote to Janet, who was very sympathetic, but when I told her what a good time I was having she wrote back that that was not right. She sent me \$40 and I bought cigarettes, then used them in trade. I bought a fish dinner for

one cigarette and the guy was thrilled with the deal.

Finally, my court appointed lawyer showed up. He had poor English but we struggled through. The court had asked a chemist for an opinion about whether the amount I was busted with was more than enough for one person. The chemist's official answer was "I don't know." In the end, that didn't matter much.

Christmas came and then New Years' Eve. I will never forget the energy when the whole place erupted in a loud cry at midnight. Later, Jarda would tell me that he and the police chief had smoked the marijuana that day and really liked it.

Jarda would also tell me he had sent me 10 kilos of carrots but they had been sent back because they were two grams over the limit.

When my day in court came I was very nervous. The judge was an older woman with purple hair. I told her how sorry I was and that I just hoped I could stay in The Czech Republic. Tonda and Milan testified. I was led out after an hour. They were deliberating my fate. When I returned, everyone was all smiles. My sentence was simply the four and a half months I'd already served, and I could stay in The Czech Republic.

However, I had to wait another two weeks for my release. When the day came Jarda was waiting outside. I waited. And waited. Time moves differently in jail than outside but eventually it became clear that it was taking too long by any standards. I asked the guard when I would be released. He said that there was some problem with the paperwork. Then, I did flip out a bit. I threw my covers on the ground and lay, rigidly, on the bed, in what I hoped was a pose of dynamic civil disobedience, but might also have been interpreted as madness. Either way.

"Fuck the guards!" I shouted. My cellmates were clearly alarmed. "What are they going to do, put me in jail?!" I was released the next day. Luckily, they gave me a bit of travel money.

Chapter 26

Everything means something – Guru Sharab

My first stop, after jail, was to fulfill my promise to the chaplain who looked like Yoda, so I stopped in to visit the monastery at Ráj Hrad where he was the head monk. I hadn't been to confession for twenty years so I talked for quite awhile and he let me off with only three Hail Marys. I felt that was a pretty good deal. That's the good thing about being Catholic. You get your money's worth.

I was hoping that the last batch of plants that we had moved to Jarda's relative's had survived and that we would have something to sell and get a little cash but Jarda had destroyed them all after the bust.

Jarda, and everybody else involved in the whole incident, had been released immediately. In fact, the only reason they'd held me was because I didn't have any official residence in the Czech Republic and so for bureaucratic reasons they couldn't release me. Jarda told me about getting high with the cops, and how they said they'd done everything they could to give us enough warning and time to clear up the operation and get out of there but eventually they were right there, we were still there and it was totally unavoidable. I felt like a schmuck.

My two cars, the VW van and the Alfa Romeo had been taken care of by Tonda. In jail I had gotten a letter from Tonda's nephew Zbyněk inviting me to his apartment in a small town called Kecibaba in southern Bohemia. He had included 500 Kč. I headed there in the van.

When I told Zbyněk about getting a tattoo and then the letter letting me know about Carlo he told me I had acted according to the bible: Jeremiah 48:37: For every head shall be bald, and every beard clipped: upon all the hands shall be gashes.

It wasn't just Jarda. Everybody had panicked; everybody had destroyed their plants, except for Renata who hadn't bothered to tear out those 20 plants left in her garden that we'd had to plead with her to keep. Of all the people I thought might come through, she was the most surprising one possible.

Janet had been on my mind a lot while I was in prison. Most women would have dropped me by then. I was torn between the woman I loved and a country. The USA and that small town of Arcadia had become a hell to me. Failure in the USA had made me the laughing stock of my community. Failure in the Czech Republic would end up making me famous, at least notorious, at least among the Czech police. Over the next years whenever I was pulled over for a moving violation, they would take one look at my passport, shake my hand, and say “have a nice day.”

Janet still wanted me but I could not see myself returning to that town. She needed me to have a job and I couldn't see that in my future, either. I did not want to keep her hanging, so I suggested we call it quits. She reluctantly agreed. We would remain good friends, and we still are.

I enjoyed getting to know Zbyněk. He was such a kind, simple man. He taught chemistry at the school of ceramics in Kecibaba. He had wanted to be a Catholic priest and was a man in the mode of St. Francis. He asked no compensation for my room and board.

Kecibaba, like Starý Hrad, is a town with a castle overlooking a river, but it's smaller. The landscape is green and beautiful. As before, all eyes were on me, a stranger from the American paradise. What was I doing there?

There was an old woman who lived in an apartment overlooking ours. We had a woman friend over for dinner once, and she immediately started spreading rumors that we were having wild orgies. I was amazed to hear what a womanizer I was becoming known as. I wished it were true because, for the moment, I was without a girlfriend, dying of hunger in the land of plenty.

Wishing doesn't bring in the women, though, so I knew I needed to do something.

All of the English speakers I met told me teaching English was the easiest way to get a girlfriend. There were two reasons I decided not to go that route. For one, I didn't actually feel qualified to be an English teacher. I'd never actually taught, officially, and even though it should have come naturally to a bullshitter like me I felt a difference between peddling used cars, wood burning stoves and the life changing insights of eastern religions on the one hand, and standing in a classroom filled with students who were

going to ask me questions like “What’s the difference between the past simple and present perfect tenses?” on the other. The other reason is that everybody else was doing it. American expats working as English teachers in the Czech Republic were about as much of a cliché as gay hairdressers in San Francisco, and I didn’t want to be a cliché.

So, I decided to go with the women-seducing method I knew and get back to being a Guru. Gurus get the girls, ain’t no doubt about that.

Chapter 27

There is almost a sensual longing for communion with others who have a large vision. The immense fulfillment of the friendship between those engaged in furthering the evolution of consciousness has a quality impossible to describe – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Sex is beautiful. Sex is sacred. Once you truly believe that, and make it part of your being, you will start getting more sex. – Guru Sharab

Spiritual diversity in the Czech Republic is nothing new. The country is famous for being the home of the first Protestants under Jan Hus, and you see the occasional Hussite Church with a golden chalice on top instead of a cross, mixed in among the other churches and cathedrals. In Prague, there are several historical synagogues, and a few mosques, too. Officially, statistically, it is the least religious country in Europe (not just the most alcoholic) but its loose, tolerant attitude makes it fertile ground for alternative spiritual experiences, and Czech youth are as experimental as any youth in the world.

I found the Sufis in a small village outside of České Budějovice called Stany. The leader was a woman just a bit older than me named Lucie (Lu tzee ah). She had been studying the sufi dances of Murshid Samuel Lewis. She welcomed me warmly and gave me a place to sleep. I helped put up their first teepee. During the week the center was being run by a sweet couple from Pilsen, Pepa and Petra and their 2 year old daughter.

I gave Lucie a massage and helped in the kitchen. We soon found ourselves in a 'who's more Sufi than who' power struggle, but I got along fine with Pepa and Petra.

A tantric sex week was planned for August, which was not far off, so I was sure I could put up with Lucie until then.

The tantric sex seminar was led by a disciple of Osho, and Osho had been known as Rajneesh before that whole brouhaha out in Oregon where the locals didn't much like his ninety three Rolls Royces and all the zombie eyed Hippies in orange robes and all the election rigging and well poisoning and fake marrying, which ended with him leaving the country and agreeing to never come back but never actually being charged with the attempted

murder in the well poisoning incident.

I had known some of the American disciples who had been convinced to give all their money to the sect, even though I was never one of them. That's an interesting thing about these alternative religions. Since they all draw from the same pool of people, people who are looking for some kind of meaning in life, people who believe that enlightenment is possible, people who want to find that Utopia where everybody is doing good to other people all the time and the flowers grow wild in the meadow; where everyone dances in long, flowing robes and feels the cosmic connection between the earth at their feet and the soft, warm glow of the sun on their smiling faces, people meet again and again and it's like "Oh, I remember you from a Sufi camp!"

"Oh, yeah, that was a long time ago. I was following Sri Chinmoy for a while, but then I discovered Osho. How about you?"

"I was hanging out with the Hare Krishnas for a while, then I got into Transactional Analysis, and now here I am." Good people for the most part, looking for the same thing, in a lot of different ways.

The Rajneeshis I knew in the States felt they'd been completely deceived, and after my experience with Kwance I could totally empathize. The amazing thing about Osho (formerly Rajneesh), though, was that even though he was exiled to India in disgrace and died, personally, his cult lived. It grew. And right then, in the Czech Republic, it was the happening thing.

This particular disciple (Sanyassins they called them) of Osho was a middle aged Guru named Sadhi. He welcomed me to join in even though I had no money. There were about 60 men and women, evenly divided.

Most of the people were young. A beautiful Czech girl with long, blonde hair, so straight it could have been ironed, chose me for the first action. She sat on my lap and let me touch her everywhere. The trick was to keep with the routine, to not just grab and perv, and it took every ounce of will power I had. Low moans and soft gasps of pleasure was the ambient sound in the room. However, there was no sex. Nobody's dick went into anybody's pussy, and no clothes came off.

I saw two possible ways of looking at this. You could either see it as forced

frustration, a bit of weird self-torture, a tease, a ‘keep ’em wanting more’ mind control technique, or you could take it at face value, accept it the way they were presenting it, that is, to see it as an exercise in detachment, a way to strengthen your will power, an experiment in feeling passion in your mind and not just your body. I decided to look at it that way, feeling certain that greater things would come.

Then we moved on to Osho dynamic dancing, which is basically jumping up and down to music. Later we would do what they called gibberish, and that’s exactly what it was, and that’s exactly what speaking in tongues is, and that’s not far off what stream of consciousness poetry is supposed to be, either. There are many pathways to enlightenment.

I was chosen next by a dark haired girl with haunting green eyes, like a cat, and the way she stared at me made me feel she was looking right into my soul. Her Osho name was Bijali. I held her in my arms and she claimed me as hers for the rest of the week. She slept with me in my van but we still weren’t doing the dance of the ultimate spiritual connection. Until the very last day.

When the seminar was over and all of us wee spiritual beings were scattering like seeds back into the world, along the branching highways of reality, Bijali suggested I should come home with her. I agreed and then we lay down and made love for the first time. There was so much of a charge in the air, built up over the whole week, I’ll swear to God there was an electrical current, a surge, when my plug was inserted into her socket.

We had no common language but that did not matter at all. We drove to her parents’ home in Eastern Moravia. Along the way she did manage to communicate that there was “one little problem.” She had a boyfriend! Bijali’s parents were totally accepting of me and, surprisingly, of the whole situation. Bijali was a real screamer in sex. “Jezish Marie!” her mother would say “She should be a professional, she likes it so much.”

Bijali was an extremely talented painter, abstract stuff, very intellectual, and I began to paint again myself. I asked her to read Czech to me so I could learn it and she said that between sex, painting and marijuana, we had enough. I certainly didn’t have any reason to argue.

Of course, she had lots of friends in the area and one fine day we were

visiting some guys she knew on their farm and they had found a land mine in one of the fields and brought it inside. It looked like a fat, black manhole cover, a frisbee of the titans and, to my innocent eyes it had death and destruction written all over it, but they seemed to think of it more like a fun bit of fireworks. They set it on a table in one of the upstairs rooms and were preparing to whack it with a hammer. Being the honored foreign guest, they invited me to take the first whack but I politely declined, put my arm around Bijali and led her from the room. We walked downstairs, out the door and were strolling through the courtyard when we heard a horrific bang and looked up to see one of them at the window, with the flaming and smoking remains of the core, which he flung from the window in a long arc. It landed at our feet.

That farmer was the guy who eventually bought my Alfa Romeo off me for two thirds of a kilo of seriously kickass domestic weed. It was good for me because it wasn't even running by then and I did not have the wherewithal to restore it, but made enough off the weed to live quite well for a while. It would have been good for him, too, because it was, after all, a classic car, but he had it parked in the barn with some other cars one winter of particularly heavy snowfall. The roof collapsed and the massive oak beams crushed my cherry red baby beyond redemption.

Those were golden days. Bijali would make love to me all day long and then spend the night with her young man, Michal, who was such a young puppy dog. He was probably still in high school or just finished. He got more and more jealous of me with each passing day, and he wasn't particularly impressed with all the talk of Osho and tantric sex and spirit and enlightenment, either. One evening we were out playing pool and he laid a wager – winner gets his way.

Well, he lost the game but didn't want to observe the terms of the bet. It was a long evening of bargaining, arguing, and pleading which wound up somehow with all three of us naked in bed but me not participating. It was a reversal of the incident with Dennis and the redhead so long ago, so many lifetimes ago.

Chapter 28

You wear the hat, you become the person – Guru Sharab

After that, I was sort of back and forth between Bijali and the place at Stany and one weekend a few of us from Stany went up to the Ticho music festival (which means quiet, I'm sure they meant it ironically.) There were Chinese singers and Mongolian throat singers, weird sounds and instruments from the whole world over, so I borrowed a fez and was doing Sufi dancing all over the place. I was the whirling sufi Guru of Frýdek Místek, because somebody had to be and that's who I am.

I borrowed the fez from some people who lived at an Osho center near the town of Zelenina. The next thing I knew, I was hanging out with them. It was a cool place. It was Czech Osho instead of American Osho, so they were much more laid back and into peace, love and vegetarian cooking and not quite so obsessed on the right way of paying homage to Osho. It was much less like a military camp.

Bijali wasn't quite as into the place as I was, she dropped by occasionally but I lived there for two or three months. It was a giant three story building and then they'd put on an addition illegally, but did get it certified after the fact. I helped dig a septic system that went out into other farmers' fields.

I was infatuated with a healing woman there, Sofia, who I'd first met at Stany but that went nowhere and, outside of the fact that it kept me hanging around and, due to the butterfly effect, affected everything that followed, it was of little consequence.

One of the things I loved about Zelenina was the food. The place was founded by this guy, Boris, who'd been a teacher at an acting school until he switched to guruhood. It's a natural switch, a different outlet for acting, and every bit as potentially lucrative. Sure, few Gurus really wind up in the big bucks, but out of work actors are as common as cabbages in the Czech Republic, too. Anyway, he'd used the place to start a soy dessert company, and the desserts were truly good, not just vegetarian good. I loved them because I loved them and not just because the Czech Republic is a place where vegetarians do suffer, we are practically a discriminated against minority group.

So, I traveled with a friend of Boris' wife, his name was Ondřej (Ondrzhay, and all those consonants in the center are really pronounced together, without any interceding vowels, and this is no problem at all for the Czechs) to a food fair near Utrecht, in the Netherlands. We got there early, so got one of the four 'wild card' free spaces. There was one for the Czech Republic, one for Slovakia, two for Poland, or something like that.

Ondřej and I had a big problem, in that we had totally different ideas of what we were supposed to be doing there. He was taking everything very seriously, didn't want to leave the stand, but I saw it as a fair, I was wandering around, visiting all the other stalls. I got massive amounts of free food, including lots and lots of cheeses, more kinds of cheese than I knew there was cheese. I took it to a squat where some people I'd met a year or so before were staying and everybody there loved me for it.

I was getting free beer, free this, free that, but more importantly, I was making friends with all the other merchants, getting to know everybody. I would stand at the junction of aisles and give people directions as if I were in charge. I was the King of the Fair, and Ondřej got pissed off because I was supposed to be working for him.

The soy desserts, to my amazement, were not a smash hit. However one man who walked by the booth was a Dutchman named Jerry Koolwijk. I started telling him about the soy desserts and tried to get him on board as an investor, hell, we'd have sold him the company outright, and he was interested. I relayed this to Ondřej.

He said "No, this guy's not serious, look at his car."

"What's wrong with his car? He's got a BMW!"

"It is a very old BMW, and not in good shape."

I think he was just jealous because I'd generated the contact. I talked to Jerry, and mentioned what Ondřej had said about his car, which he found a little bit weird and insulting.

On the morning we were checking out of the hotel I told Ondřej about that conversation. He was furious that I'd mentioned what he said about the car which struck me as a bit hypocritical. If you don't want somebody to hear

something, maybe you shouldn't say it.

I've been fired from many a job in my life but Ondřej not only sacked me, he left me right there in the hotel lobby with my seven bags of goodies and no money. I didn't even know where I was but I managed to catch a bus into town, begging the fare from somebody at the bus stop. At the squat, they were happy to see me.

I stayed in Utrecht for a few weeks. It was a nice squat. We all cooked and ate together and sometimes we would take our meals outside, setting out a table just like a sidewalk cafe. Ah, the European elegance, tourists with money didn't have anything on us.

I loved walking through the streets and hearing the sound of the bells from Utrecht's many old, historical churches, echoing down the canyons of the busy city streets.

It wasn't my first squat, that's for sure. Why pay rent when you can just move in some place and live for free? There was one I'd stayed at a few times when I was in Amsterdam, which was run by a bunch of Polish Punks.

Punk is a broader definition than some people think. While I was there we threw a party and there were a bunch of people breaking bottles and being assholes and I said to a friend "What's up with them?" and he said "Oh, they're Punks, too. We're the Hippie Punks and they're the Hard Punks. That's the kind of thing they do," but there was total acceptance and no judgement or fear in his voice, and eventually I became friends with the hard Punks as well. They were pleasant and generous people who just enjoyed smashing bottles and making noise now and again.

I stayed in Utrecht another week or two, making myself as useful as possible. I washed a lot of dishes, it became almost a meditation, I would get into a dish washing trance. Eventually, though, I went back to the Czech Republic.

I talked Bijali into hitching back with me to meet with the famous entrepreneur Jerry Koolwijk. I believed in our soy desserts and I knew Jerry was representing a bunch of Arab Sheikhs who were looking for absolutely anything to invest in; their goal was to get a toehold in Europe, to get into the game. The trip did not turn out as planned.

Bijali, as smart and sophisticated as she was, spoke only Czech and as soon as we crossed the German border she was like a toddler lost in the supermarket. She could smile sweetly and nod but basically she clung to me and let me do all the talking. Then we got to the squat and she met this Dutch guy there, I guess she had as much language with him as she did with me, which was what worried me.

The Dutch guy wasn't actually living in the squat, he had a place nearby. Bijali told me she was going over to see his place, and then she came back the next morning. I was jealous, oh hell yeah I was jealous, but I was trying to be cool. I asked her if they'd had sex. "Only a little," she said.

We argued, he was defending her and it looked like him and me were going to come to blows, so the other squatters hustled him out the door, and the argument and tension between me and Bijali carried on as we packed up and it was raining outside, a long day of constant drizzle, I will always remember the sky that day in Holland because of the outrageous intensity of our argument, she was totally freaking out and nothing was going right and she broke the umbrella waving it around and things continued badly until she told me she needed a tampon and I went and shoplifted one for her. We never did meet up with Koolwijk on that trip.

Chapter 29

To fail to fail is to succeed – Guru Sharab

I was going back and forth a lot between Prague and Utrecht and Amsterdam and points in between, making lots of friends and contacts but the money was eluding me. I traveled several times with Gamal, a handsome Egyptian guy, a serious ladies' man, who I'd met at Pension California. Whereas my standard m.o. for finding a place to sleep was either finding a hostel that wasn't too persnickety about getting paid or a meditation center I could impress with my impoverished holiness, Gamal used his ethnicity to walk in and out of refugee camps. They weren't pretty places, but a bed is a bed.

I remember one time he'd left me at one place, out running some scam. (His big thing was selling phone cards with unlimited time on them, I don't know how he got those, how they were even made, but they did work. I called some people in the States so much that they told me to stop.) I was surrounded by people jabbering on in Arabic, they were friendly enough but there was no communication, and they kept the TV tuned constantly to Arabic channels despite my pleas. I was so desperate I considered narking on Gamal about the phone cards, just to shake up the equilibrium and get myself out of there. Of course, I could have just gotten up and left but that might have necessitated explaining what I was doing there in the first place, and I wasn't too clear on that myself, so I stuck it out and eventually Gamal returned and we moved on.

There was another place they woke us up at 3 a.m. to kick us out, they thought maybe I was CIA.

It was not long after that that I was alone one night in Amsterdam, broke and depressed, wandering along the canals, squeezed between the traffic struggling through the narrow streets and the rail, seeing the girls in the windows and wondering what their lives were like, and feeling very, very much out of place, and I decided it was time to go back to the States. I'd talked to someone who'd told me that if you were in Europe and destitute all you had to do was go to the American Embassy and they'd put you on a plane and send you back home.

It's not true.

At the embassy they brushed me off, saying as long as I wasn't actually charged with any crime or being deported by the Dutch authorities for whatever reason, they had no reason, obligation or even any interest in helping me.

I couldn't even fail successfully. There was a Dutch woman there who overheard the conversation, and what she did would change my life once again. "You need healing," she said.

I wasn't sure what she was on about but she seemed friendly enough. "I sure do," I said.

She put out her hands, held one with her palm right in front of my face and the other tracing the outline of my body. "You need a place to stay," she said.

I thought perhaps she was out recruiting for one of the hostels, as people sometimes do there, and I wanted to nip that in the bud, but politely. "I don't have any money," I said.

"That's O.K.," she said, speaking, as most Dutch people do, in absolutely perfect English. "I know somebody who can help you out."

That's how I met Andre, an eccentric Belgian who manages a coffee shop called The Ark and dabbles in plenty of other businesses besides. Tall, with watery blue eyes and wispy blond hair, he was always impeccably dressed. There are a couple of important things to remember about Andre. He's quite secretive about his personal life. He never tells anybody how old he is, and it's hard to guess just by looking at him. And he never says no to anyone. He will always provide a stranger with a place to stay or a meal if he can. He is a saint, if ever there was one.

The first night he put me up at his flat and we got to know each other. From the second day he let me sleep in the room where he kept the marijuana, 5 and 10 gram bags ready for sale all around me. Amazing trust.

Andre was not all about money. Like so many people who deal marijuana, he honestly believed in the good herb. Nobody left The Ark unstoned, even if their pockets were totally empty.

I also helped out a bit, working my way as I'd done at Pension California, and after a couple of months I was back on my feet and headed back to the Czech Republic, but Andre and the Ark have been a major part of my life from that time forward.

It was maybe a year or two after that I was back for a visit. The usual procedure when I stopped in was to take up my old position, sleeping in the room with the marijuana, but this time Andre had given that room to somebody else so he gave me some money and sent me to a hostel instead. The hostel was next door to a music club that had a live band that night and I got into the ticket line. It was an easy mistake to make. The line was moving slowly and by the time I got up to the window and realized my mistake, the hostel's reception desk was closed.

"No problem," I thought. "I'll go stay with the Polish Punks at their squat. I haven't seen them for a few years, I'm sure they'll put me up."

It was a lovely idea, but I didn't remember exactly where it was and I got a bit lost. I saw a guy who looked like a punk but was a bit deformed; he had a bulbous growth coming out of the side of his skull. He looked like a Martian with a partial lobotomy, and he drooled.

"Are you a punk?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you know the Polish Punks? I'm looking for their squat because I want to stay there tonight and I'm sure it's around here somewhere."

"They're all up at the rumble."

"Rumble?"

Apparently there was a street demonstration going on, so we walked together and he told me of his life, how he'd become addicted to heroin as a child, his parents had given it to him, and how he'd been in jail but they let him out because they couldn't deal with him, anybody gave him any shit he'd fucking thump 'em. He found a big, old metal bar by the side of the road, picked it up and said "This'll be a good thing to have" and we walked

on together, still looking for the demo, but we never found it. It got late, I said I was tired and we both lay down on the sidewalk to sleep.

I woke up as dawn was breaking and looked over and saw my new friend, on hands and knees. His face, bedecked with drool and morning dew, was pressed to the ground and his butt was up in the air. To this day, when I am in need of a laugh, I recall that image.

“Hey, nice meeting you, I’ll see you later,” I said, although I was talking to myself. I got up and headed back toward the center. I found a pub that was open (yes, in Amsterdam there are pubs that are open at the crack of dawn, and plenty of them doing a brisk business), went in and got into a beery early morning conversation with a guy who said “I really don’t like what I do.”

I was curious, but didn’t want to press too hard, and over the space of an hour or two I got Rodrigo’s story out of him. He said he was locked into it because it was the family business. He said it caused him nightmares. He said he couldn’t talk about it. He said he knew it was wrong, even though there were ways to justify it.

Gradually it became clear that he was a hit man and he’d come over to Amsterdam to kill somebody and now the job was done and he’d spent all his money on hookers and beer, but nothing could wash away the regret, nothing could make him forget what he’d done.

I spoke to him about meditation, about how it could help a person find inner peace no matter how complex or messed up their life was in the real, physical world. He said he was willing to try anything.

I took him by the hand and we meditated a while and he said “I felt that.”

One of my favorite props at that time was a plastic fly in a little wooden locket I wore around my neck. My daughter had given it to me. I would take it out from time to time and show it to people and say “this is God” and that’s what I did and I told him I was going to name the fly Rodrigo and he was pleased and grateful and as he was leaving he said “Jack, I’d like to give you something but I don’t have anything. Would you like my gun?” I passed on that.

Chapter 30

We must be willing to fail and to appreciate the truth that often life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. – M. Scott Peck

My son has spent a great deal of time with me in Europe, and in China, but my daughter's visits have been less frequent, and she is much less approving of my lifestyle. So, I was very excited when they flew over together. I bought a car in Hamburg, quite cheaply, an old Honda Civic. It had German plates but they were expired. I drove down to Luxembourg to meet their flight. I'd asked Cara to pick up some American license plates for me; a small thing, really, and I must admit they wouldn't have made the car legal, they would have just made it look legal, but perhaps time was short or perhaps she just didn't consider it an important request because she didn't get them.

They did, however, have an extra passenger with them, a young American preparing to hitch-hike around Europe. I said we had no room but Cara had taken quite a liking to the boy and insisted he come along. The car was absolutely stuffed with luggage and the lad wound up sitting on top of it. He was with us for a few hours as we drove around, lost, circling and trying to find the main road. Eventually we dropped him and we were on our way back to the Czech Republic. The border between Luxembourg and Germany was nothing, there was a Willkommen sign by the road and there we were, cruising on the autobahn.

The trouble came at the Czech border, but still on the German side. I thought it would be a good plan to obscure the expired license plates with a bit of mud but the German guards are onto that trick and, if there's one thing Germans don't like, it's mud.

They stopped us, impounded the car, searched it, and searched all of us individually, which didn't bother me or Caleb too much, but Cara was totally offended, embarrassed and humiliated even though it was done, very professionally, by a female officer.

In the end, we had to carry on without the car and I came back for it later. I had to pay a fine, and all I'd really needed to do in the first place was just get temporary tags. Sometimes it's actually easier just to follow the rules. No challenge, no fun in that, but it would have been easier.

Chapter 31

If you think about the people you know, and the people who the people you know know, and the people who the people you know know know, soon you're connected to everybody in the world. That is wonderful.

– Guru Sharab

One day Bijali took me over to a friend's house. "She great, like goddess Osho, you will be like."

Parivara was, indeed, something like an Osho goddess. She had an air of omniscient wisdom and connectedness to the universe. She and her late husband had founded the Chcibýty meditation center. I was about to get very involved with Chcibýty.

Her house was in a five story building that her family owned. There was a loft area with a greenhouse and a shower, too, those really are a natural fit if you think about it, and still above that there was an attic. Her mother-in-law, who was just Grandma to everybody, lived downstairs.

Her husband had died about a year before I arrived. Poor guy had grown a bunch of good pot and never got to smoke it, and she gifted me with that.

Parivara had three daughters and I was to become sort of a surrogate father to them. Not so much the oldest one, she was already a teenager by the time I met them but her youngest was only five.

I helped her get her car, a pure white Ford Mondeo station wagon, fixed, which was a piece of cake, really. I just took it down to Tonda, he sorted out the mechanics, which didn't really amount to much, and I did a bit of piddling cosmetic work, and she was thrilled.

She also liked my massages. In fact, she liked them so much that she introduced me to some of her friends and pretty soon I was giving massages to women every day, (and all the kids, too) and feeling my power.

A girlfriend was visiting, Natálie, and we were talking about tantric sex and talk leads to action when all parties present want it to go that way, and we did.

She was a voluptuous woman, a sweet little bundle of sex wrapped up in hippie cloth; she was about five years younger than Parivara so about fifteen years younger than me, which made her about ten years older than my son Caleb.

Then, Parivara took me to a tantric weekend in Stany and I met Šárka (pronounced Sharka), sweet, little, undefinable Šárka. She had a dyke haircut and a killer body. She was short, with big breasts and a beautiful, big, round butt. A blue-eyed angel with a fiery streak. Feisty but sweet. An excellent macrobiotic cook who loved dogs. Loved my massages, but would never actually have sex with me. Never had sex with me, but had a major influence on my life.

One time, after a massage, she turned over, sat up, looked directly at me, spread her legs and said, in sort of a sad, uncertain voice “Jack, am I fuckable?”

“Oh, yes, oh, yes” I said, leaning in close and thinking all my fantasies were about to come true.

But she shut that down fast, closed her legs and said “No. You’re not my type. I just wanted to know.”

Šárka could be cruel, but I still love Šárka. I will always love Šárka.

Chapter 32

Give something to the world. Anything. You will be amply repaid. – Guru Sharab

After Šárka there was Klára and after Klára there was Aga, which was short for Agáta, (which would be Agatha in English, but the Czechs do not do the th sound, not at all) and I was enjoying tremendous freedom and empowerment as I wandered from town to town, from Prague to countryside, from meditation center to meditation center which is how I met both Klára and Aga, they picked me out at Tantric Sex gatherings, maybe rule #1 on Guru Aja Gara steps to enlightenment should be to learn massage, you will spread good vibes throughout the world, one body at a time, and it almost certainly will get you laid at some point. Cooking is good, too.

I was also working again with Jerry Koolwijk, he was fronting for some group of Arabs now and they were trying to buy a firm that makes forklifts, one of the biggest companies in the Czech Republic. I got to tour all their factories and pretend to know what I was doing.

Borat is a town about an hour or so south of Prague which has a long history of Utopianism. It was started as an egalitarian peasant's commune back in the early 15th century. They were also Hussites, i.e. Protestants, which was way radical in that era, when Martin Luther wouldn't even be born for another 60 years.

I found an anarchist cultural center run by two Americans there. There was Patrick, a hippie guy from California, and Melanie, a lesbian. They were both in their 30s. They'd bought a derelict old mill on the river just below Old Town, and had invited in a lot of other anarchists from San Francisco. I was welcomed in as a friend and helped cook a good tofu dinner.

They seemed a bit arrogant to me, but I liked them. They were obviously making sacrifices to be there. They had learned Czech and were trying to bridge the cultural gap. But, after four years, no Czechs were living with them even though the structure was huge, they could have slept 100 people, easily.

While I was there visiting for a few weeks a girl from Prague, who shared Melanie's sexual orientation, came to check them out. I'd finished eating.

She asked if she could take my plate. I said sure.

Mel went off and gave her a big lecture about not being abrupt and allowing a little bit of time. That's the problem with people who are making a conscious effort to create a better world, a better way of life. They get bogged down on stupid details, like what to eat or what to chant how many times a day or what gesture you should make on greeting or how long to leave a plate on the table before you whisk it away for washing. Normal people actually have simpler lives.

Pat and Mel were both musicians. He played drums, she played bass and they would tour the Czech Republic and sometimes they would go back to the USA for fundraisers to keep the place going.

We organized a cultural fest and invited squatters from Holland and Belgium. Some of the Dutch squatters left behind an old VW bus which was too old to be registered in Holland. Pat and Mel didn't want it because of that, so they let me have it. Everybody knows I tend to be less concerned about such details.

It was a real hippie bus with the word 'Fantasy' painted on both sides in a freaky font, with lots of stripes and swirls and flowers added all around. I added 'fantasy' license plates and put it back on the road. It leaked a bit of oil, but ran O.K. I drove it back to Prague and enjoyed a few weeks at Pension California where I met some newly arrived tourists. Gamal was still there and he loved driving the van.

There was a festival going on, The Technofest, the first of many annual Technofests in the Czech Republic, so we loaded up both vans, my van and the fantasy van, 21 people in each, and off we went. When we got to the festival, Gamal was two or three vehicles ahead of me in line and they were hassling him over documents and such (it was a race thing, you don't always notice the racism in the Czech Republic because it's such a white, white, white place, but the racism is there) and so he got out and came back to get me and I went up and cleared that van and then ran back to drive the 2nd van in, too. With our band of 42, we were a huge part of that event. There was a big ditch that people kept falling into, we set up some lawn chairs and sat and drank beers and waited for the inevitable. Nobody was getting hurt; it was all mud and hilarity. We also had a table set up with a sign that said "Marijuana for sale." It was the last of the marijuana I had left

from the sale of the Spider. It sold out, leaving us both financially solvent and very popular.

Then, I invited Gamal and a few others to come down and visit Borat with me. We set out in my van with a Macedonian, a Moroccan, an Israeli and Gamal, the Egyptian. Melanie had encouraged me to bring visitors so I expected the doors to be open when we arrived. We reached Borat as the sun was setting.

I knocked on the door and was greeted by another lesbian from San Francisco named Rebecca. “Patrick and Melanie aren’t here,” she said, as she stood blocking the doorway. Her body language was quite clear.

“Well, can we spend the night?”

“Sorry. I need my space.”

“We won’t bother you at all. We’ll just take a room at the back, sleep, and leave in the morning.”

“No. I’d prefer you not be here.”

I was bummed but you can’t tell an anarchist how to be free, so we headed out to Kecibaba where I had lived with Zbyněk. It was only a 20 minute drive but night was falling and the generator on the VW was not working so soon we had no lights at all. There was no moon in the sky. We could not even see the road. Two of the boys got out and led me along with their cigarette lighters. All of a sudden one of them disappeared into a ditch. We fished him out, but it took a while because we were all laughing so hard, nobody could see what they were doing, and he kept slipping back in.

We then came to some road that seemed to turn to the right but as we moved slowly along we realized were bumping up and down. Then we looked in the distance and saw a single headlight approaching. I yelled “TRAIN!” and we jumped from the van like it was on fire.

We expected to see my prize possession and our only means of transportation pulverized, sent flying, ignominiously destroyed, but it didn’t happen like that. Not every train is a TGV. The engineer saw it and stopped, and waited while we got it off the tracks and trundled across the field to the nearest road.

We took a wrong turn somewhere and ran out of gas in a small town which was definitely not Kecibaba. I knocked on a door but got no answer. Instead the police pulled up 15 minutes later. The Moroccan was scared because he had no passport but when they heard that I was American Jack, the crazy guy who'd been in jail in Brno, they drove us to Kecibaba themselves.

Zbyněk was not home so we spent the night at a Herna bar without sleeping. Herna bars are everywhere in the Czech Republic. Hra means game, hrat is to play, and herna has something to do with all that because they have slot machines, sometimes a pool table or darts, stuff like that. They stay open late and are not generally picky about their clientele.

In the morning I found some gas and got a ride to the van from a friend in town. But then, as he was helping me start the van, he drove it into a field and got it stuck. I had to find the farmer and ask him to pull us out with his tractor.

Finally, we got back on the road and drove back to Borat, where we parked along the public road outside of the mill. We collapsed into sleep but were soon awakened by an angry knocking on the window. It was Rebecca.

“What do you think you’re doing here?”

“Fuck off,” I said.

We weren’t even on her property. No matter. Now I was banned from the anarchists.

Chapter 33

Dance like the whole world is watching – Guru Sharab

Czechs are not the only native inhabitants of the Czech Republic. They share the country with a sizable Gypsy minority. Perhaps share is the wrong word.

It is an uneasy co-habitation, like a married couple that has long ago fallen out of love but neither one can afford to move out. They use the same space, but avoid contact to a tremendous degree.

As a foreigner, fortunately, you are not bound by the same unwritten social rules; unwritten but generations old and hard to break. At least, not this foreigner.

One night I went to a party in a very strange place. Prague is filled with strange places. Places you walk by every day and think you know because you've seen them from the outside, but there are nooks and crannies and Tardis like courtyards and basements. It is a city of constant surprises. Underneath the statue of Jan Žižka, the massive mounted man whose one eye looks over Prague from the peak of Vitkov Hill, there is such a space. Nobody ever goes in there, it's just the base of a statue, but there is a large, empty space, with some memorial stones scattered around, which on this occasion were serving as stands for various vendors, it was a very strange open market. But the market was just preamble.

The place was crowded and when the music started, it erupted in dancing. It was actually by accident that I stepped onto the stage, but all of a sudden I was the go go dancer for the whole audience, the group trance; it was much more than a dance.

It was gypsy music and most of the people there were gypsies. A beautiful, dark haired girl started dancing with me and we were both high, everybody in the place was high, it was an enclosed space and there was damned close to zero ventilation, an indoor cloud of marijuana smoke hung heavy all around us.

Then another woman came into the picture. A nice looking woman, blonde and so, presumably, Czech. "You're coming home with me," she said, and I

was like jello, ready to follow her anywhere. Then she said “Just a minute, I need to tell my husband we’re going,” and I suddenly saw her in a very different light.

While she was gone I ran back to the gypsy girl I’d been dancing with before and said “Keep me here; I do NOT want to go with that girl!”

Chapter 34

The city is to the people as the hive is to the bees – Guru Sharab

I was bouncing around the Czech Republic like a pinball, from Parivara's place to Zelenina to Stany and then for a while I was at an Osho center near Karlovy Vary, a beautiful spa town of elegant arcades, and columns, and fountains, which is famous for its film festival and being a popular spot for wealthy Russians, but most of the Osho people there were German and I felt a strong neo-Nazi vibe, which may have just been because of their accent and having seen too many World War II movies, but I don't think so.

One day I was sitting in the meditation room just meditating and chilling and one of them said "You have to leave."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"You are not meditating properly," he said.

I did not understand this at all. Since meditation is a silent, and individual, discipline, how could he possibly have reached the conclusion that I was not meditating properly?

"What makes you say that, I didn't say anything," I said, perhaps a bit irritably.

"We know what you were thinking."

"Oh, really? What was I thinking?"

"You were thinking that Osho is not God."

I must admit, he was right. And, actually, I hadn't been meditating silently; I'd been making funny monkey sounds. So, it was no surprise that they kicked me out. But they were still wankers.

Just as the bouncing pinball always eventually falls down the center gap between the flippers, just as comets crash into the sun, so circumambulating expats in the Czech Republic wind up in Prague, and I did, again and again. I was still staying at Pension California when I went, and met several

interesting groups of people.

Most expats tend to gravitate to their own language group but I tended to hang with the Africans, the Arabs, and a bunch of Serbs. It was one of the Serbs, Mudar, who gave me a more permanent place to stay and I wound up living with him off and on for years, never paying any rent but I managed to keep us in dope and very often went out to shoplift some breakfast, usually some rolls and yogurts. One has to pull one's weight, after all.

There were usually a few other people living there, mostly Serbs (or Yugoslavians – they still call themselves Yugoslavians). One was a guy we called Twister, because he could twist up beautiful, geometrically perfect joints, origami rockets with a tight, little nipple at the tip, and the product was blended in perfectly with the tobacco so that each hit was an automatic high. He could roll them one handed while driving; he could probably roll them in his sleep.

Twister had a strange tale to tell. When Yugoslavia fell apart, when the shit hit the fan, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Serbian by ethnicity, Bosnian by residence, he was living in Sarajevo. The Bosnians drafted him into their army but wouldn't give him a gun because he was a Serb. Then, he was captured by the Serbs and they forced him to fight for their side and they *did* give him a gun. One day while he was out on patrol he came across some of his former, Bosnian comrades in (sort of) arms. They sat down together, shared a couple of cigarettes, and he put aside his gun and started walking across the mountains, through Croatia and Slovenia, eventually reaching Austria and an escape from the conflict. From there he made his way to Prague.

I met a lot of crazy people in those early days. There was Julian, the one handed poet from California who was totally into Sufism and constantly quoting the great Sufi poet, Rumi, and didn't really seem to have a conversational tone. To Julian, everything in the universe was a poem. There was Lenka, who sold stuff to tourists on Charles Bridge, perhaps the most romantic bridge in the world, especially at night when the castle glows on the hill, like an apparition coming out of the night. She loved my massages and we had, due to that, a bit of a relationship. There was Motormouth Mike. He was an Englishman, a Londoner, but not posh at all; loud, aggressive, extremely extroverted and not morally opposed to or particularly bothered by the concept of violence. He had a wild white man's fro and was, like me, small

but fit. A lot of people had him pegged as a simple hooligan but he was also an actor and could play a wild harmonica.

I first met him at Pension California because, in addition to working in the kitchen, I was helping Eva by leaning on the other patrons to pay for their stay. Mike didn't appreciate my interference and told me to fuck off. I challenged him to step outside. He brushed that off, surprisingly, because he can be seriously volatile, and it was a good thing he did because he would have kicked my ass for sure. After that, though, we became good friends. You could say we had a lot in common.

One of our favorite places in Prague was the Sombrero Rojo, a mecca for potheads in Prague, and there were (and still are) plenty of people who fit that description.

One fine, warm evening I was standing outside the Sombrero with some guy, smoking a joint and talking and another guy came up and asked us if he could buy some. Now, I'm a trusting sort but I'm not completely stupid and this totally seemed like a set-up so we said no, we are not dealers, he should maybe try inside, and he walked on down the road. We saw him, about a block down, stop at a public phone to make a call and a minute later, maybe even less than a minute, a police car rolled up.

The cops had us empty our pockets and I had about eight grams on me, he handed me back the still sealed five gram pack and said "This much is O.K." Then he handed me back the rest, like waiting to see what I would do and I threw it on the ground and stepped on it and he let us walk away, I didn't even walk back later to see if it was still on the ground after they'd left.

One night there was a girl, not a bad looking girl although a bit dishevelled, walking around the Sombrero yelling out "Who's going to fuck me tonight!" and all the slow responders were just looking at her not knowing what to say, but I went with the obvious and said "That would be me, let's go." That is on Guru Aja Gara's list of helpful hints on how to succeed in life; sometimes the prize just goes to whoever speaks up first.

We took a taxi back to her place and as soon as we got inside she said "Hit me," and she wasn't speaking metaphorically, like "Hit me with your best shot, let's see what you've got," she meant for me to hit her, to physically punch her. I said no, I couldn't do that, and tried to use words, persuasion,

psychology to get around to the point I'd thought we were starting at, where we could have a nice, friendly fuck but she became more and more hostile and started yelling at me "Do you know who I am?" and she claimed to be the daughter of some high level Czech politician, which I later had confirmed at the Sombrero, plenty of people there knew perfectly well who she was, which was maybe why I was the one who'd gone home with her. I tried to leave but she blocked my exit and was shouting "Rape! Rape!" but I managed to get out and nothing ever came of it. Sure was nervous for several days after that, though.

I would walk around the Sombrero with props, like one time I had a dildo covered with a boxing glove, going table to table asking girls "Do you want to fight," and then when they said no, I would whip off the glove and say "Well, then, do you want to make love." Didn't have any luck with that routine but got a few laughs.

Mike and I would dance all around the place, among the tables of quietly stoned people sedately drinking their beers and try to get some action going.

One night there was a group of girls I was sitting with and they liked my bead necklace and flat out asked me for it, I said no because it had been a gift from my son and it meant a lot to me, and they were progressively flattering me more and more and kissing me each in turn and then eventually one of them said "Can I just wear it for a little while?" and I couldn't say no to that but then I got up to go to the bathroom and when I came back they, and the necklace, were gone. Forever.

Mike saved me from getting my ass kicked one night at the Sombrero. The whole brouhaha started shortly after I came back from one of my trips to Amsterdam with two Americans, Jeff and Sammy. I'd told them I could hook them up with drug connections in Prague, and I did.

They sold some pot and mescaline to my friend Matyáš, my DJ friend from the Keyboard Cafe, but then they didn't give me any cut of the money at all, not even a little thank you bonus. I confronted one of them at Oswald's, a pub just a few yards from El Sombrero, under a medieval arch and across a cobblestoned courtyard which also had a bookstore and a highly stylized hippie shop that sold home made soap and paper and stuff like that, but Oswald's was quite different from El Sombrero. Their beer was about twice

the price and they were definitely trying to attract a different crowd.

I had a bit of a history with Oswald's, because my extremely flamboyant homosexual friend Desmond, a six foot seven, black version of Liberace, had arranged a cabaret revue that played there for a while.

I found Sammy there and went over to talk to him. In the beginning, I was thinking of it as much more like a conversation than a confrontation. Then the owner saw me and came over and joined in. He was a tall, thin, well dressed guy who looked like he could have been a stockbroker, and he had a lady friend with him. This would have been fine in a strictly social situation, or like "Hey, how are things going with the cabaret?", but somehow they got involved in the discussion, and not on my side. Not calmly and quietly, either.

When he started screaming at me I lost it, and flipped over the table, spilling beer on the girl, and stormed out. I ran into the security guard outside, not a security guard for Oswald's, he patrolled the courtyard, I don't know if he was paid by the city or some sort of business owners' co-op. I started talking to him. He could see I was flustered, and I said "They're fucking drug dealers, he sold drugs to my son!"

He was easily persuaded, he obviously had no love for Oswald's, so when the owner came out and started screaming that he was going to hurt me, he was going to kill me, the guard just stood there and did nothing.

Sammy said he was sorry about the whole affair and did meet me at the Sombrero later to give me a bit of cash. He wound up being a friend and even a roommate for a while, but his friend Jeff was just a dick and he disappeared.

The next night, I was drinking and chatting and having a pleasant evening when Mike came over to me and told me that a guy there, an American football player, was planning to kick my ass and it didn't take me more than a second to figure out who'd put him up to it since I'd never seen the guy before in my life. I hightailed it out the door as I saw him coming over and disappeared pronto into the tangled streets of old Prague.

But, the next day I went and stood outside of Oswald's, across the courtyard, with a sign saying "I'm sorry." I couldn't quite bring myself to just walk in

and say I was sorry because I wasn't fucking sorry, but self-preservation is self-preservation.

About that time, I decided to go down and see Bijali and I was hoping we might have one more physical meditation session, that she would let me feel the glory of connection with the universe one more time.

We met at an outdoor beer garden, and after just two beers I was a little drunk. We were sitting on the grass and it was lovely, looking into each other's eyes, occasionally brushing against each other lightly with our fingertips, our arms, and our legs. Her boyfriend, though, still the same guy, Mr. Jealous, was sitting not far away making tch tch noises and being a pain in the butt. Eventually he came over and told me to cut it out.

I stood up, we exchanged a few words, and then he broke my nose, which was no big deal, they snapped it right back into place later in hospital, but he also kicked me in the knee and ripped a tendon and I was walking with a limp for two years after that. The police were called, he told them I was a drug dealer and I told them he was growing marijuana and Bijali, to my great disappointment, sided with him.

The police didn't do anything to either of us, but they did get me to a hospital, where the doctor whacked my nose back into place. No money, no insurance, no problem. "Have a nice day," he said, and sent me on my way.

Chapter 35

*The things you love, but leave behind
Are always with you, in your mind – Guru Kalehuru*

The fantasy van eventually went the way of most vehicles that you pick up for free because nobody wants them and they are too old to pass inspections and get registered. It broke down, I left it parked on the street intending to get around to fixing it up some day but that never happened and one day I passed by there and it had been towed, probably. I suppose it could have been stolen, or spirited away in the night to another dimension, but towed was most likely and I was as much relieved as disappointed. It had been fun, but it had been a pain in the butt, too.

For a while I was living with Gamal and Caleb in my van. Those were interesting times, indeed. One time Gamal left his shoes underneath it, which was actually very considerate of him, the internal air quality would have been significantly less pleasant if they'd been inside, but he didn't tell me and in the morning I drove off. He never saw those shoes again, and Gamal was all about the shoes, he was a very image conscious guy.

Another time Caleb and I were just hanging in the van and Gamal went to a nearby pub and came back with two Polish girls, one for him and one for Caleb, and all of us did acid together and it worked out very well, especially for Caleb. Women like him O.K., he's a good looking guy, but he doesn't exactly have an easy time initiating a conversation. We stayed with the girls at their place in Kecibaba. It was nice being in that town again, but then they went back to Poland and didn't have enough cash for the train tickets so one morning we woke up and they were gone and so was some money and Caleb's passport, but it was all good. It had been fun while it lasted.

Chapter 36

The drug is not the person. Heroin is a horrible drug, but heroin addicts can be the sweetest people in the world. – Guru Sharab

It was at the Sombrero that I had first met Desmond. We were on the corner outside, which we also called “the smoking room.” The bouncers wouldn’t let him inside because he was just too indiscreet about his dealing. The Sombrero has always been a bit schizophrenic about that. Every stoner in Prague, which is a large number of people indeed, knows that it basically exists as a place to buy drugs and, in fact, everybody else knows it, too, but they are quite strict about not letting people smoke there, even more than some places which are just regular old Czech beer bars filled with long, wooden tables, fat, middle aged men, and clouds of cigarette smoke.

So, everybody goes out to smoke on the sidewalk even though you can see the cameras right over your head and you have to wonder what their agreement with the police is, why they’re allowed to stay in business and why every other pub doesn’t do the same thing. I guess the deal with most of us Hippies is we aren’t too bothered with the police spying on us as long as we aren’t going to get arrested on this particular joint right now, we’re going to go ahead and toke on it like a vacuum cleaner.

Actually, I’d seen him before, at the Pension California, but he was the sun and I was a bit of dust out in the asteroid belt. I was washing dishes and he had a steady stream of worshippers showing up at his room, some to buy heroin, and some to suck his dick; his long, straight, elegant, black dick.

When we met outside the Sombrero his first words were “I’m not sure if I will let you talk to me,” and soon we were the best of friends. It was a case of mutual need. He needed somebody with a van, and I wanted new friends because I always want new friends and needed a better marijuana connection, because I was a bit tired of buying gram bags in the bathroom at El Sombrero.

Desmond was from Surinam so he spoke Dutch, English and Lord knows how many other languages. An extremely charismatic character, he loved to talk but he also listened and it made me feel important just to know him. It seemed like he knew everybody in Prague. My Serbian friends called him Mr. Coconut, or The Baboon, both of which were racist as fuck, I guess,

but they loved him.

He dealt anything and everything, but his great love was heroin, which he would smoke off a piece of tin foil, like James. Smelled like black tar, worse than black tar, a horrible, shitty smell. He was married to a beautiful Czech girl named Jana, a little blonde girl, as tiny as he was large, with eyes as blue as robin's eggs.

Soon, I moved in with him and Jana and his brother Cesar and Cesar's girlfriend and their friend Dragana, a thin, brown haired beauty from Sarajevo, and she was also a drug addict. They were all drug addicts. Birds of a feather, you know.

It wasn't a move of any great distance. Mudar's place was just a bit off Old Town, on the way to Charles Bridge, right smack dab on the parade route, where tourists walk through every day, like a stream channeled through a narrow canyon, like cattle through a chute, they walk between the souvenir shops and cafés and restaurants and pass beneath the wire stretched over the street with a statue of a unicyclist on it, and out onto the bridge and through Malá Strana on the persistent pilgrimage up to Prague Castle.

One morning I walked downstairs, just dressed in my bathrobe, to check the mail. I sensed something different in the street. It was quiet. I looked out and saw a phalanx of dudes in suits and short hair looking very much not like tourists, and a single woman at the center of them. "I know that woman," I thought, and it took me a few seconds to realize that it was Hillary Clinton, and this was at the time that Bill was president.

Caleb came over and stayed with me at Mudar's place. It was a pleasure, bonding with my now nearly adult son. One night, staggering home drunk, we got a bit lost. It can happen in Prague, it still happens after 20 years. Caleb said "It's right down this way," and he was right. I asked how he'd known, and he said he recognized the prostitute on the corner. Oh, the lovely, lovely landmarks of Prague.

Desmond's place was the other side of Old Town, above the bakery on Dlouha Street, not far from the Roxy, with its constant ear pounding techno music, but it was a cool scene, I remember one night a couple of guys on stilts (obviously because they were about 9 feet tall) under their long, flowing silver suits and with their faces painted silver, too, and there was

a super sexy Brazilian barmaid with huge tits and wavy brown hair who spoke English with a cute accent. Five minutes walking distance, when there was no crowd, but there was always a crowd. All the other expats envied our location.

It wasn't a great distance socially, either. Dragana and Mudar, of course, were compatriots, and Mudar knew Desmond and Cesar from the Pension California, so we were all one, big, happy hippie family and changing flats was just about as easy and simple as changing rooms.

Dragana was so strung out on drugs that she wasn't even interested in sex, so that was like a cold hose on this old dog, I'd have been into her otherwise. She had an ugly, open sore on her leg which was just not healing and it was about the size of a tennis ball. That's one of the bad side effects of heroin, your body doesn't recuperate properly and small things can become chronic problems. I told her all she needed was a bit of sodium and you can get it at any drug store but she never listened to me so, one day, I stole the money from her, went down to the drug store and got some. It worked a charm, the sore healed right up and she was extremely grateful and not bothered at all by the pilfering.

Unfortunately, Dragana got Mudar on the smack again, heroin addicts are worse than born again Christians about trying to convert everybody. Nice people as a general rule. Kind. Generous. Loving. But totally irresponsible and in thrall to the demon spirit of the black paste.

I wouldn't call her a pusher, though, because I saw her many times giving a dose to someone on credit even though she knew they would never have the means to pay her. She was very generous that way, even saintly.

Cesar was darker (Psychically darker, I mean. Physically, they were both a very dark, glistening hue.) than his brother. He had just gotten out of jail where he'd been doing time for stabbing his girlfriend but there she was, living with us, too.

Desmond was about as careless with the police as I am sometimes. We drove down to Austria once because Jana's father was working there and I knew a place where you could just drive across the border and there was no checkpoint at all but Desmond wanted to go the quicker, more direct way and told me to stop worrying, there would be no problem.

But, as he opened up his passport on the Austrian side, a joint rolled out. So, we were detained, stripped and searched. They went through the van inch by inch and then did it again a couple of hours later. They separated us and interrogated us. There was a stretch of a couple of hours where I was sitting by myself in the guardhouse and I got so bored I stole a flashlight, a pen and a roll of toilet paper. It was a really good flashlight, too, I had that for years.

They didn't hassle Jana too much but they spent about two hours interrogating Desmond. They spent about an hour each interrogating the other two boys travelling with us, one Czech, one Slovak, but when they came to me the first question they asked was "Have you ever been arrested?" I looked at the papers in his hand, it looked like a rough draft for a novel, and said, as humbly as I could "Yes, sir." And that was it for me.

It took us about another hour to get back into the Czech Republic, but the Czech boy, Kuba (that's short for Jakub), flipped out a bit the first time we pulled over at a rest stop and grabbed my keys and started screaming that we needed to kick Desmond out, but I calmed him down and we made it back to Prague without incident, and never invited Kuba anywhere again.

I was basically Desmond's chauffeur. Another time we were driving out to the country, because that is what one does in the Czech Republic when one has a van. Desmond had his wife with him but also his lover, Honza, and Honza had brought his girlfriend. An argument developed, with Honza saying that Desmond was jealous because Honza had a girlfriend and Desmond saying that Honza was jealous because Desmond had a wife and I spoke up on behalf of Honza and Desmond said "You are no different than anybody else, you want to suck Honza's cock, too" and I shouted out "That's bullshit! I will eat all the pussy in this car!" and everybody laughed.

It got to be a bit much, though. Desmond was dealing out of the van, had pretty much started to consider it his, and when I asked him to stop, because it looked a bit suspicious that there were always people outside the van, he just started inviting them in.

I moved back in with Mudar, and started parking the van in different places. After a couple of weeks, I got a call from Desmond asking me to drive him and a bunch of people out to a festival, and I agreed, because he offered to pay me. Actually, I was ferrying people to the site, I made 3 trips there from

Prague and after I dropped the last bunch off, I pulled over to sleep.

Desmond found me and wanted me to drive him back to Prague right away. “No, man, I’m tired, just relax, we’ll go back in a couple of hours.”

“No, wake up, I want you to drive us back right now.” He had 6 people with him, so I didn’t really have a choice, it would have made him look bad if I’d refused and he’d have been seriously pissed off. So, we went. I woke up at about 110 kph heading straight for a concrete barrier, about waist high. Groggy as I was, something in my mind told me not to brake and it was probably for the best. If I’d have slammed on the brakes, we still would have hit the barrier hard and people definitely would have gone flying and gotten seriously injured. As it was, we knocked the barrier down and it became sort of a ramp and we actually took flight for a moment as the bottom of the car scraped the top of the barrier. We knocked down a couple of flashing lights as well, and when we landed on the other side, no one was seriously hurt. Everybody was pretty freaked out, though. The transmission was trashed, we were leaking fluid, and everybody helped to push it into the woods so there would be no police attention.

I was stunned, I was in shock, and Desmond said “Give me some money back, we need to get taxis.”

“You can’t be fucking serious! I need it for my own problems,” I was shouting at him, and went on a rant about how it was all his fault, if he’d let me sleep in the first place, but he just went into the van and started stealing anything of value, which was mostly Mudar’s stuff.

I was too weak to stop him.

Chapter 37

Say what you want, and there's a chance you'll get it. If you don't, you surely won't. – Guru Sharab

Ask, and it shall be given – Matthew 7:7

One seriously cool pad I had for a while in Prague was near U Zvonu in Prague 5, out past Anděl Metro Station which used to be called Moskevská in Communist times, there is still a plaque up with that name on it and the station is famous for a scene in the movie *Kolja*, which won an Oscar for best foreign film; out on the heavily traveled Pilsen Road, with the trams and the busses and a seemingly endless parade of old Tatra trucks, with their front wheels set at an angle, pigeon-toed like, for better traction on winding quarry roads. It was not far from Bertramka, a rich person's villa from the 18th century where Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart used to spend his summer vacations and his piano is still there.

It was Aga's find, it belonged to the father of an Osho friend of hers, Terka, but she had use of it and thus, so did I. It was small, just big enough for me, but a lot of my friends and lovers wound up hanging out there.

One day I was standing at the sink washing dishes when Robert, an African guy I'd known from Pension California, said "Hey, Jack, can I fuck you in the ass?"

When I reacted with surprise he said "It's no big deal, it's just how we release a little bit of the pressure in Africa. It's not even gay."

I declined, and he just waited until I finished the dishes and went and jerked off into the sink. To this day, I have no idea if what he said was true or he just wanted to fuck me in the ass.

Once, I got hold of a whole bunch of hash on a trip to Amsterdam, and decided the most practical and economical way to consume it would be to make brownies. Also, it's just better to eat than to smoke, health wise. Instead of harshness in your throat and smoke and tar in your lungs, you get to enjoy a bit of chocolatey goodness. But Terka came in when no one else was there and she thought they were just normal brownies, and ate damn near the whole tray. She slept for about two days and was extremely

embarrassed and apologetic when she realized what she'd done. It was a bit expensive, and we were all a bit bummed that there was so much hash that we now weren't going to get stoned on, but life goes on. We had a good laugh.

It is proven: you cannot overdose on Cannabis.

There was a young Slovak girl named Bara, a petite redhead with abnormally pale skin, and we did some LSD together one fine afternoon and went walking in the neighborhood. There is a cemetery there, a very old cemetery that looks kind of spooky even in the daytime because it is so overgrown and unkempt, and it lies between two very busy streets, the Pilsen road on one side and on the other a narrower street with no trams but busses and plenty of other traffic. Step into the cemetery, though, through the tall, wrought iron gate, and the world disappears. Even the noise died down to a distant whisper, the foliage was that thick.

The cemetery was full over a hundred years ago so nobody ever even visits except for an occasional tourist. The dead, once all the people they knew in life are also dead, fade from human memory, and the letters on their stones fade too and become hard to read as the trees grow taller every year, and the weeds grow up amid the tall grass. Bara laid herself down on a tombstone, enjoying the cool of the stone and the view of the tangled, summer greenery above her head and I put my head under her skirt - she always wore long, flowing skirts - and proceeded to lick her pussy. It was a beautiful moment.

My van was parked in front of the flat, not actually driveable at the moment after the incident with Desmond. I had some Gypsy neighbors who would call me every day and then one day I returned home, the van was gone, and suddenly I realized the reason for the repeated phone calls. They were just waiting for the day when I didn't answer. They would have had to have had it towed, but however they did it, it was gone. The van which I'd driven from Oregon, which Richard had stolen before I got busted, the van which had faced off with a train, the van which had transported fish, manure, marijuana, as well as lots and lots of people, was gone forever. I filed a police report, but it was gone.

While I was living in the flat at U Zvonu, I had one of the coolest jobs ever, but it didn't last very long. They were filming an ad for Whirlpool washing

machines, and needed extras, lots and lots of extras because the scene was two hordes of people charging down two hillsides with pots and pans and then stuffing them into a washing machine as quick as they could. English speakers got paid 2,000 Kč per day, which was actually not bad at all, and Czech people got paid less, which was totally unfair but lots of places did it because Czech people would work for less and still feel they were doing pretty well.

But, the first day I overheard the directors complaining about a little problem they had – not enough black people. Nobody'd asked my opinion but I leaned in and said "I can get you black people." They said great, take the rest of the day off and get us some black people, and were probably thinking I'd show up with a friend or two. I went and had a flyer printed up that said "black people wanted" and handed them out to every black person I saw in front of Anděl station. It took awhile, but every black person I showed it to was interested and I told them to tell their friends. The next day they had all the black people they could handle. They didn't pay me a commission or anything but they let me eat at the canteen along with the regular actors and crew, which was cool.

Between takes I would entertain people, running down the hill and making a lot of noise and being silly, and I screwed up a couple of shots by running uphill when they told everybody to run down, which they didn't think was terribly amusing.

Klára came up to Prague because I'd told her about the job and she worked for one day but then I couldn't very well let her sleep at the flat because I was sleeping there with Aga. We all thought of ourselves as liberated and free spirited but, still, Aga was not going to let me get away with that, so I told Klára she could sleep in my car and she said sure, that's no problem, but either it was a problem or she just totally misinterpreted what I said because when I woke up in the morning Klára was gone and the car, too.

After the job was done, I had to go all the way down to Moravia to get it back and there I saw Klára getting a massage from some guy who had the perfect gimmick worked out; he massaged women by placing hot stones on their body but that was just a maguffin, there was plenty of touching going on and I noticed he was spending a lot of time in the area of the nipples. There was an added bonus. After the hot stone massage, the girls were offered a nice, relaxing soak in a tub, with some more gentle rubbing.

Along about the 4th day of filming I was getting bored and clowning around a lot and one of the directors told me to go sit down. “We’ll pay you just to go away” he said and I was pretty cool with that. A bit later I was walking past him and another director while I was walking up the hill to smoke a joint with a couple of the camera guys and I overheard him saying “He thinks he’s Jesus Christ.”

“Finally!” I thought, “somebody who understands me.”

Chapter 38

Illumination – or insight – can come from anywhere. So, you should listen to everybody – Guru Sharab

Although my life was a whirl of buying and selling and meeting new people and seducing women and trying to find a place to stay that wouldn't cost anything and figure out the next meal, I hadn't completely forgotten my quest to be a Guru so it was in the spring of the year 2000 that I put together a meditation weekend of my own.

Parivara was on board, and I put up flyers all over Prague, trying to attract not just the usual crowd of enlightenment seekers, but also those creative sorts who tend to think that Prague is the modern day embodiment of Paris in the '20s. We had a lovely little farmstead in the Šumava Mountains, with a big enough house to sleep everybody and a couple of barns for different activities.

The people who'd promised to help out didn't show so I spent most of my time in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning up from the cooking, and didn't have a lot of time to lead the meditation groups I'd planned.

There was one American guy there who was, as far as Gurus go, even a bigger fraud than I am. His thing was reading Tarot cards, and it was obvious right away that he was just making shit up as he went along.

When he read my cards, he said "You are looking for some kind of meaning in your life."

"Well, duh," I thought, that should be fucking obvious from the fact that I'm running a meditation seminar.

"You are seeking it in many different places." Also obvious, and I'd told him that.

"You need to go back to the source."

"What?"

"What religion were you raised in?"

“I was raised Catholic, dude, I’m Italian, but I’m way beyond all that now”

“Did you go to church often as a child?” he asked, in sort of an over modulated, condescending type voice.

“Oh, sure, we had to go every Sunday. I was an altar boy and everything.”

“And you’re telling me that doesn’t have an impact on the way you think?”

Well, damn, he scored there, but he had to fish around a while to get it.

When Parivara showed up she was disappointed that the event wasn’t more spiritual. There were a bunch of local lads trying to get a disco going in the barn which was fine by me, there is more than one path to enlightenment, but she saw it as a distraction.

It was a nice weekend in the country, but it didn’t really establish me as a Guru or give me the cult following I craved.

Chapter 39

To become conscious and aware, we must become authentic.

Authenticity includes both positive and negative.

-Teal Swan (on-line spiritual advisor)

Twister had a car which he was thinking of giving to his ex-wife and I said “No, sell it to me! I need a car and there’s no reason you shouldn’t get something out of it.” I gave him \$2,000 but then he turned around and gave her the car anyway and never gave me back the money so after U Zvonu I moved in with him in a flat out in Prague 5, somewhere beyond Budějovice, because he owed me.

We lived on coffee and white Serbian bread, that we baked right there in the oven at home; simple fare, but delicious. He had a crazy roommate, another Serbian guy who used to break beer bottles over his head for show, and there was a Serbian pimp who used to come around with his girls, but they’d just sit and talk, being normal, they weren’t going to have sex with anybody if they weren’t getting paid for it.

Another guy who was right in the center of the action in Prague in those days was Kryštof the crazy Canuck. He would fast for weeks at a time to cleanse his system, but he continued to smoke cigarettes and drink beer. He wore shorts in the middle of winter. He was born and raised in Canada but his parents were Czech, got out in ’68. He spoke the language and fit right in, but was not intimidated by their winter.

He hung out at the Sombrero at times, but I met him at the Keyboard Café. The beer was O.K. and reasonably priced, but the service was bad: slow, lazy, arrogant, and sometimes downright rude. The tables were small and the chairs were uncomfortable, because the owner splurged on some designer furniture, which totally didn’t fit the character of the place. It was wildly popular with some expats. They would sit there, night after night, complaining about the place, but they were always there.

One reason of course is that it was an internet cafe, one of the first, although within a few years they blossomed all over town. Kryštof was an early adapter, the closest I ever knew to a genuine computer geek.

He told me he knew somebody who was interested in importing motorcycles, and of course the idea appealed to me right away. Lord knows, the whole car thing had turned to shit. He introduced me to the guy, who turned out to be a Protestant minister, and from my home state. I accepted those as positive signs, but I should have seen them as red flags. Trust is good, trust is saintly, trust is an expression of faith in the innate goodness of mankind and the glue which connects all the things in the universe with each other, but trust can be a fucking mistake, too. Just ask anybody who has ever trusted.

Pastor Dan said he had connections in Japan. He offered to import a container with about 45 motorcycles – well, mostly scooters but there were seven or eight regular sized motorcycles, too. He just needed \$18,000.

Well, I went back to the states but didn't stay long in Arcadia, there was still a lot of bad vibes and they honed in on me like hawks on a rabbit. I lost my temper a bit and trashed John Easton's office. Well, not trashed, but there was some shouting and a bit of furniture got knocked over. No big deal, but it was not a successful trip.

While I was in New York, though, I talked to Kevin Bennet. He met Pastor Dan in NYC, and gave him the cash. I told the reverend that the bikes would all need to have papers, because even though I still trusted him, it was starting to look a bit like the Great Nigerian Businessman plot. Anyway, despite his reassurances, the goods arrived without papers. Also, there were unpaid freight charges. Kevin made good on those as well. Then, after their voyage halfway around the world by ship from Japan to Amsterdam, and a train ride across Europe, customs wouldn't let them into the country so there they sat, on a railroad siding in Prague, and we were kind of stuck.

I called Parivara, she was a smart lady, knew a little bit about everything. More importantly, she knew lots of people and she set us up with Filip Vesely. He said we should get the goods on a truck and send them down to České Budějovice, which was also a customs point for goods coming into the country and apparently had much more relaxed standards. Amazingly, there was no problem with shipping them right across the country to get to the slacker spot.

Filip met us in Budějovice. He was a heavy set man, successful looking, with dark eyes and curly dark hair. He was sure right, we had the goods cleared and all papers signed in under an hour. Some of the bikes needed work and we needed a place to keep them all so we moved them to Ivan Němec's place.

He was a friend of Filip's, and resembled him in some ways. He was short and stocky, a bit more muscle than fat, with brown curly hair and a mustache. They could have been brothers. Ivan was a hustler and had converted his barnyard into a mini-factory; he made doors and windows but was perfectly capable of a bit of mechanical work.

I don't know if Pastor Dan ever made any money on the deal but I know I didn't, and Kevin never got back the money he put in. He was the big loser, even though to hear Kryštof whine about me never paying him a finder's fee, you'd think he had money in the game.

The bikes were in Vesely's possession now, and possession is 9/10ths of the situation. Some got sold here and there, some got moved around, lots of promises were made and time went on.

One day I took Parivara's middle daughter, Katya, out for a spin on one of the scooters and I was pretending to let her drive, as adults have done with all children since the dawn of the internal combustion engine and probably before that, come to think of it. We came within an inch of getting whacked by a bus but, it was a miss, so it's now something we laugh about. It's such a thin dividing line between living, and laughing, and not living at all. Every moment, every moment we should be aware of that fact.

Then, I got a chance to go back to the States for free and concocted a plan to make back some of the money.

Chapter 40

Dope will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no dope – Freewheelin' Franklin Freak

Time passes and events unfold, like blooming flowers, because what else can they do? One thing leads to another – Guru Sharab

The free ticket came about because there was an American in Prague at that time, a man in his 50s, partly paralyzed, definitely wheelchair bound. Ron was teaching English; the word was out around the world that absolutely anybody could do it. It didn't actually work out for him. He needed assistance wherever he went and most of the buildings in this country still recovering from communism were world's way from handicapped accessible. There were some buildings that had elevators which moved in a continual loop and had no doors and it was jump on, jump off; kind of scary and dangerous even for able bodied types.

If he'd been some kind of a pedagogical expert or had a particularly scintillating personality he might have pulled it off but that, unfortunately, was not the way things worked out. He had a stroke and was in Motol Hospital but they couldn't release him because there was no place to release him to. It was a dilemma.

There were two girls I knew through Kryštof, cute teenage sisters from Texas whose Dad worked at the embassy, and they were helping with his case.

He was being shipped home, and his family was going to put him into some kind of assisted living facility, and somebody was needed to accompany him on the flight. Even though I'd been back not long before, this seemed a golden opportunity and I had a plan. I sent Twister out with the bit of money I had, to score some dope.

He was gone a long time and I thought "Oh, no, he's done a runner, fuck, you can't trust anybody" but then he showed up, mission accomplished. I carved out a couple of paperback books, put the hash inside them, and put them in Ron's luggage. I figured no way they were going to search his stuff, who would hassle a cripple? Even if he got busted, what were they going to do? Send him to a hospital, probably, and there's no real difference between a prison hospital and a real hospital, either way you're not getting out.

Well, the first little problem was right at the airport in Prague. He needed to go to the toilet so we got there and I helped him out of his wheelchair and into the stall but there was no toilet paper so I ran off to get some, leaving him propped up against the wall. Truth to tell, I was not looking forward to helping somebody else poop. When I got back he was lying on the floor, looking up at me. “You fucked up, Jack” is all he said.

When we got to the ticket counter, they asked me if I was a doctor and I said “Yes.” They never checked.

One thing I hadn’t counted on was that there was a layover in Paris. There was a change of planes, so they took all our luggage off before moving it to the other plane. One of the gendarmes asked “Whose bags are these” and I shot back “His!” perhaps a bit too quickly and emphatically but they didn’t pick up on it and I’m pretty sure he didn’t, either.

We flew non-stop from Paris to Dallas and then – no luggage! Oh, shit. Of course, that happens, regular passengers who aren’t smuggling anything lose their luggage all the time. I was panicking, but couldn’t show it. We went to his parents’ house and, after a couple of hours, the bags were delivered. I was afraid to look but snuck a peek inside his bags as soon as I discreetly could and my paperbacks were still there, with the hash inside them. I transferred them to my bags in a second, said my good byes and called a cab to head down to the Greyhound station.

Home free. Or should have been. At the Texas/Arkansas border, if you can believe it, there was a police checkpoint, with sniffer dogs! Whole ’nother country, indeed. There was no place to run, so it was either deny the bag was mine and finish my American trip with nothing, a total waste and extreme embarrassment, or gut it out. I put a bunch of brie cheese over the dope hoping that would mask the smell, and prayed to God. I swore if he’d just get me through this I’d never smuggle dope again, which is a promise I’ve broken a couple of times (sorry, God!). The cheesy smell apparently was enough to throw the dogs off, and I carried on up north.

The hash didn’t sell as well in Arcadia as I thought it would. I had been hoping I could hit Kevin with a big wad of cash when I got to New York, but instead I wound up giving him a bunch of hash to compensate for not getting any money back on the motorcycles.

I still wanted to get the merchandise back from Vesely, though. When I got back to Prague, I went over there once when I knew he wouldn't be around. There was a kid who worked at the warehouse who let me in. I was taking my time with the inventory, so he called Vesely, who showed up and said if I wouldn't leave he would lock me in, so I slammed the door and started moving furniture up against it, screw him. I went to the window and leaned out and started shouting "Pomoc, zavolat policie!" (Help, call the police!) I didn't really have a plan, I was only half serious, I just figured stirring things up and causing confusion might be a good tactic, but I'm always ready to talk to the police. I'm not nearly as paranoid about them as most people at my level of criminality are, so it sometimes works out well for me.

That day it didn't. He just laughed and walked away and I had to exit through the window. I confronted him in the parking lot and I was flailing away at him but he didn't hit back, just held me off like I was a small child. Eventually, he agreed to give me some of the stuff and we went back inside and had a look around.

I'd been in Europe nine years, off and on, seven of them in the Czech Republic. Even though I had lots of friends and was having a great time, I wasn't making any money and was certainly feeling frustrated over the motorcycle caper. I could feel no forward motion in my life's plans, so when Šárka offered to introduce me to a Chinese businessman I jumped at the chance.

I met with John at a classy hotel, because not all of the foreigners in Prague are hippie backpackers and now I was dealing with the moneyed crowd. He bought me a coffee and juice, and we talked a bit about international trade. I was impressed. He got to the point pretty soon and invited me to come to China. I accepted without a second thought.

Chapter 41

The way you tend to see the world, depends on where you stand.

– *Guru Sharab*

Vesely actually bought me the plane ticket. I guess it was worth it to him just to have me out of his hair. So, I arrived at Beijing International Airport with nothing but my clothes, a return ticket and \$10. I knew I was taking a lot on faith but, I always do and it usually works out O.K.

John had told me somebody would be there to meet me at Beijing International Airport, and somebody was, along with a ticket to Xi'an, a city with six thousand years of history on Guangzhou plain, right smack dab in the middle of China. If you picture China as a duck (it's very easy to picture China as a duck) Xi'an would be right at the front of the wing, where it's connected to the body.

It's a walled city, with plenty of ancient palaces and temples. For a while, during the Ming dynasty about a thousand years ago, it had been the capital of China. My head was reeling from all the first impressions, the crowds, the traffic, the cars, trucks and bicycles. I was whisked away to a Villa in the suburbs and had as close to no idea where I was as I have ever had at any point in all of my travels.

One of the things that struck me right away in China was the anarchy of the streets and the madness of the traffic. I woke early one morning and saw nineteen workers, I counted because it was so bizzare, sleeping in the street, actually right there at the intersection. Traffic was still light, and the drivers would just go around them, not even trying to wake them up.

Another day the electricity was out. There were no traffic lights and no police. I stood and watched, slack jawed and open mouthed, as 4 different directions of traffic merged into a clog but somehow exited the other side in perpetual movement. One bicyclist was stopped in the middle of it all casually lighting a cigarette.

The apartment was luxurious, especially for a vagabond like me. It had a natural hot spring as a water source. I had my own living room and office on the 3rd floor of the house. My villa apartment and office had enough room for at least 6 guests. There was a car with a driver at my disposal. There

was a cook and a butler. They even gave me a new laptop. The downside was that I had no one to speak English with except for John, and a father and son business team from the Czech Republic who lived below me, Jarda and Standa, but they weren't there long.

I learned quickly from them, though, in the time they were there, and tried to involve myself in their business. They were trying to invest; in what was not precisely defined, maybe a gold mine or maybe some mobile gadget.

Meanwhile, I was being shopped around for marriage. That was John's idea, but I didn't have any objection in principle. The lady they picked for me was in her 40s and could generously be described as matronly. Those less generously inclined would say fat, but other than that, she wasn't unattractive. She was an executive with a steel company and didn't speak a word of English. Her brother owned three restaurants in Xi'an. We were feasted to oblivion. We had meals of 20 courses for a round table of 10 guests. I eat fish, it's hard enough being a vegetarian without going crazy about it, and there were more kinds of fish than I knew existed. I ate like an emperor.

John asked me to dye my hair black. I'd reached the gray hair stage of my life and gray hair is a big stigma in China. It's not a big deal to me and I was there because of him, so I went ahead and dyed my hair black; seriously, Chinese black. It looked ridiculous, because my hair was never black, but I got a lot of compliments from Chinese people, especially ladies.

As luxurious and opulent as the meals were, they got a bit tedious because I was expected to sit at the table for 3 hours and smile, and John wasn't translating for me much. Food is only food but conversation is the food of human relations, the sustenance of the soul.

I got in the habit of sneaking out after a couple of hours to the kitchen, where I'd entertain the staff in sign language. It is easy to communicate without words when people want to communicate. I did a range of animal imitations, barking like a dog, whinnying like a horse, and on down the line. I did a sheep, a lion, a donkey, a snake, a bird, a rooster and, when I did the monkey I lifted my shirt to show them how hairy I was. They thought I was hysterical.

The 'romance' lasted a few weeks but eventually I called it off. She was a

very nice lady and I did not want to use her.

My next job was kind of similar to what I'd been doing for Koolwijk but even more blatant. They'd cart me around from business meeting to business meeting, where I would sit, dressed in a suit and saying nothing, just being 'the American expert,' while others negotiated. I was actually a bit relieved that I spoke no Chinese; at least I didn't have to lie about my business credentials.

I met the mayor of Xi'an and the police chief who took us into the mountains to eat wild animals, the restaurant had wild bear and wild boar, as well as snake and much more. I watched as the sectioned snake wriggled as it cooked in the pan, but all I could eat was white rice. I gave the mayor a massage.

I was not what John had expected. He was offended when I asked for a doggie bag to save the leftovers. This was a new concept in China and he found it extremely dishonorable. The whole point of a restaurant meal in China is to celebrate with extravagance and waste. That, in turn, seemed strange to me.

They love their plum wine and the ritual of the toast, but I learned to fake it with a hearty "Kampai!" and a quick sip that looked like a gulp but most of the wine wound up getting disposed of under the table. They were constantly offering cigarettes and honor meant you were required to accept, but they didn't object if you tossed it after a couple of puffs. The honor was in the acceptance. Everybody eats from the same bowl and it is O.K. to burp. I like that.

John's wife was always called Lady, I never knew her name. She ran a business buying and selling books. At the villa, breakfast was fried dough which I found boring. Eventually I managed to communicate my dissatisfaction to John's father, and he started bringing me regular muffins.

I was told that the young girl in the office could not be touched – not in the Western, metaphorical sense of don't make a pass at her, but literally no physical contact was permitted. So, I chased her around with my finger for a laugh. She squealed with delight but John said it was not right.

I suggested that the toilets should have toilet paper. That was another new

concept.

It wasn't just the touching. A young niece of John's, about 13 years old, lived in the villa. One day she came back with a new haircut. "That looks very nice," I said, with a smile and a palms-up around the bottom of my hair gesture, to indicate 'haircut.' They told me I should never compliment a young girl. She must remain humble.

I was told that I should keep my ankles covered and not wear shorts. Like most cities in China, Xi'an is seriously polluted. The sky was always gray. I could not even see the sun but once a month or so. After a rain the sky would clear and suddenly you could see the mountains, and at night the moon and stars.

One day I was trying to help Jarda and Standa, who were already back home, with a business venture. A tech company in China needed to prove they had collateral. They didn't actually have any but were trying to persuade Jarda that their president's mind was a thing of value. I thought that was an interesting concept, but they didn't get the deal.

The translator was a young Chinese friend of Standa's. We talked for hours but seemed to be going around in circles. Eventually I realized that part of the problem was the poor translation. I also noticed that the companies' secretary seemed to be following the conversation quite well. I suggested that we find a new translator which upset John.

John always referred to Jarda as 'the Nazi who drinks snake's blood,' which was perhaps not as insulting as it sounded because the snake's blood reference was a reference to an actual drink that Jarda drank, and it was a Chinese thing which actually contained snake's blood, but it was still pretty insulting. Nobody uses Nazi as a compliment.

He said changing translators was out of the question. I told him I would not continue with the guy we were using and turned to the secretary and asked her in English if she could do the job. At first she refused and said that she was not capable. The Chinese are very humble that way but I imagine even in the West a secretary might have responded with the same self-deprecation, being suddenly forced into the hot seat like that, but I insisted and she was given the job.

They gave me a contract which was complete garbage because of the poor English. When I pointed this out they asked me to correct it. I refused and told them only a lawyer could do the job properly. We took an hour break and I went out on the street to find some kids to entertain.

When I returned they tried to fool me with a tour of some empty buildings. I was not impressed. When it was all over the young secretary thanked me for giving her an opportunity to use her skills. I made a report to Standa back in the Czech Republic but that was the end of it.

Another Czech businessman arrived with kind of sparkling juice that's very popular there; it is champagne for children. He had managed to get a \$200,000 down payment. We went on a trip to visit the special farming research center. I spoke about my organic farming experience. They offered me a job, but I couldn't just leave John in the middle.

I was at home at the villa early one evening when that businessman walked in and said "Come out, you've got to see this." We walked out into the street where we noticed a lot of people talking excitedly and some were shouting and dancing for joy.

It was September 11th, 2001.

While all of the Chinese I actually talked to about it were sympathetic, and spoke of what a horrible tragedy it was, I'd seen the street reaction. America is Rome. People speak of it glowingly and talk about how much they'd like to go there, and they would. But, they resent America's political power, its influence, and its domination of the rest of the world. They didn't mind seeing us get kicked in the balls.

I got into trouble with John when I made a phone call to the woman who had been an interpreter at the center. I was not to initiate any action on my own. I was so bored in the villa that I started taking strolls in the evening. I came across a street restaurant which only showed up, Brigadoon like, for six hours each night, and made friends with the owner, a generous, outgoing, middle-aged man. We had no common language but it didn't matter. He gave me free beers and barbecued fish each night. He even offered me money at times. I did not know why and did not take it. John frowned on this, too, and told me it was dangerous to be out at night.

Lady had another villa next door and it was rented to a man named Mr. Dong, who sold hardware, tools, pipes, stuff like that. He invited me to a rock club for an evening out. Upstairs was a show with Chinese opera. Women screamed in the highest voices. Mr. Dong offered to hire a woman to sit with me. I found that very strange and declined.

When I went downstairs to the main dance floor I found girls standing in place wagging their heads back and forth to some techno music. I showboated and created a big stir. Back upstairs they invited me to come onstage and compete in a dance contest. I did, and took 1st place with no problem, winning a bottle of plum wine. Again, no English, just mime. Maybe I actually succeed better like that.

One day there was a lot of commotion and I was asked to stay in my room. Many boxes were moved in. Later, when John was away, his father invited me into his room to have a look. There were hundreds of chariots and soldiers made from bronze. They were stolen antiques and John was visibly upset when he found out I had seen them.

I offered to take them back to Prague and sell them, but they didn't trust me enough for that.

Mr. Dong decided to buy me a prostitute; it's a very common thing to do for a client in China. My ego was saying no, I could never stoop so low, but my head was saying 'yes, when in China do what the Chinese do,' so my dick had the deciding vote and I went along, with some reluctance.

As I'd expected, I didn't enjoy it much, because part of the pleasure for me is an empathetic connection, seeing that the girl is enjoying herself which gives me a feeling of power, but also of worth, self-validation. Then Mr. Dong got me a second prostitute and, trying to get her to enjoy the experience as much as me, I moved to go down on her but she pulled me back up and said "no, no, no" which I took for simple shyness so I persisted but there was a horrible taste from some chemical douche she'd been using, bitter and unnatural. So I stopped and she looked at me as if to say "I tried to warn you, dude."

Since I was staying in the Villa, away from the center of Xi'an, I did not even see the old fort wall for months. But I would get short glimpses of it as we drove by to meetings with the mayor of Xi'an.

Later we toured an old temple of Lu Tsu, where a wrinkly old Buddhist woman gave me a special, heartfelt blessing and made me feel at one with the universe and people of all generations and races.

I was very happy when they took me to the soya house restaurant where all meals were from soybeans, the food there was wonderful, and some nights we dined in a restaurant which had an orchestra playing Chinese classical music.

I had a 3 month ticket and eventually it was time to go. Things hadn't really worked out well between me and John. I said he owed me money, he said I owed him money because I hadn't fulfilled my duties, but since I didn't have any money to speak of, it was a wash. I took a train to Beijing and flew back home to Prague.

Chapter 42

Give people what they want, and they will give you what you need.
– Guru Sharab

I'd been gone three months but my life in the Czech Republic was waiting for me when I came back, faithful as a dog. I checked in with Gamal in Prague and Parivara in south Bohemia, where a strange incident occurred. Her youngest daughter, who was just a wee toddler when I'd first met them, was 11 and going on 18. I accidentally walked in while she was in the shower and tried to beat a hasty exit, but she shouted out "Jack!" and when I looked back, she flung the shower curtain wide and said "You like?"

I nearly fainted. It was springtime in her body, her breasts were blooming and they weren't that small, either. A downy patch of brown hair was starting to grow between her legs. I turned and fled, scared of the situation, but I had been treated to one of the most beautiful sights in the world and I knew it. I probably should have told Parivara about it at the time, though. Instead, I was so embarrassed I stayed away for two years.

I first met Lukáš (Loo kosh) on a hilltop outside of Chcibýty, doing some kind of a meditation. It was a beautiful moment.

He'd stopped smoking marijuana and was in the middle of breaking up with his girlfriend who was threatening to commit suicide and that was weird and painful and complicated for him because his father had committed suicide. He'd been a military man and shot himself after the fall of communism, as the rest of the country reveled in its newfound freedom.

Lukáš lived with his mother, in a small village near Brno, and I went and stayed with them for awhile. He accepted me as a Guru right away. His mother was not so impressed, but she humored me.

I got a call from my friend Damian, who asked us to come up and help out with a project. I knew Damian from the time of the cabaret at Oswald's; he was a very creative guy. He and some friends had gotten hold of a derelict old building in Podbaba, an abandoned theater. The plan was to turn it into a pub. Well, at least a place where all of their friends could get together and drink, just like a pub, and throw big parties. They were all living together in a big house nearby.

Podbaba is lovely neighborhood right at the northern tip of Prague, popular with bicyclists and joggers because it lies along the Vltava River as it flows out of town, the atmosphere is tranquil and the scenery is gorgeous. The building had peeling plaster, no glass in the windows and lots of trash tangled up and hidden in the weeds, tall grasses and tangled blackberry bushes. I took a look at the yard and despaired, but their solution was brilliantly Czech and extremely effective. A keg was rolled out. A small lawn table with plastic cups was set up. Within a half an hour, we had 30 or 40 volunteers. I don't know where they came from; they just suddenly appeared, from out of the trees, like magic. We cleaned the place up in no time, and Damian, Anton, Gunther, Ludmila, and Gandalf – that was a nickname just because he looked like Gandalf – moved in.

It was Lukáš' idea that we take a trip to Egypt, which we did. We booked a cheap flight, landed in Cairo, found a hotel for only 3 bucks a day, and spent a couple of days seeing the Pyramids, riding a camel, walking through Khan e Khalili market, stuff like that.

Cairo was the worst city I'd ever seen. The traffic was almost as mad as in China, it was filthy, there were mobs of poor boys following you everywhere and trying to sell you things you didn't want and services you didn't need. A shoeshine is a fine thing but really rather a silly suggestion when you are wearing sneakers.

At one point Lukáš turned to me and said "Where are all the women?" I looked around and didn't see a one. We decided to stay there on that corner and wait until a woman walked by, and we were there over an hour. Unbelievable.

Then, we took a bus to Dahab, across the vast emptiness of the desert, and at one point the bus had to stop because we were surrounded by a herd of wild camels crossing the road.

One thing you can say for the Egyptians, they are always ready to talk to anybody, they're just like me like that, and when they found out I was American they were thrilled that I was there because it was a time of high tensions and American tourists, who are usually there in droves, were staying away in droves.

The Egyptians were hurt by this, both financially and personally, because in

the Arab world business is a very personal matter indeed, usually conducted over a cup of tea and with a whole lot of conversational preamble.

Nobody would sell us any drugs but they were eager to talk and when they found out I was not exactly supportive of the American government we developed a bit of a rapport, as we walked along the beach all the boys waiting tables in all the restaurants in front of the hotels would chant “Bin Bin Bin Bin Bin Bin Bin Bin” and I would raise up my hand in something between a wave and a salute and call back “Laaaaden, Laaaaaaden.” I’m not really political, but it was fun, it was a bonding moment, and we got invited into one restaurant where they gave us free tea and told us if we wanted to buy hash we would have to head up the beach to the north where the Bedouins lived. So we walked that way.

Dahab is a secure area, because of the terrorist threat probably, but when we’d come through by bus we’d barely noticed the checkpoint and now we just walked through it as well.

A mile or so up the beach was like walking back a century in time. The glitzy hotels disappeared and we wound up in a village. Well, even village is a generous description, it was a collection of four or five houses, and houses would be a generous description. Walls and roofs were made of reeds, they let in the light and flies but provided a bit of shade. Bits of beach rubbish and blankets made for furniture and extensions.

We made friends with a one legged Egyptian who invited us in for a dinner of fried eggs and tomatoes, covered with flies, but he was happy to share it with his foreign guests and we appreciated it, sitting there in the sand with his wooden leg beside us. Eggs and tomatoes, covered with flies, that was the standard fare in the village. Of course they were serving nicer to the tourists at the resort, and little Bedouin kids were wading into the sea and finding Octopi on the rocks, which they’d sell at the hotels.

His friend came by shortly, an old Bedouin with an infant’s face, smiling, bald and toothless, and he spoke a bit more English than the Egyptian, but it was still next to nothing. The Egyptian guy loved opium, said he smoked it all the time, and his old Bedouin friend was into it, too. He offered to let us sleep at his place and said he would take us to an oasis the next day, which sounded nice. We set off in the morning with the old Bedouin and his camel and we thought at some point we were going to ride but, no, we

were walking, the camel was walking, it was like taking a dog out for a walk, I guess, and after about 45 minutes the old man suddenly leaned down and started digging in the sand and he pulled out a box with some old, hard bread and a plastic bottle with water. The camel got a bit stroppy at that point but I managed to calm him down, my experience with horses came in handy.

We carried on to the oasis which, like the Bedouin village, was much less of a thing than I'd thought it would be and the old guy told me to go look for firewood, so I did, although prospects looked pretty thin. I was lost almost as soon as I was out of sight over the first dune and sort of freaked out a bit, the desert is as vast as the sea when you have no point of reference. In the end, I was only gone about ten minutes and came back with a handful of sticks and they had no idea how traumatized I was and Lukáš offered me a hit of acid and I said "No way, are you fucking crazy" because the concept of slowly dying of thirst and being eaten by vultures was still very much in my mind, but the old Bedouin guy leaned over and said "Hey, hey" and pointed to his mouth so he and Lukáš did the acid.

The next morning he gave us a whole bunch of marijuana to take back to Dahab and sell, he said he'd meet us at the big rock just outside the village in two days time at about noon. Incredibly trusting. It was full of seeds and twigs so we had to spend an hour or two cleaning it up and then we took it back into Dahab, once again walking right through the military checkpost.

We found buyers right away, two Egyptian kids who paid us cash for the lot, and spent a pleasant time lounging on the beach and drinking tea. I bought a bedouin veil from a woman selling stuff on the beach, that was the only souvenir I brought back from Egypt. So much of the stuff in the shops was just junk and kitsch for tourists, not like China at all. China was calling me home and the idea of an antique export business was growing in my mind.

On the morning we went back to the village up the beach they totally took us apart at the checkpoint; made us strip and looked through every bag and pocket, but we'd disposed of the drugs so we were laughing.

When I found out later what the penalty for drugs is in Egypt (death, by hanging) I nearly shit myself. This was one case where ignorance was definitely bliss.

We got to the rock but the old man wasn't there, so we walked on into the village and found him, he wasn't worried at all. We gave him his part of the profits and we also left a bit of money for the old Egyptian guy because while we had been away someone had stolen his wooden leg.

Once again we walked back to Dahab, this time to catch a bus back to Cairo and the airport.

Chapter 43

Things that begin at 3 a.m. do not begin well – Guru Sharab

Vladislav, a friend from Pension California, woke me up early one morning in winter and asked me to go fishing with him and his friend Hugo.

“If he has money for gas, why not?” I thought, so we headed out while it was still dark, but what light there was was glowing on the screen of snow which covered the ground like sand covers the desert. I started to get suspicious when we were still driving after two hours. We parked in some kind of a nature reserve and carried in plastic crates with no fishing poles. Now I knew something was wrong.

They told me to stand guard and let them know if anybody was coming. I hunkered down but I was not happy with the situation. This was not the idyllic, dangling our poles in the river, looking at the ducks and waiting for the dawn’s sweet light to slowly wash over us experience I had imagined. I did not feel like Huckleberry Finn.

Then I saw the fish farm. Vladislav and Hugo took hold of the fishing nets that were there on the side of the ponds and started to harvest loads of carp and trout. I could see a light on in the small guardhouse in the distance.

I got more and more nervous as I waited, thinking about the consequences for me if we were caught since I already had a criminal record. Also, we’d smoked a big, fat joint along the way and that certainly added to my paranoia.

We carried two 50 kilo crates of fish to the van but they were not satisfied. They headed back for more, ignoring my pleas to leave. I didn’t go back with them; I just stayed with the van and sweated it out.

When they returned with another 50 kilos I was in such a hurry to leave that I burst my rear tire running into a rock on a curve. It lost all its air and I just managed to get the van outside of the entrance to the fish farm. I had no spare.

It was still only about 5 a.m. and dark. Vladislav suggested that he go back and steal a wheel from a VW van he remembered seeing parked in the fish farm. I vetoed that idea on the spot. After removing my flat tire I got out

a cane that I had in the van and stuck out my thumb to hitchhike. The cane prop worked its magic and the first car picked me up. I traveled with the wheel to a nearby town where I managed to get it fixed. Then I hitched back to the van. The boys were quite impressed that I had managed all that by myself, with my very limited Czech and a whole hell of a lot of sign language.

With the VW back on the road, we drove to Prague and divided up the fish. I had decided to take my share to Zlín and give it to all my friends there. But the fish had been out of water for a long time now and I had to hurry. As I sped down the main highway from Prague to Brno I was, as usual, traveling without the required freeway sticker. I know that the penalty for a foreign car without a sticker was over \$100 but, so far, I had never been caught.

First time for everything. I came across a line of police cars and they pulled me over with many other violators. I told them in my broken Czech, with lots of over the top hand gestures, that my wife was having a baby in Brno and that I was trying to get to the hospital on time. They didn't buy it and told me to wait while they processed my offense. I started to plead and cry at the same time and in five minutes the kind hearted police were waving me along.

My tears turned to laughter. I'd managed to evade another traffic penalty! I deserved an academy award for that performance. When I got to Zlín, luckily, the fish were still fresh and I distributed them to Bijali and four other families.

I went back up to Prague, spent some time at El Sombrero, argued with Vesely over money, and then it was Spring and I could feel the call of the Orient, pulling me toward the rising sun.

Chapter 44

Faces in the crowd are like flowers in the meadow. Their beauty is not diminished by their number – Guru Sharab

Once again, Vesely provided the tickets, dribbling out the largesse in terms of travel bonuses instead of paying what he actually owed me, but he screwed up a bit and Lukáš went on the appointed day but I had to wait for the next flight, which was a few days later.

I was worried about Lukáš, innocent, wide eyed, inexperienced Lukáš but he handled himself brilliantly. He hooked up with some other travelers and had a week of sight seeing before I arrived and we went to Xi'an. We stayed one night at the Villa with Lady, but she didn't want us there for longer.

So, we got an apartment in a hutong. Hutong might be translated as 'alley' or 'lane,' but maybe also possibly as 'neighborhood' or 'community.' There's a lot going on in any given hutong. Each has a name. Each has a history. It was really primitive, a hard core look at life in China, the urinal smelled so powerfully of ammonia that you had to hold your head outside it just to breathe and not pass out. We stayed there about a month and then Lukáš went home.

Lady's lawyer, Mr. Wu, liked me because John didn't, so he found me a job in a juice company. It was a state company. The president was a young man with no English. I was introduced to the secretary, a young man named Carey who they said would take care of all my needs. Many of the Chinese used English names. It was easier that way.

I was only to receive a commission on goods I sold. I asked for a telephone, fax, and internet. I found, once again, that there was no paper in the washroom.

My internet connection was very slow. I asked about it but was told that Chinese do not complain when things don't work as they should. "Just wait," they said. I never got a phone. But it was an interesting place to work and I got a good lunch every day.

I met a bunch of people from the University because they had a thing going on called The English Corner, which was basically just a study group. It

was mostly girls, doll like little college girls with glistening black hair. Elizabeth, who seemed to be the leader of their group, introduced me to the man who was actually running the operation, and he set me up with a better place to stay in return for teaching a bit of English. It wasn't much, but it beat the hell out of the toxic urinal where I'd been living.

I had no shower there but had noticed that there was one at work. I asked the president if it would be O.K. for me to use it. "Yes," he said, but I could see the idea made him nervous. "But only before or after work," he added quickly.

That was fine with me. Carey kept telling me about Chinese tradition. I told him I was an international trader trying to bring modern business ideas into the company. I noticed that he was the troubleshooter in the company; he seemed to be doing everybody's job. He worked seven days a week, unlike the others. He told me that he also had no shower at home. One day I suggested to the president, through him, that he be allowed to use the one in the office. Carey did not get the O.K. to do so but he was impressed that I would stick up for him.

I continued to use the shower, but now I felt a bit guilty about it.

While working there, I got to know Mr. Sun. He was the local communist party vice president. He encouraged me to have a nap at noon each day right there in the office. "Good sleep. Good work," he would say.

One day he pointed out the insignia of an English football team. He told me that the president had become their sponsor. The amount of money was substantial, and I suddenly realized that I could save the company!

I asked for a meeting with the president and he was hyper-defensive. With Carey translating, I managed to ask him what exactly the company would get for their sponsorship and he explained that the company's name would be printed on the team's shirts. But it was just the name. There was no clear connection to juice. He told me that there would be a big sign in the stadium showing more information about our company. He told me the football team's president would try to help us find the right connections to penetrate the English market.

Since we were a wholesaler, what we really needed to do was to connect

with a few exclusive buyers of concentrate. We had no idea if those people even liked soccer. I told the president this, with Carey translating. I have no idea how literally he was translating. I was sure I could use the sponsorship money to directly court the buyers we needed to reach. He thanked me, but dismissed me without any real answers.

After mulling it over for a few days, I went to the second vice president, a woman in her 40s. She spoke English. I told her I needed to speak to her in private. There were 10 desks just outside her door and I did not want to cause problems for the president among his own people.

She told me she could not close the door. It would not be correct. I ask her what she did when she wanted to speak in private. She told me such conversations are moved to the conference room. I asked if it was possible for us to go there. She said sorry, it is busy at the moment but encouraged me to just proceed. I lost all patience and went on a bit of a rant about how the president was flushing maybe half a million dollars down the toilet. She listened politely but I could see she was upset that I would criticize the boss. She promised to look into it and I was dismissed.

I don't know if they went ahead with the sponsorship deal in the end, because I was fired the next day. Actually, I was relieved and happy to be gone. I would miss the free lunch, but that was about it. Carey thanked me and asked that I keep him in mind if I needed a secretary in any future businesses. I went to the cafeteria for one more lunch and as I stood in line I overheard someone saying, in English, "Our president flushes half a million dollars down the toilet".

I met a girl named Jennifer at the English Corner, and she started up a café she called The English Lounge. They served drinks and light snacks and people could come in and learn English. Her English was good enough to do simultaneous translation. Jennifer was smart, and ambitious. She had a two year old son, and an abusive husband she wanted to get away from. We flirted, but that was a lot more trouble than I wanted to deal with.

They fired me from the English Lounge, not so much because I'd rejected Jennifer, just because I was crazy, I understand that. I went behind the bar to get my favorite CD that I'd loaned them, Lynyrd Skynyrd's greatest hits, and a bartender grabbed me by the shirt and threatened to break a beer bottle over my head. Everybody in the room froze, conversations died on

the lips, but it didn't look like anyone was going to interfere, the Chinese are the world's greatest innocent bystanders who don't want to get involved but eventually, into that still, frozen moment, one girl shouted "Stop!" and I was saved. He gave me the CD and I left.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth from the English Corner had started her own business, the London Language School, and she wrote me up a six month contract. She told everybody I was the president, partly because she thought an American owner would give it more credibility, and partly just because I'm a man and China is backward that way.

I told her she should say she was the president and she should emphasize the fact that her own child was in the school, but she wouldn't hear of it. I was the president, even though my job consisted mostly of handing out fliers, which I do do with a great deal of flair, I must admit.

Chapter 45

“Dance, when you’re broken open. Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you’re perfectly free.” — Rumi

The people you are next to are the people you are with – Guru Sharab

Dubai might have the tallest building, Las Vegas the brightest lights and New York City the world’s rudest cab drivers, but what Shanghai has is the sharpest damned division between the modern world and the third world, anywhere in the whole world. On one side of the street you’ve got The Bund, the area near the port, where the English ruled from the 1840s or so up to the beginning of World War Two. It’s a land of gleaming skyscrapers and well dressed people equipped with all the most modern devices.

Just across the street you’ve got the old city, the “Chinese City” of tiny, tangled streets, street markets, and millions and millions of people sweating, hustling, and doing everything they can to make a living. It’s not as neat, but I wouldn’t say it’s less beautiful. There are people from all the far flung regions of China living there. They have come from their ancient villages to make a better life for themselves, but The Bund is still a foreign land to them.

This is how I came to be there. One day, while I was still working at London Language School, which was on an upper floor of about a 15 story building, I was in the elevator when a well dressed Chinese guy got in. He was probably in his young 20s. When he opened his mouth, perfect English came out, with a bit of a Texas accent, which only made it more perfect. It was only “good morning” but you can tell. A foreigner may learn all the words, and study the grammar, but there’s something in the voice.

It felt strange and good after having not heard the pure sounds of my native language for so long. It never takes me long to strike up a conversation and that was easily enough of an opener for me. John Taylor called himself a banana. That is, yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Although he was Chinese, China was only slightly less foreign to him than to me. He did not speak the language. He worked for an export company a few floors above us in the same building.

He was an innocent looking guy, so I was a bit surprised to hear his tale. He'd gotten into a bit of a pickle with the law in Texas; drugs, of course, it's always drugs. His Dad had packed him off to China, because even the long arm of the law doesn't reach that far, and probably Dad was hoping that a bit of time in the old country would straighten him out.

John told me about his new love in Shanghai and encouraged me to check that city out for business. So, I took his advice and got on a train. The first night I stayed at the historic Peace Hotel – well, actually it was the Peace Hotel Hostel, but they were connected - on the Bund. Albert Einstein, Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant had stayed there. Now they had Jack Pazzo.

I met a guy named Mohammed, he was French and Moroccan, and we hit it off straight away. As we were talking a young American joined us. I unconsciously put a toenail I had just pulled off into my mouth to chew on, as I do sometimes. He freaked out and when he found out that I had sneaked into the hostel without paying, he told Mohammed that he should avoid me. It may have been well intended advice, but fuck him. Mohammed paid him no attention and lent me his sleeping bag to sleep on the floor.

The next day I set out on a random stroll in the city, because when you're traveling you can stick to a guide book if you like but you're likely to get lost and frustrated anyway so it just seems better to me to go ahead and get lost deliberately, you are where you are, we are all alone together on the surface of the planet and the people you are next to are the people you are with. This time I wound up by accident in the antique district. There, on the corner in front of her antique shop, I caught my first glimpse of Wang Bo.

She was doing what she called her inside/outside. She would bring half of her goods out to the sidewalk every morning and carry them back inside at night. 365 days a year.

She was taller than the average Chinese woman, and had bigger breasts, but was still very skinny. She wore her hair up, in a big, lacquered bun on top of her head. She was wearing white hose. Her face was not typically Chinese. She had a cute, little pug nose and her skin was more of a dark tan than typical Chinese pale hue. Other Chinese did not think she was pretty but I thought she was the most exotic person I'd ever seen of any race, age, or gender. It was love at first sight.

She told me she was single and lived with her sister. She was lying, of course, but I wouldn't find that out until later. I loved her simple way of talking.

It only took a few days for me to decide that I was moving to Shanghai. I went back to Xi'an to tell Elizabeth. I expected her to be angry, maybe even to feel a bit betrayed because she had been so kind to me, and I was ending my six month commitment after only two months, but she was totally supportive, and offered to help me with contacts in Shanghai.

I said goodbye to John and thanked him for pointing me in the right direction. He said I'd probably see him in Shanghai soon, because his marriage to the girl there had already been agreed to.

In the first days back in Shanghai I made friends with Dawa, a short stocky Tibetan woman in her forties, full of joy and laughter. She sold her tribal wares in Yu Garden, and rented a small storefront in the old town. Dawa lived with two young girls, fellow Tibetans, who worked for her. She invited me to stay with them. There I was introduced to sharp, sour tasting Tibetan food. I would make love to Bo for the first time in that flat. The Tibetan girls saw us and laughed.

Wang Bo was obviously excited to see me back and we quickly became good friends. After a day or two, after the first of many, many dinners, she introduced me to Shanghai ballroom dancing. The dancing was held each morning, noon, and night for two hours on the top floor of a deserted high rise building in the old district. There were lots of old ballrooms just like it located throughout the city. It would have been a death trap if fire ever broke out, since everybody depended on one elevator to leave the building but the wooden floor and crystal chandeliers still held their old time ambiance. Tiny colored lights were everywhere.

It was a carnival atmosphere. The Chinese do a sort of racecourse dancing, three steps right, three left in one continuous direction, with fourteen other styles mixed in randomly. Most drank tea, which was included in the price of admission, only about 50 cents. Actually, for most Chinese, that was probably not so cheap.

There was smoking everywhere, even on the dance floor. We looked like fireflies in a fog. There were 'No Smoking' signs everywhere, too. China

is weird like that. It is oppressed and repressed, but anarchy breaks out in weird ways and signs on the wall and all visible traffic regulations get ignored entirely. China is free! Three girls or two boys danced together, no problem. Some even came in their pajamas.

Along with the traditional Chinese music they played some country western music and Simon and Garfunkel's "El Condor Pasa." An old man with a cigarette dangling from his lip asked me to slow dance. I declined... gracefully, I hope. As we danced I put my hand on Bo's breast, and felt her big, hard nipples for the first time. "I like" is all she said.

Bo and I started a daily ritual of cheap clothes shopping, dinner at a restaurant, and dancing. She was spoiling me so badly that she even pulled my socks up. I still had a lot to learn about China.

We needed a place to have sex and Bo found a sleazy cafe of intimate booths near the Bund. For \$5 you got drinks, treats, tissues, and were left alone. It was exciting until one day a rat ran over my legs as I knelt on the floor eating Bo's pussy. That put me off the place, but not the whole experience, of course.

She called it the 'lick lick' and she loved it. She was used to the old up and down, missionary style, five minutes of a guy pumping up and down like a merry go round horse and then it was all over.

When she experienced her first clitoral orgasms she said "I feel so good! Why I feel so good? Why I feel so good?" over and over again in a childish voice.

Bo lived in one of the old Hutongs just across the street from her shop in Dong Tai Lu market in the old French Concession District. It was a rickety, wooden building with communal kitchens, communal washrooms, and the tiniest staircase I'd ever seen. When I saw the furniture she had upstairs, full sized furniture, I was amazed.

"How did you carry that stuff up here?!"

It turned out everything had been taken to pieces and moved up the stairs separately, and then reassembled. Things in China were built to be taken apart easily.

Dong Tai Lu market was a madhouse, a smorgasbord of sights, sounds, smells and experiences. Something was going on all the time. Goods were delivered by bicycle, sometimes even by tricycle. ‘Night soil’ collectors would come each morning to empty the pails of shit. I wondered what that was all about.

It was a fully contained, naturally ecological enterprise. In the communal toilet, five gallon plastic containers were left out to piss in. Every 3 or 4 hours a man would arrive on a tricycle to collect the urine. It was used in natural medicine for women, so I was told.

It was a human beehive, a trading hub for people from all over China. There were the Miao from the Southern Mountains; lovely, petite women in long, flowing dresses. I heard you could tell what village they were from by the colors and the patterns, but I don’t know about that.

There were the Uighurs from the West; half white, half Asian and 100% Muslim. There were the Oirats and Boirats of the North, and the Tuvans with their weird way of singing from the throat, producing a totally non-human sound.

There was a food market with every animal from birds to snakes and dogs, lined up and waiting to become your dinner. The dogs were half carved up but, mercifully, already dead. The snakes and birds were accorded no such dignity. The snakes were killed and skinned on the spot, and the live baby quails, defeathered up to their necks, stood there in boxes waiting to die. I don’t know if they knew. I don’t know that I want to know if they knew. Barbers would set up a chair on the curb and do their job in the great outdoors while the traffic whizzed past. There were even street dentists. Bo would argue with the same people every night over a half of a penny. It was all right there in your face. People there live for the day.

One day while walking back to Bo’s I heard a little girl, probably about four years old, standing next to her mother who was hacking vegetables. She was screaming as loud as she could, which was pretty darned loud, and high, it was a chalk on the chalkboard moment. What shocked me was that nobody was paying any attention to her. The already noisy street just incorporated her tantrum with ease. So, I squatted down and started screaming right with her. People noticed that all right, but after a few seconds the child calmed down. And I walked on.

Traffic was always a mess in the market. I noticed how some country farmers would take up positions in the middle of the street, blocking the way so merchants could not get through to their shops with their bicycle trucks. One day I was there with a whistle and I just took over. They accepted my authority and retreated. The clot was cleared. Traffic was flowing. I stopped by about ten minutes later and it was back to normal, clotted and contentious.

Wang Bo had gotten rich selling to American tourists. They would always look, because they were tourists and that's what tourists do, tourists look, and BAM! "Hello! You say how much!" Then it was off to the races, and most westerners bargain very badly.

With the Chinese, though, she would argue for every half penny, for as long as they could keep it up, even though she was richer than most of them. We dined on fish soup with seaweed and greens, tofu, eggplant, oh my god eggplant, the Chinese cook eggplant in ways that Westerners have never imagined, with fresh mangoes and pineapple for dessert.

I wanted to make myself useful. I was not used to being just a sex toy, so I started dusting and washing some of the goods. She yelled at me for that. "In China dirty very good... is old!" She would even leave scroll paintings out in the rain to make them look old.

Every day a short man of about forty would come to help around the shop. He was very friendly to me although he had no English. Bo called him "Small Man". He worked for her, she said. There was also a fourteen year old boy who would pop in frequently to use the computer. Bo called him "Small Boy". He was a neighbor, she told me.

Bo had simple names for everybody. The man who showed up every morning and evening to help with the carrying was "Grandpa." He'd worked for her for ten years, and she didn't know his real name!

Across the street from Bo's shop was a thirty something man from western China. His name was Bingwen. He worked from a small cart on the corner fixing flat bicycle tires every day for as little as 10 cents. He had moved into Shanghai to get his two children, one boy and one girl, an education. Lots of ethnic groups, from out in the boondocks, had exemptions to the one

child policy.

The family lived in a small room next to Bo's with only one bed and a TV set. No toys in view at all, just books. There were few toys for poor Chinese kids. Not even balls to kick around.

Outside Bo's shop was a western style trash bin with its top taped shut. I opened it one day when I needed to throw some garbage away. Bingwen's wife came over and explained in sign language that all trash belonged on the curb where the street sweepers simply swept it up with their broad rhythmic strokes. I was only making more work for them by using the bin - silly western invention!

As it was when I'd been in Belgrade, and then in Starý Hrad, here I was king! Westerners in Shanghai were not an uncommon site, if you were in the Bund, but once you crossed that avenue and got into the tangled warren of the Chinese City, my face was a white dot in an Asian sea.

I made friends with a fifty year old man named Samuel, who lived with his mother even though he was rich and had a modern apartment. His mother wouldn't move in with him so as an honorable son, he slept at her place.

Bo took me to a hairdresser. I had talked her into letting her hair down, because I was tired of getting whipped in the face on the dance floor with that big, plastic bun. They give me a haircut and total face shave including my eyelids with straight edge razor and hot towels. It was very scary the first time but I came to love it and only a dollar! For the first time in my life, going for a haircut became something I would do for fun, and not just as routine maintenance.

I had gotten Bo to abandon her white stockings for black ones. I taught her about my culture as she taught me about hers. "In China white skin very good" ' she said. I explained how western girls go to the tanning spa to be dark. She saw an African one day and remarked "He dirty."

"No" I said, "He take a bath." She wasn't buying it.

"In China jealous very good," she said. So I pretended to be jealous. She liked that.

After a few weeks it became obvious to me that some things did not add up. Bo was racing home to make a meal for her sister every evening before we went out for dinner! And, I never saw her sister. I was never invited into her apartment. When I got there in the early morning, I found two pairs of men's shoes at the door and only one of a woman's. When I confronted her about this, she leveled with me. Small Man was her husband and Small Boy was her son! Then she told me her true story.

Just a year before, she had caught her husband making love to his niece in the back of the warehouse. Not only was he cheating on her but there was the whole incest thing, which is strongly taboo in China.

She went to Small Man's brother and told him about it. That was a mistake. He told the whole family what she'd said, but nobody wanted to accept it. Face, you know. Four men, brothers and cousins-in-law, ambushed her in an alley and beat her nearly to death.

She went to her mother's home over the river in Pudong to heal. It took more than a month. Small Man begged, and then demanded she come back. He was losing money without her!

She missed her shop, the only life she had ever known, so she returned. Even though they slept in the same bed she would never make love to him again, or at least that's what she told me and I believed her. She wanted a divorce and could easily have gotten one due to the circumstances, but he threatened to kill her if she did. Then I came along.

Small Man was actually relieved that I had entered the picture at first. It meant that he had more freedom to pursue his young girls and I am sure he hoped that I would make him some money along the line. When I asked Bo why she had lied to me she simply said "Sorry, sorry, sorry, I very love you."

After a few weeks she found me a small room with just a bed on the third floor of a building in a hutong in the old town, with a carry out toilet like everybody else. I liked it! The rent was only \$30 a month.

John Taylor had moved down to Shanghai and contacted me. He needed my help because he wanted a job at a language school, teaching English. They weren't satisfied with his American passport or his life story. Chinese

on the street knew he was American as soon as he opened his mouth, so he wasn't really accepted as Chinese, but the school looked at him and couldn't accept him as American, because he was Chinese. He had to bring in his token white American, i.e. me, to convince them.

He got along with Wang Bo right away.

I saw that a young man lived on the floor below me. I figured he was quite a ladies' man because every night I heard what sounded like three girls giggling below me. But whenever I passed by in the morning he was always alone. Finally, through an interpreter, I asked him about it. To my amazement I found out that three young country girls lived in a small crawl space between our floors. It was only 4 feet high.

I played at Bo's shop in the day. She had lots of props. I would put on a Communist cap and play a trumpet or don an emperor's helmet and wield a sword. It was so much fun to play in the streets of Shanghai.

Caleb came over and joined me in my theater. I may not have always been a perfect father, certainly I've been a bit erratic as a role model, but I've given my kids exposure to the big, wide world and that's not something all American children get.

I was out performing in front of the shop one sunny afternoon when a local man walked up to me and said, with many very obvious gestures, that I should not make so much noise. He said something about it being against the law. Loudness against the law in Shanghai! He had to be kidding. The streets were like a circus. I checked with a Chinese friend and he just laughed. Of course, that was absurd. Still, I did try to tone it down a bit after that.

People would come every day to sell some second hand goods. Small Man would offer them pennies on the dollar, so to speak. To my delight some of these goods arrived on tricycles. They would get rid of their goods (Small Man was well aware they needed to jettison their cargo) and then pick up the buckets of urine from the public restrooms.

The kitchens and washrooms in the hutongs were communal, which was fine for an old Hippie idealist like me, I felt I had discovered a hidden Utopia, a Shangri-La of the slums, and I felt right at home. The locals did not share,

or understand, my enthusiasm. They wanted a nice, private bathroom and a kitchen, just like the western world.

When I got bored I would venture over to the nearby mall and enjoy the electric massage chair for free. It was a mall of luxury shops but very poorly frequented, so I was a welcome change for the young girls working there and I helped them with their English. I took Wang Bo there one day and was stunned to find I had to coax her onto the escalator. She was terrified! It was as if I was asking her to stick her hand into a spinning motor. It was her first time, not only on an escalator, but even inside the mall, which was just one block from her store. It was work 365 days a year for Bo.

Back in old town I would sit with the footless beggar on the street. He shared his food with me and felt honored by my presence. He never would accept money from me. I begged with him and people thought it comical and gave me money, which I gave to him.

I will always remember one young girl with a horribly burned face. I felt so guilty that I didn't give her a coin one day that I looked for her many days after. It was as futile as looking for a four leaf clover-so many are so close that every few seconds you think you've found the one, but no.

Another day I was on the bus and saw a man in the middle of the street, traffic whizzing all around him. I got off at the next stop and walked back. He was as blind as a wall and no matter how many people honked at him or yelled at him, he couldn't get out of the middle of the street. So, I steered him to the side of the street and then bought him a soup with dumplings. He was so grateful he cried.

The most amazing sight of all, though, had to be a young boy, probably around 13, with no arms or legs. Using his stumps he managed to move along on a board with wheels.

I loved the steamed wheat cart that came by in the evening. I was getting free tea all day long in old town. Tea merchants would accost me in the street and say "Why you no stop for free tea today?" Their business picked up whenever I was present, just because of curiosity.

In China, it is customary to give large wreaths to friends who are starting a new shop much like those that we in the west give at funerals. One day at

the mall I just took one of the stands of flowers and walked away with it. As I approached the mall exit I was greeted by the security man. Be cool, Jack, be cool. Instead of asking me about it, he simply held the door open! I took them to Wang Bo. She said thank you, all girls like getting flowers, but I noticed she put them into the garbage just a few minutes later. What do you do with flowers? Ping was plain practical.

When I had enough of the massage chair I would head over to the local bath house. There I could get a steam bath for a dollar but I soon discovered the lounge area upstairs and had fun entertaining the prostitutes and massage girls. I would offer them massages and just giggle with them, mostly in sign language.

Bo was very jealous because, to her, a massage meant sex and a massage parlor meant a whorehouse which, of course, it was, but that's not what I was there for. I wasn't paying and I was the one offering the massages. Such bath houses were common. Masturbation is frowned upon, so often young boys would go to the bath house just to get a hand job, very low rates. I spent a lot of time explaining to the masseuses there that all I wanted was a good massage, without work on my penis.

I was concerned about Bo getting pregnant and asked her about protection. No problem, she said, and explained that she, like most women her age, had an IUD. But, she had had this device inside her since her son was born! I worried about her health. I advised her to have it removed, and she did, but then we had no protection. Later I would hear of a Chinese joke that the only recognizable object in the cremation ashes was that anti-conception device. I have never liked using a condom so I began early withdrawal.

I guess I was getting a bit complacent, a bit overconfident from having a run of plentiful sex, but I was only fooling around when I told Ping that in the U.S. women paid men for sex. Either she was playing along with the joke, or I'm better than I thought because she gave me 75 yuan, which is almost ten euros. The next time we had sex she rolled up the money and I looked at it later and it was half as much.

Bo's shop was at one end of the antique district so she had the advantage of first crack at anybody approaching from that direction, but there were a lot of freelancers setting up on the sidewalks, trying to steal the business right in front of her. I tried to shoo them away but Ping stopped me. "That no

Chinese way,” she said. She even let them use her phone. In return, they’d keep an eye on her shop when she needed to go to the toilet, even the most dedicated Chinese shopkeeper needs to do that some time, and everybody had an eye peeled for shoplifters, or unattended clients.

A plump, young Miao woman named Kiab actually had her own little corner in Bo’s shop. She sold the traditional clothing of the Miao tribe, plus silver goods and jewelry that she’d made herself. The Miao love silver. She wore the traditional dress, a walking advertisement for her way of life. She had a lovely smile and radiated sweetness and joy. I chased her around with my finger, just as I’d done with the girl in John’s office in Xi’an. She had the cutest little giggle I’ve ever heard in my life; funny, and heart breakingly sweet.

Bo took me to Pudong, the poor district just across the river, where she was from. We took a ferry. We were standing at the rail, looking back into the wake, seeing the water carved into a pattern, like the dirt kicked up either side of a plow, and then collapsing back into the sameness of the dark river. Water is a medium for meditation. She told me about how her brother had died. His friend had thrown his shoe into the river, just fooling around. He’d jumped in to save it, because a pair of shoes is not a cheap thing. He drowned.

The hutongs on that side were even more cramped than those in old town. We walked through a maze of small streets to find her mother’s small apartment. It was just one room with a small bedroom off to the side. Her brother lived upstairs with his wife and 13 year old daughter.

Bo had brought fruit for her mother and a carton of cigarettes for her father. Her mother was very sweet to me and made me tofu when she found out that I did not eat meat. There were plenty of vegetables and we ate from the same plates, typical Chinese style. I could see where Bo got her height. Her father was tall and skinny like her.

I learned that Small Boy had been raised, mostly, by Bo’s mother. Bo’s relationship to her son, therefore, was a bit more like a big sister than a mother.

This was the first time I was offered live baby shrimp. The shrimp were drunk from the alcohol that they were soaked in, so I guess they died happy.

They wiggled as Bo put them in her mouth. She sucked out their liquid innards and made a pile of their dead body shells next to her plate. I declined the invitation to try it.

They also were munching on chicken feet. This seemed odd to me, but there are health benefits. Collagen and calcium, for younger looking skin and stronger bones. Also good against arthritis and other forms of pain in the joints. For real.

Bo would eat every bone on her plate, even the head of a fish.

Chapter 46

The more people you know, the richer you are – Guru Sharab

Now that I knew the truth about Small Man things went a little easier at the shop. I tried to help business and make friends with many of the foreigners that came by. I was also learning the business from some of Bo's old customers. I tried to help Bo with her eBay site but we were never able to do much with it.

A new Chinese man my age, named John, now entered the scene. We called him Chinese John to differentiate from my friend John Taylor, the banana. Chinese John played the classical Chinese flute. He cooked fish soup for us and helped with communication between me and Ping and Small Man.

One day some Australians came by who were looking for furniture that we did not have. We sent Chinese John with them to Ningbo, a city about 2 hours away that is known for furniture shops, and gave him the name of our contact. He made the deal and found a shipper, because in China only specific shippers can export antiques.

Of course, we expected a tip for all our help in setting him up to succeed. After a week the dealer came by and asked us if we had received a part of the tip that she had given him. When I found out that he had kept all the money for himself I was upset, but Bo wasn't. She just said it was business, normal, not to worry.

As limited as Bo's English was, she was one of the few people I knew at that time who spoke any at all. Chinese John spoke it better, but I was still a bit ticked off at him, even if Bo wasn't. So, I was quite pleased when I met Jianwei, just while wandering around the market one day.

Jianwei was young, maybe 24 when I met him. He always, always wore a black suit and tie. He said he wanted help with his English and, in return, he would help me with the antique business. He and Bo hit it off together immediately and became very good friends.

Jianwei was a lot more Yin than Yang, if you know what I mean. With his slicked back, jet black hair and his sweet, round face, he was an Asian version of Dom deLuise. He would never admit to being gay, although it

was obvious to everyone around him. He was a virgin. Probably still is. When my daughter Cara came to visit, Jianwei became obsessed with her. It was not sexual, but rather aesthetic. He didn't want her, he just worshipped her. She, on the other hand, was totally creeped out.

When we met he had a bad habit of saying everything twice. It was driving me crazy. One day I told him that if he ever repeated a sentence twice again I would stop talking to him! He was cured instantly and never did it again. He would hang on my shoulder like a monkey which was common in Chinese culture but after I explained that it made me uncomfortable he quit that, too.

He shared some secrets of the antique business with me and let me know that the nice wooden pails I had been admiring were just common night soil buckets. Like the five gallon urine containers, people would empty their poop pots into these buckets and every day, people on bicycles would collect them and carry them out into the country, to be used as fertilizer. It's the reason Chinese vegetables are bigger, shinier and bursting with flavor. It's the cycle of life. It's also the reason they use a wok, apparently. It gets up to a seriously high heat and kills all the bacteria.

Jianwei treated me to many hot pot dinners. In a hot pot restaurant you sit around a wok full of boiling water and cook your choice of vegetable, meat, or fish. It comes with great sauces, some of which are fiercely spicy. The peanut sauce was my favorite.

I was shocked when I saw him mix his beer, orange juice and soy milk together. He was disgusted when he saw me blow my nose into a tissue at the table and directed me to blow it on the floor the proper Chinese way. All filth to the floor.

Jianwei was to become my business manager in China and he helped a lot with Bo, translating and such. He liked calling me master and bowing in the ancient style as we joked about him being my Chinese servant. It was a weird and unequal relationship, but that was an imbalance that Jianwei seemed to cling to.

He took me out to Xen Xao, several hours from Shanghai, to look for some antiques. On the way back, on an old bus, a very crowded old bus, Jianwei needed to pee. He asked the driver if he would stop and the driver said

no, no way. A couple minutes later, Jianwei worked his way over to the doorwell, unzipped his pants and peed against the door. Nobody said a word about it at the time. As we were leaving the bus, though, the driver asked Jianwei why he'd done that, and Jianwei told him that if I hadn't been there he wouldn't have. That didn't make any sense to me at all, but the driver seemed to understand.

Jianwei introduced me to his friend Mr. Wang, who was a successful, young antique merchant with two stores in the old town. Like Jianwei, he always wore suits. Unlike Jianwei, he had more than one. Wang would go out to discos with us and bring his girlfriend. His wife was home with two kids.

Bo had such a simple way of saying things. When she disagreed with you she just went "Pa" "Pa". I enjoyed learning the body language of the Chinese. I enjoyed learning the sound of Shanghaiwa, the dialect of Shanghai. Like New York and Paris, Shanghai has an accent which marks it as different from the rest of its country. Like New York and Paris, it is a harsh, more aggressive, less gracious accent than the language of which it is a part. Every discussion sounded like an argument to the untrained ear. Everybody talked at once. I found the accent very easy to mimic, even though I never did learn the language.

I was helping out at the shop one day when an American named Ben Michaels stopped in. He was a musician, about my age, with a recording company in Orlando. He was working with a Japanese company which did animation for American cartoons. He needed to ship some cartoon archives back home to Florida. He asked if I could arrange it, and include a pair of stone lions that he wanted to buy from Bo. I was happy to help him out and called the shipper who Chinese John had used, so in the end I guess that deal did work out to our advantage. Contacts are priceless.

Ben took us for a visit to the Yu garden, the world famous Yu Garden. It was a lovely afternoon; we had tea at the tea house over the pond, a reddish-brown wooden temple on stilts, reached by a zigzag wooden bridge, in the middle of a pond full of weird rock formations, surrounded by green. This was the beginning of a not so beautiful friendship.

Chinese John invited us out to a new dance hall, one early afternoon. Maybe he was trying to get back on our good side although Bo had never been mad at him and I was coming around to the view that I wasn't going to bear a

grudge if she wasn't. It was much fancier than the old death trap we'd gone to before, where they'd never had the fire I worried about, but they did have a murder. A jealous man had stabbed his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend. It can happen in the nicest places, but there it seemed only natural.

This place had crystal chandeliers and a live band. Famous Chinese singers would even pop in from time to time. I looked up at the large Chinese sign on the wall and knew it meant dancing just from its shape. Bo loved it when I sang along to "I hate myself for loving you."

The showman in me went crazy with Tantric break dancing. The men would engage me in dueling dances, to the great excitement of the crowd. The whole floor would stop and stare, forming a ring around the American showman. No woman would come close to me, although I would chase some of them around when I got bored of the men. At first Bo tried to keep me in my chair when the dancing fools came to taunt me into action. She was afraid I would have a heart attack. Then she would try to put my shirt back on when I stripped down to my T shirt. She said she was afraid I'd catch a cold, but I'm sure she was much more worried about how much I would embarrass her. I mimed taking her shirt off, and it got a huge laugh. Not from Bo, but from everybody else.

It was fun to see both Jianwei and John suddenly catch the fever and start strutting around like roosters. Jianwei was awkward, John was pretty good. There are places like this all across China, and dance sessions are every day, three times a day- from 8 to 10 in the morning, from noon until two, and evenings from 8 to 10.

Chapter 47

Forbidden fruit is tempting and delicious. Sex is like that, too, sometimes.
– Guru Sharab

I was getting along better with Chinese John now, but he did have a sleazy side that Bo did not suspect. He introduced me to a teenage girl with an absurdly tiny body, who wanted to be my toy for \$10 a shot. I picked her up and tossed her in the air, like a baby, but was not tempted to take her up on the offer. I can understand how some guys might go for that, it might be a fantasy like fucking an elf or a fairy or other tiny, magical being, but it felt like pedophilia to me.

I was offered young boys by a gay man who prowled the riverfront, recruiting homeless strangers. He said he liked to watch, and he liked to be watched. In a fast food store one day I noticed a boy, about 10 years old with a hundred yuan note. That was a lot of money for a Chinese boy. We joked about it. He spoke a little English. Later I met him outside of the lavatory and to my surprise he offered me sex with his friend for \$10. Boys or girls, that seemed to be the rate.

One day Bo took me to a new apartment building nearby and showed me her new flat. It had three bedrooms, with a big living room and kitchen. They had to do some work on the interior – well, that’s a bit of an understatement. It was a completely empty space; they had to build the interior. But two months later we all moved in. Living in Bo’s flat was great! Now I was part of the family. I was amazed to find that Small Boy could not hit the toilet. There was piss on the floor near the toilet almost every day. Bo didn’t complain.

I had to take the plastic wrappings off of the wooden cabinets and nametags off the television. Chinese like things to stay new.

Small Boy’s friend came over every day to use the internet. I noticed that he was into porn. I put on a hardcore flick and five men were watching in the living room, glued to the screen like it was the Superbowl and World Cup all rolled into one. I suddenly realized that Small Boy’s friend was masturbating in the corner and I pointed him out, laughing. He ran into the bathroom. I squirted some shampoo on the floor and pointed it out to Jianwei. He was eager to check it out, and very excited.

We had a balcony there, which was lovely. Sometimes I would move the speakers outside, crank up the music and dance. The construction workers next door were always entertained. One day I was out there with Caleb. We'd just finished a bottle of juice and he asked me what to do with the plastic bottle. He was stunned when I heaved it over the railing, but then we looked down and I was immediately vindicated, as I knew I would be. Somebody picked it up within seconds.

Bo and Small Man slept in the same bed every night but she swore she would never have sex with him again. "He dirty," she said. I believed her, but one night he returned late from a rendezvous with one of his girlfriends and she attacked him! I got between them to hold her off but the next thing I know, she's reaching over me to throw her punches. Then he started punching and neither of them intended to hit me at all, but I got hit a couple of times.

We did not want to make love while Small Man was home so when Bo wanted to do it she would say to me "You me go walk now" which meant that we went to the 21st floor, and fucked like monkeys right there on the stairs. I loved it. I mean, of course I loved it, it was sex, it was love, but I also got off on the sweet combination of secretiveness and wanton, brazen, sex in the open. Fortunately, nobody ever saw us, not that I know of anyway, and so we had the thrill of the fall without the thud of the landing, the joy of the moment which becomes eternal as a memory, and without any negative consequences.

We did let Jianwei watch once, though. Somehow, he was an exception.

The Chinese are weird and as many times as I've been there, I haven't figured them out. They are very circumspect about what they will say, out of deference, out of modesty, to avoid taboos, sometimes a bit of each. One time I was talking with a woman and the subject of homosexuality came up. I said "I've had some experiences" and she said "No, you haven't." It was as if I'd said I'd been kidnapped by aliens, or resurrected from the dead. That just was not possible in her world.

On the other hand, living in such close proximity with a billion other people, they are well aware of each others bodies and bodily functions.

I was there over Christmas and I thought it was hysterical how they incorporated the holiday. The Chinese do not know who this white bearded

guy was in the red jacket; just another Colonel Sanders, selling something. They had a plastic life size Santa Claus in the nearby mall and a few weeks after Christmas I found him being accosted by two older Chinese women in the middle of the street! They were trying to get his pants off. I saved Santa from being raped and put him in the middle of our street to direct traffic.

I needed a pair of shoes and found a pair of Earth shoes for only \$30. Earth shoes were a thing in the 70s, designed by a yoga instructor with a different ratio between heel and toe than normal shoes. They'd become wildly trendy, then almost disappeared, and \$30 seemed a steal for something I'd always wanted, but Bo said the price was too high for 'brown shoes.' But, eventually she gave me the money. Then, she laughed at me and made a point of telling her friends and everybody she met how much I'd paid for the shoes. The benefit she got was status. She could afford to waste money on her American boyfriend.

One regular customer at the shop I became friends with was Cheryl, an American retiree. She was tall with long, blonde hair, a Florida tan, and was still fit and looked great despite a few wrinkles. She gave me some good advice about the antique business and I went around with her as she bought goods. We were both mystified at a Chinese woman who was crying as she sold her goods. Through an interpreter Cheryl told her that she shouldn't sell if she didn't want to but the woman paid no heed. She sold, and she sold, and she cried over every sale.

We didn't often visit the tourist part of Shanghai, but one day we did and we happened to wind up in a place with western disco music and rock and roll from a Filipino band which was actually pretty good. Their lead singer was a thin, young dude with obviously dyed, blond hair and a manner as effeminate as Jianwei, as flamboyant as Desmond. His name was Enrique. Bo asked me to follow him into the bathroom to make sure he really had a penis! (he did). We talked to him after the set and invited him for a party at Bo's apartment. I also invited another gay man I knew.

So, we were 6 men including Small Man and only one woman, Bo. We all danced to the music in the living room and the sight made me laugh, it was such an incredibly gay scene. Enrique spent the night, and slept in Small Boy's bed, a matter of convenience and logistics but Small Boy had to fight him off all night. When he complained to his dad, Small Man just told him not to worry. In the morning Jianwei denied shouting out "I am gay, I am

gay!” the night before, but he totally had.

I’d been trying to convince her for a year, and Bo finally agreed to go to the Czech Republic with me and a 40 foot high-top container full of goods. We loaded it on the street next to Ping’s shop and Small Man emptied his warehouse of junk. We also nearly emptied Bo’s shop. This was a big gamble for me, but by far a bigger one for them. There was a lot of junk but also a few good statues and ceramic pieces. Enough to learn on.

We needed a shipper to certify the load and send it out and thus began my relationship with a successful middle aged shipper named Mr. Chang. He was a great help. He took me out to a fish restaurant I will never forget, where the garlic clams were as big as softballs, and offered me use of his office if I needed it. I spent some time there removing the plastic wrapping from his room dividers. There were many young girls there to flirt with.

I contacted Ivan Němec and asked him to give Bo a letter of invitation which meant that he had to guarantee her return to China. I was actually surprised that he agreed but he did. Ask and it shall be given, as the good book says. He felt bad for me, knowing that I’d been cheated in the Japanese scooter deal.

Bo’s mother was very anxious about Bo going so far from home and I had to reassure her that I would keep close watch over her daughter.

Bo was terrified, but trying hard not to show it. I couldn’t resist a bit of cruel humor. I told her they didn’t have toilets on airplanes so she would have to bring her night pail with her. “I know, I know” she said.

Chapter 48

*There is no greater bravery in this world than a bird, who has never flown,
leaving its nest – Guru Sharab*

*East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet
– Rudyard Kipling*

As we flew out of Shanghai I was impressed with Wang Bo's courage. She took the aisle seat, and refused to look out the window, but she didn't cry, she didn't panic. She was leaving the only land she'd ever known. She had never been out of Shanghai, barely spoke English, and she was going to the middle of Europe with the craziest white man on the face of the planet. I have seen men and women, born into privilege and well within their cultural boundaries, react far, far worse to an airplane flight.

After we landed, however, the facade started to crack, her nervousness started to show. Caleb picked us up from the airport and drove us straight down to his girlfriend's farm, not far from České Budějovice. That was Natalie, the same one who'd been in the threesome with me and Parivara.

Bo wanted sex, right away. She needed sex, to calm her shattered nerves. Also, she was jealous of Natalie, which was ridiculous because Natalie was with Caleb. I didn't do as well as I should have at putting her fears to rest, that's true. All I wanted to do was sleep. I don't know if she knew about me and Natalie, but women seem to have instincts about that kind of thing. She was flailing away at me, hitting me, and I lost my temper and slapped her, hard. I felt guilty about it right away, but there's no way to ever take that back.

Since staying with Natalie wasn't going to work, Ivan Němec and his wife invited us to stay with them for the few weeks it would take our container to catch up to us. Their home/shop was just outside of České Budějovice in the small town of Maly Vlk. I was nervous about the customs declaration because the Czech Republic had recently joined the EU and I expected that the new regulations would be more difficult than before. It was all coming in under Ivan's company name. He ran a customized door shop and was very correct about his taxes. He did not want any complications.

I typed up a fake receipt and inventory declaration. I expected to pay about

\$1000 duty and VAT tax. When the container arrived they just gave it a quick once over, glanced at our papers and sent us on our way. It was quicker and easier than I'd dared to hope, not to mention cheaper.

Ivan's crew helped us unload. I had 500 pairs of pants hidden in the antiques. Textiles were controlled by quotas in the EU, but there was no problem. We'd also included about 200 watches which we hadn't declared, but we wound up losing money on those.

There was some cool stuff: The furniture in the container was crap, though. Some of it had cockroaches more than an inch long. The larger than life size Buddha, two meters tall sitting down, was full of termites. And I had no idea where to start selling the stuff.

I hired Caleb's girlfriend Natalie to help us sort and clean the things. Bo refused to have anything to do with cleaning anything, and her jealousy of Natalie, super sexy Natalie, was as obvious as it was unnecessary.

The Němec's had a big German Shepherd who terrified Bo. Czechs adore their dogs. Chinese are not the same.

Our first sale was to a friend of Ivan's wife who had plenty of cash to spare and bought several cabinets. I tried a local flea market, which was frustrating. I only sold a few small items there, but the bright spot was that someone there told me about an antique market just outside of Prague in the small town of Buštěhrad. I borrowed a van from Vesely and we sold over \$1,000 worth on our first Friday there. Unfortunately, as we were leaving the transmission went out. Almost every time I ever borrowed a vehicle from Vesely, there was some kind of problem. It was a curse.

I called Vesely but he wasn't able to come until the next day. Bo and I slept in the van and when I found out that the market was open Saturday as well I talked a Czech guy into towing our van back into the market. We sold another \$1000 worth the second day.

Things get a little hectic as we waited for Vesely to show up and the guard was waiting overtime to close the gate. Eventually he showed up and towed us back to České Budějovice. Vesely moved a big double bed into a storage room in his car shop. All's well that ends well.

On the flight back from Shanghai I'd brought an electric bike as luggage. I wanted to test it on the market, maybe next time I'd bring a thousand. We wound up using it to commute back and forth to Maly Vlk. One day we were out on it and we stopped at a restaurant, and the restaurant had a salad bar. I asked the man how many times I could return to the bar for that price he said 'jak chceš,' which means as you like, and so I went back three times and they charged me for three times. I had no intention of paying. Things looked ugly, I sent Bo out front to wait. As soon as she was out of the room they wrestled me down to the ground and then they went out to talk to Bo and told her if she didn't pay for the meal, I was going to prison, so she paid up on the spot.

Two weeks later we were out on the bike again when a car cut us off. It was the cook who, for some reason, was bearing a grudge. We were stuck in a little parking lot so I told Bo to jump off, then kept dodging him on the bike and he kept coming after me with his car so I yelled at Bo to throw rocks at his car and that got him. He left.

After a few good weekends at Buštěhrad we had \$4000 saved up. I was anxious to send it to Small Man to show him that I was sincere about paying him back. I told Bo that we had to put it in the bank to send it to China. When we get to the bank she caused a commotion in front of all the clerks by arguing against putting the money in the bank at all. I wasn't sure if she was scared of banks or just wanted to keep the money for herself.

We finally got it all sorted out and sent but when we returned three weeks later to send more money it was a rerun of the same show. I lost my temper and yelled at her. I never really understood what her problem was and she wouldn't tell me but after we went home and had sex she was happy again. For Bo, it was frightening to be in a strange land. She felt like she was on an expedition to a deep, dark land, through the looking glass, lost in the Land of Oz. For me it felt more like an astronaut returning to Earth. Back to normal. There were Hippies having bonfires in the woods, drinking beer and smoking joints. We slept one night under the stars, inhaling the scent of nature. I lost my hat in the woods and considered it an offering to the Forest Gods.

We had some free time so we traveled to Zlín to visit my old girlfriend Bijali. Bo was very jealous of her even though she had a man of her own, Michal, the jealous one. We enjoyed Bijali's backyard swimming pool and

Bo was nude with a mixed group for the first time in her life. Her eyes grew wide as she took a good look at all the boys and all the girls, too. Later, back in China, she would deny that it happened.

DJ Matyáš let us use his flat to stay in Prague. It was small but it was nice, and convenient. We had borrowed an old Fiat Uno from Vesely and it was parked just outside our window. One day, while I was gone, it suddenly caught fire! The curse of Vesely's cars carried on. Bo was at home, along with a Japanese guy, Toshio. He was an interesting guy, trying to get away from the conformity and regimentation of Japanese society. He was certainly in the right place at the right time.

He jumped out the window and managed to put the flames out before things got out of control, and he saved all the cars parked nearby, but the Uno was trashed. Vesely would lend me nine cars in the span of three years and only two would make it back to the shop without something going way wrong.

Bo hated Prague. Not enough people, no tall buildings. She enjoyed the Chinese restaurants but was unhappy to find out that there were no chicken feet to eat in the Czech Republic. "Many chicken, why no feet?" she asked. I said I didn't know. She also hated the open countryside. "I very fear" she said.

We had good luck selling some jade and silver pipes and boxes, so I asked Small Man to send some more by UPS. I told him to mark a low price and to send less than a few kilos, but he did exactly the opposite and we got fined 20,000 crowns at customs, which is about a thousand bucks American. That killed the business for that trip and, all told, we wound up about \$500 in the red.

Meanwhile, I had gotten to know a guy who lived across the road from the Podbaba gang. Vlasta was a Czech film producer who'd lived in the U.S., and was interested in helping us sell our Chinese goods, so we became friendly. We moved out of Matyáš' flat and in with him. He had a sweet young girlfriend living with him named Erika. Bo was very jealous of her and one day while I was massaging her feet in the living room, which I figured was totally innocent because Vlasta and she were both right there, she flipped out and started screaming. Later, Bo and I were about to drive off and Vlasta made some kind of a joke about how I was going to have sex with Erika later and Bo jumped right out the window to attack him

because she couldn't get the door open quickly enough. She really did not appreciate the western sense of humor.

We sold out the load and headed back to China. Although the trip wasn't altogether profitable, Small Man was satisfied with the results and ready to send another large container. We made the arrangements, loaded up the goods and shipped them to Ivan once again. This time I went back without Bo.

Chapter 49

Everything that happens, every person you meet, is the beginning of a new story. – Guru Sharab

Again, customs were no problem even though I had 500 watches inside the boxes, and a few pairs of pants. We'd reversed the ratio. I lost money on the watches, again, and barely broke even on the pants.

Unfortunately, this load had even more junk than the first and after weeks of moving the good things, I was left with a mixture of good and bad cabinets and statues. Vlasta offered to buy everything for \$4,000 so that I could get back to China and try to convince Small Man to send quality goods. I agreed but when it came time for Vlasta to pay he was \$400 short.

Šárka was trying to start a real estate business and she had a new business partner. I was over at her place when they first met. Artur rang her bell and she went to the door. It was a cold, winter day and he was shivering as he explained that he'd been arranging festivals and they should be business partners and she looked at me and asked if I thought it was a good idea and I said sure, because I always say sure, so she invited him in and that was the beginning of their story.

Artur found me a nice warehouse space at a cheap price in Bubeneč and we moved all the goods there. Vlasta agreed to pay the rent until I got back from China so there'd be someplace to bring the goods back to, and he needed it for the stuff anyway.

Chapter 50

Life is the greatest story of all, far more complex than any book.
– Guru Sharab

Back in China, I went with Bo to find antique furniture in Ningbo which happened to be Small Man's hometown. We wandered through the market for hours, looking at this, looking at that, and then suddenly Bo remembered that she had a friend in the business there, the same one we'd sent John to. We found some good cabinets and I agreed to buy 20 pieces for the next container.

Jianwei convinced Mr. Wang to front me some goods. He put in hundreds of Buddhas and Dragons, of various sizes. Some were bronze, some were ceramic, and all of them would look exotic as hell in The Czech Republic.

Mr. Mu came from a village of woodcarvers and he would bring all their goods to Shanghai, and he had some truly beautiful stuff. Jianwei convinced him to send a bunch of stuff with us as well. With all these partners and lots of stuff from Small Man, too, I felt supremely confident about this business expedition.

But, my Karma caught up with me. I must have lost control of my joy stick one day up on the 21st floor, because Bo suddenly told me she was three months pregnant. There was no doubt at all that it was mine.

Small Man demanded an abortion. He would lose all face if she had a white baby but Bo's mother was happy and excited about having a new grandchild. I had talked many times with Bo about divorcing Small Man and we even visited a lawyer to help her understand her rights but nothing came of it since Small Man told her that if she divorced him she would die.

She wanted me to marry her, but I wouldn't.

So, it was with great reluctance and a feeling of unfinished business that I left Shanghai, with the 40 foot high top container to follow in a few weeks. I was worried about Bo but excited about the well stocked container. I had already given Mr. Wang some money toward his payment, because I'd recently come into a windfall.

When Diana's mother died, for some reason I do not understand except that maybe she hated me less than her daughter does, she left me \$5,000 in her will. I borrowed another \$4,000 from my Mom, and that let me pay for the shipping, too, and have some walking around money.

When I arrived in Prague I found out that Vlasta had not paid the rent on our warehouse. A small detail, he said. Perhaps it was, because after putting his stuff out in the yard, they'd put it into a shed. We couldn't get at it just at any time we wanted, but it was safe. The other bad thing is it gave him an excuse for not having sold any of the stuff.

We had new stuff, though, so there wasn't time to dwell on the old. I was amazed at the product as we unpacked. Great stuff! There was so much, from so many sources; Mr. Mu, Wang, Bo, Small Man.

I was a bit nervous as we unloaded the container at customs at Budějovice, but as per usual I just made up an invoice on the fly, 'estimating' the amounts of things rather liberally, which means guessing, but it wasn't much of a problem. Parivara had sent a friend of hers to help, a one handed man named Libor, who was pretty sharp and knew lots of other people. We loaded everything into a truck, a semi-trailer truck, and drove it over to Vesely's, quite happy to have the customs hassle behind us, but there were the customs officials, waiting for us at his house.

They said they wanted to check the items against the list I'd written down on the invoice and I realized this could go very badly but there was no use trying to stall or avoid opening the truck, they were there for a purpose and that just would have made them more determined so we started unpacking, quickly, actually enthusiastically, talking lovingly about each item and giving them way more information than they'd asked for or wanted to hear and eventually one of them said "Yo, dobře," (Yeah, O.K.) and they drove off.

We still had the question of where to put the stuff because the warehouse in Bubeneč was not a good option, and Libor said "I know a guy who's got a farmhouse," so we drove there and unloaded the shipment, a semi-trailer full of Chinese antiques and not-so antiques, right there in the muddy pasture, and then carried them one by one into the barn. We had plenty of manpower: Me, Filip Vesely, Parivara, Lukáš, my son Caleb, the farmer, and a rather shady character who'd done time for armed robbery, of a bank.

He was a friend of Libor's.

We paid the farmer for storing the stuff and he also had a room to rent so that became headquarters. It was a fine time. He had a very sweet family.

Kevin came over. He and Lukáš borrowed a car from Vesely and took some goods up to an antique show in Munich, which might have been a great success except Kevin, being on a European vacation after all, and in Munich, went out the first night and got shitfaced and Lukáš was pissed off when he showed up in the morning bleary eyed and not looking in great shape for work, and there were people in the adjoining stands who were already mad at Lukáš for having the good spot, and so he was arguing with them and with Kevin and the upshot was we all got thrown out.

But, we carried on, going to auctions and fairs and everywhere we could, Buštěhrad, Dresden, a big silver Buddha here, some wood carvings there, we were making about a thousand dollars a day which I thought was pretty good but Kevin had expected more.

He was enjoying his trip to the Czech Republic, though, especially the beer. Once I went out drinking with Kevin in a small village pub and we literally drank the place dry, I'd heard that as an expression but didn't think it every really happened.

Another time Gamal was down visiting us and we went to a pub by the river – not even a pub, really, it was a couple of picnic tables and a kiosk that sold beer and rum, there wasn't even a road to it, except the river. Boating down the river, mostly canoes, some rubber rafts, is a popular pastime in the Czech Republic. Guys out with their girls for a romantic weekend, families with children, groups of schoolmates or colleagues, floating down the river like a parade, and there are bars like this along the way, sometimes even float-through service on a boat in the middle of the river. Gamal was supposed to meet us there but he got lost – as he was to say later, lost in the jungle for two days. But, it wasn't a jungle, it was a forest, and barely even that, there probably wasn't more than 300 meters between the pub and the main road, and it was overnight, maximum, because he showed up at the house the next morning.

Business had slowed right down but Libor managed to get us a deal with a big carpet and home decoration wholesaler to sell all the stuff on

consignment. That seemed an easy way out; Kevin wasn't happy with the deal but everybody else was. So we had to drive first to Pilsen and, of course, the van we borrowed from Vesely broke down. We called Libor, who was becoming our go-to guy whenever there was a problem. He came with a couple of friends and a bigass MAN truck, a Czech made power machine, a tank on wheels. It was needed because there was a lot of heavy stone stuff. Our bank robber friend was driving but he was having trouble because it was an old vehicle and the gear box was kind of funky, so I took over and was pleased at the irony. The big, bad bank robber couldn't handle the big truck but I could.

With the stuff sitting in the store there wasn't much to do and I felt that I could be spending my time more productively in Shanghai, preparing a new load, and also I wanted to be with Bo.

I left things in Lukáš' hands and went back to Shanghai. It took years to sell everything from that shipment and there were some people, notably Mr. Mu and Small Man, who never got a return on their investment.

Chapter 51

We all have a world inside our own mind, and we all must be the ambassador of that world to the rest of the worlds in our world – Guru Sharab

I flew into Shanghai, Bo met me at the airport and I could see right away that she wasn't pregnant. Small Man had poisoned the baby. I was devastated. I could see she was afraid, but all I could do was put my arms around her and tell her it was not her fault.

It was not, but what she did next was. Well, as much as anything anybody ever does in life is their own fault. There was peer pressure; lots of people in China were getting plastic surgery then. It was a trend.

I'd always liked her nose, which turned up a bit, but she didn't. So, she had had it straightened. It made her look like a horse. So she went back, and they couldn't put it back the way it was, so she got something in the middle. It wasn't horrible, but it wasn't her.

Then, on a beautiful summer day, I was playing in Shanghai's old town when I noticed a slim Chinese girl with a doll's face and thick glasses, selling crafts in a shop. That 26 year old was Hui Bo. Although her English was poor, her wit and humility were immediately obvious. Her co-worker saw my interest, I am pretty easy to read, I must admit, and she giggled a little bit as she nodded in Hui Bo's direction and said "She needs a man." I was hooked.

Hui Bo was working twelve hours a day with only one day off a month, for low pay. At first she ignored my advances. I saw her at the shop only a few times and then was surprised and sad when I returned from a two week trip to find that she had quit her job and that there was no contact for her.

A week later her friend told me that she was back. Hope flooded back into my heart. She said she wanted to see me about English lessons. We met at a KFC and had a perfect study session. I was enamored. She was amused. That is perfect.

After a few of these sessions she invited me back to her room among the crowded hutongs. It was very small with just a bed and a hotplate and a night soil pail. She explained how rats ran over her bed at night. The walls

were as thin as cardboard which is most likely exactly what they were, but she did have a pot to piss in!

Hui Bo had studied English at college so there was some knowledge there, and she just needed some oral practice with me. I started to give her massages. I touched her breasts but she did not react. She told me that for her physical arousal was impossible without love first. Two days later, she apparently fell in love with me.

We went through the same first steps as Wang Bo and I had, where cunnilingus was a novelty. She felt her first clitoral orgasms and was surprised by her own body. I had found my niche, my mission in life! As we travel around the world we are all, in our individual ways, ambassadors for our country, our generation, and our way of life. I would be the Emissary of Cunnilingus, the Ambassador of Eating Pussy! I would work, tirelessly, to bring appreciation of this act to the women and young girls of this mysterious, ancient empire.

Hui Bo told me about her past. She had been to university but because of some unpaid fees had not received her teaching certificate. Shortly after school she met the young man who would become her husband. He'd been living with her a month or so when one day he returned to their flat to find her lying on the floor with a towel around her neck. She had passed out from self-strangulation. He revived her, and held her, and begged her not to do that again. To repay his kindness, she married him and they had a son. She knew at the time that she did not love him but hoped for a better future.

Her son, now five years old, was living with her husband and his mother in a small village nine hours out of Shanghai by car. Their home was a simple mud walled hut. Hui Bo had lived there with her newborn baby for four years. She said she enjoyed village life. The simplicity, the slow pace. She made brooms by hand for pennies a day but felt satisfied.

After four years, though, Hui Bo felt trapped in the marriage and wanted out. Her husband loved her very much and did not want to divorce her. Her mother-in-law loved the little grandbaby as if it were her own child and was afraid that Hui Bo would try to take him away. She told her grandson not to trust his own mother and would not leave them alone together outside her home. Hui Bo understood her mother-in-law's fear. She did not complain.

Instead, she came to Shanghai.

Now, Hui Bo started a new job in a Shanghai water pump factory but to my surprise did not know how much she would be paid! (It would last a few months and she would not be paid at all.) I told her not to worry and that she would have a job with me in the antique business. I bought her some new contact lenses and clothes. I noticed a change in Hui Bo. Her breasts were growing, for one thing. She seemed more robust. I realized that what I had taken for petite Chinese adorableness had been partly malnutrition. I was thrilled that I had been able to make this change in her life.

Now I had to juggle time between Wang and Hui and try to keep my Bo's straight. Luckily for me Wang was at the shop all day so it became days with Hui Bo and evenings with Wang Bo. I was leading a charmed life on the edge. I even brought Hui Bo over to Wang Bo's place for a quick shower. Hui Bo was very conflicted over her need for money and her need for love. I tried to convince her that with me she could have both, but it was not easy. She worried that we were making love too much. She enjoyed it but felt guilty!

The communist propaganda told them once a week was enough and that work was the priority. I managed to talk her out of that one, I think, and when she occasionally refused me I was happy to find out that all I had to do was to slip my hand inside her pants which made her go weak and horizontal instantly. It was like flipping a switch. She was an incredibly sensuous woman. She quickly became my goddess. Her pussy was like heroin to me.

Chapter 52

You can keep two women, but you can't keep two women happy.
– Guru Sharab

Some big shots who owned a carnival were coming to Shanghai, and Ben asked me to put on a front for him. He needed to impress the two millionaires with a team in Shanghai. I borrowed Wang Bo's new van and with a few simple plastic magnetic signs converted it into a company car. We greeted the multi-millionaire investors and Ben at the airport with flowers and even a small band, playing Chinese classical music. Chinese John played his classical flute. Hui Bo was gorgeous in a new pink fur jacket that I had just bought for her. Ben had a hungry look in his eyes.

Like so many westerners, he was in China for the easy pussy which was supplied gratis by most Chinese business cohorts there. This was the first time that the Bo's met each other, but it all went smoothly.

After we got the rich people checked into their hotel, we were invited out to a 5 star restaurant overlooking the Bund. Ben asked me to invite a young entrepreneur in the modeling business named Laura and Wang Bo came along as my date. Hui Bo went home to her empty room. However, she had made her impression when they saw her at the airport.

Bo was totally uncomfortable and lost with a fork. She hated the food! The food was great. We had salmon. With ginger margaritas. Lots of ginger margaritas. Ben seemed to think I'd had too many ginger margaritas. He bitched at me the next day for answering our guest's questions 'too frankly.' That wasn't the margaritas. That was just me.

At one point the carnie president asked Laura "What can you do for us?" Instead of brown nosing him she replied "Well, what can you do for me!" I liked that.

I was happy to be done with them when they left the next day although, of course, we were not done with them. Not at all.

I talked to Caleb's girlfriend, Baozhai, and then introduced her to Ben and he got her a job there as an accountant.

Wang Bo liked Hui Bo and suspected nothing. Then one day I had Hui Bo over and Mr. Mu came by unexpectedly. He ran back to Wang Bo who showed up in 15 minutes. Hui Bo had already left and I explained to Bo, Wang Bo, that I was leaving her that evening. Hui Bo had found us a two bedroom flat on the outskirts of Shanghai for \$200 a month.

She told me that I had to return all the clothes that she had bought for me. “No problem,” I said. I deal in material things, I enjoy having material things, but material things have no hold on me. Then she told me that I had to repay all the money she had given me. I told her I could not, since I had no money. It was just as well I had spent all the money, I thought, because if I had had any money, I would have given her the money, and then I would have been broke.

Jianwei and Mr. Wang came by and I told them about my problem. Bo was not going to let me leave. I asked them to help me carry my bags out but they refused to take sides. I called Hui Bo and she was not coming over.

Wang Bo flipped out and started to hit me. The blows were something like a light hail. She looked like Olive Oyl pounding furiously on Bluto. I laughed at the ridiculous scene and a strange course of action popped into my head. It made no sense but as she was pounding on me I calmly and slowly undressed her until she stood there naked right in front of the two men. They were slack jawed and wide eyed, but she just put her clothes back on and continued hitting me, so I did it again. She eventually calmed down but it was clear that she was not going to let me leave. I went to my room and slept.

Jianwei was still there in the morning but Small Man and Small Boy had not come home. I asked Jianwei to call Small Man. Surely he would be happy to help me leave. When he and his son arrived, Small Boy got very angry at me but his anger quickly turned on his mother. Both father and son started yelling at Bo and then they began beating her.

Undoubtedly, that hurt her a lot more than she'd hurt me the night before and I suddenly found myself switching sides. I got between them and Bo and made them stop hitting her. She asked me if I would take her with me. I saw no other choice. Small Man told her that if she left she could never come back. She packed her clothes in five minutes and Bo, myself, Jianwei and Chinese John made our escape in a truck taxi.

In the elevator on the way down Jianwei was telling me what a great master I was. Now I had two women! I did not know how Hui Bo was going to take the new living arrangement. To my surprise, she was very sympathetic and said I could sleep with Wang Bo in the main bed. She would take the smaller room.

I made love to Wang Bo and in the morning she made sure that I went and serviced Hui. This setup did not last long. Hui Bo left me the next day and Wang Bo just one day later, to go back to work.

Small Man and Small Boy beat her in the street, in front of her shop. Luckily she was not seriously injured but I was warned to stay away. Now I was all alone in my new apartment.

Hui Bo would not answer her mobile. I had no way to find her.

Chapter 53

Just carry a ball when you travel, and you will always have a ball
– Guru Sharab

As I strolled down the Bund a few days later I ran into a guy from New Zealand. He was planning to get rich buying clothing, wholesale, to resell back home. I offered to show him the ropes. After a long day of trekking through the garment district we headed across the river to a teahouse I liked. I had been there with Hui Bo and we had made friends with the owner. The teahouse was filled with antiques. They were fake antiques of course, but good fakes. The kind of stuff I would be proud to export.

We sat down in a booth and the waitress came. We tried to order but, being two English speakers, it was not so easy. The waitress knew no English so she went away and after a few moments came back with an interpreter. Hui Bo and I both gasped at the site of each other.

After the Kiwi left I went to talk to my little runaway. She said she was happy to see me but made it clear that I would have to earn her back. I asked her how much she was earning as a waitress and was not surprised when she told me that, once again, she did not know! I guess it was considered impolite to ask.

She was glad to see me, but not happy at all about being in second place, subservient to Wang Bo, and I reassured her that she wasn't, that I was finished with Wang Bo, but nonetheless, she said I would have to work to regain her trust.

I didn't have to work very hard at all. Before the week was out she'd moved back in with me and things were even better than before.

Once, when Jianwei was sleeping over, Hui Bo let him watch us make love. It was not kinky, it was kindness. O.K., maybe a little bit kinky, but motivated by kindness. The two go together better than most people think. She even tied a cloth over her eyes and suggested that either of us could touch her. I tried to make him touch her naked breast but he pulled back like he had been burned. Then as I humped her he watched my dick, and clapped along to the slap-slap rhythm. I gave him the camera and asked him to snap a few photos. Hui Bo did not object.

Our 6 months lease was up on the flat in Shanghai and I persuaded Hui Bo to take a business trip with me, which frightened her because, even though she'd been cheated by employer after employer and was slaving away for far less than what she was worth, the thought of not showing up to a regular job was a completely foreign concept. Her parents had faced starvation in the early communist years because of Mao's great leaps 'forward.' Her mother had worked in the garden even with a broken arm.

I impressed Hui Bo with my handling of our landlord when he tried to keep our telephone deposit. I simply refused to move until he paid. It was something a Chinese would not have gotten away with.

We wanted Chinese turquoise from the source, which was in Sha'anxi province, so we got on a train and went. At the mine itself, we were disappointed by the high prices and returned to the city, where I heard about rare dinosaur egg fossils for sale. It was an illegal business, but that's never bothered me much. We asked a woman selling food on the street and she said she knew somebody and sent a runner for him and he arrived within a couple of minutes. I gave him \$50 to bring back an egg. When he did not come back, Hui Bo was upset since I had no receipt and did not even know the man's name.

I was determined to get my cash back, though, and I called the police when the food seller refused to give us his name. The police took her away and invited us to make a report after which they treated us to dinner. In the morning our money was returned and we were told that the thief would do two weeks in jail, and also that it was front page news.

Hui Bo wanted one last try with the turquoise dealers so I gave her some cash and asked her to bargain on a few kilos. She came back with three strands of beautiful stones. Good business.

We had time for some sightseeing so we went to the sacred mountain of Shaolin which was not far away, and walked up to the temple in the clouds. A cool, light rain was falling, not at all uncomfortable to walk in. She told me there, then, that she knew I really loved her.

From there, Hui Bo's home town was not far away, and she'd been gone for years. I said we should go. She was reticent. I insisted. Family is important. Her father and mother were separated. Her mother worked the

small family garden and lived alone in a dusty hut, while her father lived with his girlfriend in a town apartment. She had an older brother and sister, and an almost identical younger sister, who was not so much younger at all.

As we entered Tu Xun Di in Henan, the poorest province in China, her older sister with her husband and two boys met us at the station. They have a phone shop right there in the train terminal square.

The town was awful. The buildings and roads were dilapidated, bushes were dying from being pissed on so much, and the children shat in the streets. I went to the town WC and I had to step over little mountains of shit, like Catherine Zeta-Jones in that film with Sean Connery where she's stepping over the beams of light in the museum, just to find a place to go.

Her older sister's husband had been poisoned by chemical fertilisers that he was handling without a protective suit and had suffered irreversible brain damage. You couldn't really notice. He seemed normal to me.

Just before her younger sister showed up, Bo explained that our sexual involvement must remain a secret. I was a bit taken aback. "We don't talk about this subject between us," she said. She was whispering, but there was finality in her voice. It was not up for debate.

Her older brother showed up. He was a very friendly fellow who worked for the police. Hui Bo had told me how she had been raped by her first boyfriend in high school. Her brother and his friends beat the boy to death. Their crime went unpunished because their father's sister, who was named Hui Bo just like my Hui Bo, was a police captain. So, they were a cop family.

We next went to visit auntie Hui Bo and her husband at their home. They put me up in a hotel for the time I was there. I was upset that Bo did not want to acknowledge our relationship, but the last thing I wanted to do was embarrass her in front of her family. I'd lost her once before and I did not want to lose her again.

At the big welcome dinner I finally met her father and mother and was struck by the age showing on Han Ping's mother. She was obviously a person of worry, more than just the normal worry of a mother and grandmother. Her

generation had gone through starvation, and terror.

I had a ball with me, just a regular rubber ball, and Bo's sister's 9 year old son was fascinated. Kids don't get a lot of toys in China, real life is too pressing. I couldn't believe that I had to teach a 9 year old boy to play catch. But, there it was. He caught on quick, though.

Now, I was the ambassador of two things in China! Eating pussy and playing catch! I started carrying a ball with me everywhere. Kids loved it and would gather round to play catch with the crazy American. One day in Xi'an I was walking along a crowded street. They are all crowded, of course, but this was a major street with busses and taxis and cars and motorcycles and bicycles and street vendors shouting on both sides, and I caught the eye of a traffic policeman. I gestured to the ball, and gestured that he should catch. He tried to wave me away politely, he seemed to think I was a little bit crazy, and he apparently had no interest in dealing with a crazy person. But, I persisted and then I threw the ball. He caught it and threw it right back. I threw it back to him. This went on for four or five volleys until I could see that he was about done being confused and starting to become pissed off, and I caught the ball one last time and saluted and walked away. I was having a ball.

Tu Xun Di was a poor town, but a proud town. I never saw a beggar there. One day, though, I did see a man take the leftover food from a table at an outdoor restaurant. He ate his fill and threw the rest on the ground where another man, a wild haired character with a crazy look in his eyes, threw himself down and ate it, like a dog.

Chapter 54

One of the nicest, most comforting things you can say to another person is ‘no problem.’ Say it often. Then let it be so. – Guru Sharab

When I asked about antiques Hui Bo mentioned the ancient city of Kaifeng. Kaifeng was the trade capital of the world a thousand years ago, when Europe was in the Dark Ages. It was ruled, at the time, by Bao Zheng aka Bao Gong aka Lord Bao, who was legendary for his honesty - which turned out to be a bit ironic.

It was only 30 minutes away by bus. We set out the next morning. When you are searching you find many things. You may find things you are looking for and you may find things you were not looking for. We’d come for the antiques but my first big surprise was the food. I love bread, the vegetarian’s best friend, and there was a huge assortment of great breads. Also, I fell in love with the little garlic dumplings in egg drop soup. The market place was, literally, sizzling.

We made our tourist pilgrimage up to the rebuilt palace, and then turned our minds to serious product searching. We met two sisters who were from the Mao tribe. I liked their batik clothes and bought Hui Bo an outfit. Then we found an antique store and I bought some fossils. It didn’t seem like a terribly exciting afternoon at the time, but those two events would have major implications on the future.

Then, the night market! There were twenty different noodle vendors, twenty varieties of noodles, all in a row, for about five cents a bowl. There were wheat noodles, rice noodles and red potato noodles. You could go for a hot chapati with curried tofu inside for ten cents and at 5 p.m. each day, a woman came around with fresh tofu pudding covered with nuts and soy sauce. She beckoned customers with a sing song chant that I quickly learned and started singing along with her, much to the joy of the nearby merchants.

I would come back to Kaifeng. Again and again.

Hui Bo got a call to come work for Ben at the carnival. It all came back to that meeting in Shanghai. Wang Bo got the fancy dinner that she didn’t like much, but the carnival executives wanted “that girl who was at the airport.”

She did not want to leave me but we both realized that it was an important step in her career. If I'd known then what I know now I might have acted differently, but I put her on a train and waved good-bye.

My plan was to head to Xi'an to visit Elizabeth at London Language School and hand out some pamphlets. But, before I headed to Xi'an I realised that one of the fossils I'd bought was fake so I took it back to the dealer in Kaifeng. I now met the owner, Mr. Guo. When I complained that the fossil his shop keeper had sold me was not real he said "No problem" and produced three others for me. Taking back fake fossils turned out to be as easy as taking back shoes. The two most important words in trade, in any language, are 'no problem.' They can also do wonders for a relationship.

Then he invited me for dinner and introduced me to his daughter, who was about 14. He was very proud of her English, and I told her she spoke it very well. Sincerely. Anything at all is very well. It's a foreign language.

I went to Xi'an the next day. Elizabeth set me up in an apartment, but I had a roommate. Hector was a fellow American and he weighed 300 pounds if he weighed an ounce. Bridges would shake, elevators would groan, people would point and laugh in any country in the world. The Chinese responded, as they respond to so many things, with naive amazement. They would whisper to me as we passed "How many kilo?"

He asked me not to masturbate in my bed. "Go to the toilet if you need to jerk off," he said.

While I was at the school another American came in with a nice, old vase. I asked him where he'd found it and he told me of the antique market that had somehow eluded me in my previous stay there. I went there the next day and found more nice things than I could buy. I spent most of the \$5,000 I had. Lukáš was sending me money, bit by bit, as things sold. I had the sellers write down the age of each piece on the back. I wound up being glad I did.

I needed more cash, so the salesman reluctantly agreed to accompany me to Shanghai. So we, and two of his associates boarded a sleeper train and Jianwei was there to meet us at the station in the morning. He looked at the goods but didn't say a thing. After the sellers left, with their cash, he turned to me.

“Why you pay so much for fakes?”

“What? These aren’t fakes!”

“Yes. Fake.”

“Why didn’t you say something? You saw the stuff at the station.”

“Not me to say.”

We called a taxi and transported the five trunks of less-valuable-than-I’d-thought goods to John Taylor’s home. John’s wife was very worried about the way he was acting. Why did he have to spend half an hour on the toilet? She had no experience with drugs. She was a plain country girl from a tea growing family near Hangzhou. I explained his heroin problem to her clearly.

I was upset about being lied to again about the antiques. I had no receipt, no name, nothing besides a picture of us all and a phone number. But that was not going to stop me. I was going to get my money back.

Hui Bo came back to Shanghai to get some things and she seemed to be doing great. The job had given her added confidence. She was becoming a woman of the world. I was excited about her success but also a bit jealous of the many presents she showed off. She assured me that she was still in love with me and would never forget all that I had done for her.

I told her about the purchase in Xi’an. She was very mad at me for spending all the money. Jianwei told her how I was cheated and that made it so much worse. But we had no time to quarrel. She was off the next day to Tianjin after a night of wild, frenzied, future be damned passion.

Hui Bo had expected to return in two weeks but that date was postponed by the carnival. I was starting to get a little worried. She was working 16 hours a day with only Sunday off. That was not what we had agreed to with Ben. I tried to reach him by telephone to discuss it but he did not return my calls. I decided to visit her on my way to Xi’an to confront the crooked antique salesman.

Chapter 55

Love is crazy. Love makes us crazy. It doesn't matter. Still, we love.
– Guru Sharab

I called her every day and she told me how much she missed me and to please come to Tianjin. With the little cash I had left I bought my ticket. I expected she could feed and house me. She was staying on the 16th floor at a 5 star hotel in her own room. I was also interested to see what kind of a job Michael was going to offer me as my reward for helping the carnival, because I'd introduced him to Hui Bo and Baozhai and even Jianwei would wind up working there eventually.

The night before I left for Tianjin Hui Bo told me all was great and to please come but she was very busy and had an important meeting the next evening and to please bring her suitcase full of clothes. As the train travelled along, I borrowed a fellow passenger's mobile and called her. She told me that everything was OK but I would have to find my own way to the hotel and wait outside room 1643 for her to finish her meeting. No problem, I replied. In another hour she called back and said that I could not stay in her room. This sudden change made me very suspicious. I told her I did not care where we stayed as long as we were together but I did find this a curious turn with the timing. "We have to talk," she said. That alarmed me.

I became very suspicious. Who was interfering? I caught a taxi to the hotel and went to her door and sat down on her bag that I had brought. In a few minutes the security people showed up and asked what I was doing there. I told them I was waiting for my girlfriend, Hui Bo. They checked at the front desk. The room was not in Hui Bo's name.

"Where is Ben Michaels?"

They misunderstood me. "Are you Ben Michaels?"

I laughed inside and said "Yes, I am Ben Michaels."

"Are You Ben J. Michaels?"

"Yes, Ben J. Michaels!"

It was like Cheech and Chong's 'Dave's Not Here' routine, but in reverse. "O.K., please come with us." I followed them to a room a few floors down expecting to be brought to Ben but, to my surprise, when they opened the door the room was empty.

I realized now what was going on. I saw Ben's mobile phone and laptop on top of the desk. Later I would be told by the Tianjin police that the bed was covered in stacks of money. American dollars. High denominations. I never even noticed it.

I dropped Hui Bo's bag on the floor, scooped up both devices and put them in my bag. I'd get Ben's attention now! Caught in the act, the pig. As I was collecting these things I knocked over a glass of water and the security men rushed in to clean it up.

I left the room. As I walked to the elevators, I started to realize what I'd done and how much trouble I was in. As I stepped into the lobby two guards approached me. I thought I was busted right there but they just told me where the carnival people were meeting.

I sometimes wonder how things would have played out if I'd just let them lead me in and confronted Ben there. But, the trip down in the lift had allowed time for my trouble instincts to kick in, my adrenal medulla was pumping out the old epinephrines like crazy, and the needle was firmly fixed to 'flight.' As I was passing through the front door the manager stopped me and asked me if I'd taken a laptop. I raised my hand and waved him off. I got into a waiting taxi and fled.

My mind was racing! What was I doing? I had almost no money. Where to go? I remembered the card a man on the train had left with me and showed it to the cab driver. When I spotted a market area I stopped the cab and paid, almost half of what I had.

New city, no friends, no money, what to do? I found some young boys who spoke a little English. They offered me some food and a place to stay. I never mentioned the problem to them so as not to involve them. Inside their apartment, I stashed the mobile phone above their toilet and the laptop outside behind a cabinet on the balcony.

I called Hui Bo the next morning. Ben answered. I said I would bring his

stuff back, but he was furious, he was unhinged, and he was screaming into the phone “Every cop in Tianjin is looking for you, you son of a bitch! You’ll do ten years in jail for stealing intellectual property!”

Intellectual property, my butt. Just because he had some e-mails saved? The man was no more of an intellectual than I am. Still, I didn’t argue and I didn’t laugh. He had me dead to rights and I was scared. Four months in a Czech jail was bad enough. I couldn’t even imagine how bad a Chinese jail would be and it terrified me to think about it.

After some thinking, I went to a barber and had my head shaved. Then I found some thick black glasses. With my simple clothes I was well disguised. Chinese were now coming up to me and asking directions! But now I had to get out of town, and I figured they would be watching the train and bus stations.

Chapter 56

‘Don’t worry,’ may sound like irritating advice when you have serious problems, but it’s the best advice there is, and that’s exactly when you need it most – Guru Sharab

In the old town I met some young Polish kids who invited me to their farewell dinner with a Chinese family. It was a banquet, it was a feast, and I was really glad that nobody there had any idea of who I was and how much trouble I was in. Over dinner, they told me about how cheap it was to get a taxi to Beijing, if I just went to a certain pick-up point. There, I’d be partnered up with three others going in the same direction, so the price got split four ways and, magically, became affordable.

I called my friend Kitty from the English Corner because she was living in Beijing now and working as a lawyer’s assistant. She met me at the station and gave me enough money for a ticket to Xi’an. I told her the details of my situation and she advised me not to worry, which seemed rather silly.

In Xi’an, I went to London Language where Elizabeth helped me with food but had no place for me to sleep. I was also nervous about getting her involved in the situation. I hit the street and found my old friend, the crepe seller from the market. She knew no English, but it was the same story. She could feed me, but staying at her mother’s small house was out of the question. She gave me some newspapers and pointed to a park where the homeless slept.

I could not sleep, so I wandered the streets. Soon, I met a man sitting at an open air cafe enjoying a quiet beer. He invited me in. He knew no English at all, but he bought me a beer and soon we were communicating like champions.

We went to a brothel where he harrassed the girls trying to get me a free fuck. At first I was annoyed with him, that’s just rude, but then the madam got belligerent with him so I got angry with her and eventually we left but as we were on our way out the door we saw seven lean, violent looking teenagers headed straight for us and it was clear that the madam had called them and we were headed for an ass kicking, Chinese style.

I planted myself in front of them and screamed “FUCK YOU!” in my

craziest possible voice and to my amazement they all turned and ran. Then I kicked the big glass door of the brothel and it shattered. My new friend grabbed my shirt collar and threw me into a taxi and we escaped. I spent the night sleeping at the bottom of the ancient city wall.

I was on a damned crime spree.

The next day I found Jeremy, a young Chinese guy who was a friend from London Language School, and stayed with him and his ill mother for the night. He introduced me to three young Chinese who were running an English language school on the outskirts of Xi'an. I could help them out with their English in exchange for room and board. It was another market area and I felt quite safe there.

I was on the run from the Chinese police for over ten terrifying days. I was afraid to stay with friends and afraid to use a telephone. I called Hui Bo most days but she could not talk. Ben got on and threatened me again. He claimed the carnival was losing \$5,000 a day. But, he still wouldn't compromise or guarantee me a pardon. Totally irrational.

From a quick call to Jianwei I found out the Shanghai police had been to both John Taylor's condo and Mr. Chang's 21st floor high rise apartment looking for me and had put yellow crime scene tape around my stuff there! I did not know what to do. I called my good friend Mr. Wu (John from Xi'an's lawyer) and he met me at a restaurant, fed me and told me not to worry, not such a big problem, but I was still afraid. I decided to go to Hui Bo's family for help, and bought a bus ticket to Kaifeng.

I was angry at Hui Bo and Baozhai for deserting me after I had helped them so much. I called Hui Bo and threatened to put the naked pictures I had of us on the internet. I was in a panic.

I walked to the antique market and found the sisters in their clothes shop. They offered to help me. We ate and enjoyed the day in the shop. I could use their Internet. I started roaming the antique district and ended up at the shop of Mr. Guo. He was happy to see me and when I explained my situation to his daughter who was interpreting, (her English was getting quite good) he offered me a place to stay, in a house a few blocks away.

Chapter 57

Dance is motion, movement in time. To dance is to be in synch with the universe
– Guru Sharab

The next day I travelled to Hui Bo's hometown. I greeted her big sister at their little phone hut on the square by the railway station. It's not much bigger than a kiosk, really, but you can do a lot of business out of a kiosk. In sign language, I asked for help to find Auntie but she would not help. While I was there a notebook (in the old, paper-based society meaning of the word) and a CD with some pictures disappeared. That was odd. Or maybe it wasn't.

I eventually got the notebook back, but not the pictures. They weren't the naked pictures.

I set out to find Aunt Hui Bo, the police captain, on my own. It was not easy because very few people in Tu Xun Di speak English. I remembered the apartment building that she lived in where we had visited her and her family. I went to the local police and simply showed them the picture of Aunt Hui Bo and Hui Bo. They took me to the building. I knew the door but nobody answered my knock. I waited three hours but it was painfully clear that nobody in Tu Xun Di wanted to talk with me. I left a note on the door and went back to big sister's shop.

They couldn't avoid me there. A half hour later I was called to the phone. It was Hui Bo. She was shocked that I had gone to her family. She was afraid of what I might do with the photos. I cried as I assured her that I was only looking for help.

She explained to me how hard it had been from her side. She had been interrogated for hours by the police, but not arrested as lying sack of shit Ben had told me. Instead, she was working non-stop and could not break even for the phone. I started to understand that her loyalty was first to the company. She had hitched her wagon to a star and had no intention of unhitching.

Hearing about her troubles, in her voice, I realized how wrong I'd been to hold out on the stolen goods and gave her the address of the apartment where I'd stashed them. I made it very clear that the boys there knew

nothing about it all. I cried with her and apologised for the threat about the pictures. She said that she understood that I was only jealous and forgave me. I promised to destroy them all.

I should have.

I headed back to my apartment in Kaifeng and had a good sleep. The next morning Hui Bo called and explained that the police had gone to the apartment of the boys and retrieved the devices and told her all would be forgiven and for me not to worry.

Now I was feeling relieved and began to enjoy the colorful street life in Kaifeng. Trade center of the world, the Muslim influence was felt throughout and at one point they'd had a thriving Jewish community as well. The oldest of the old palaces had crumbled long ago, but there were stone statues remaining that went back to before the time of Christ. Kaifeng was so old that the restoration period, when they'd built replicas of many of their lost temples and palaces, had taken place in the 1700s.

I loved the mornings with free Tai Chi, dancing, and gymnastics everywhere. Some people took an early swim in the lake each day.

In the evenings, I joined the ballroom dancing in the open air. It was so romantic, by the lake; I danced with many beautiful, young women, who told me I looked like Tom Cruise. They called me Blue Eyes. That was silly. My eyes are brown. And I don't look like Tom Cruise, at all.

The main square, which is next to the lake, was always full of people: couples strolling, friends meeting, children whipping tops whittled out of tree stumps, with rawhide whips. The night market was a beehive of activity and a feast for the nose with the odors of grilled food, fried food, and boiled food mingling in the placid air.

I spent these days chatting in sign language with the Miao sisters in their clothes shop or with Mr. Guo in his antique shop. Then I found the antique and paintings gallery and made friends there. The building was full of shopkeepers painting ink on rice paper. Most subjects were classical. You could get a free lesson from anyone. They were happy to share.

That's where I met Hu, a 50 year old Chinese woman who specialised in

jade and metals and some ceramics. We became close friends and I teased her chain smoking husband about his bad habit.

I moved out of the apartment that Mr.Guo had lent me. At first I stayed in a cheap hotel off the square - just a simple room and a bed. The owner let me use the internet for free. Just outside, in the market, there was a soy product stand that supplied most of my needs. Breakfast was a small plastic bag of fresh, warm soy milk or a bean gruel. For lunch I would usually have the egg drop soup and then I would catch the soy pudding lady for a treat in the evening.

Lukáš sent me some money from the Czech Republic; it was coming in in dribs and drabs, mostly from the stuff at the carpet store. There were e-mails flying back and forth, Matyáš saying that Lukáš was being slack and not pressing Vlasta hard enough about the stuff in the warehouse and I was trying to support Matyáš in this but Lukáš would write stuff like ‘Remember we are dragon evolution which wants peaceful solutions to problems,’ because Dragon Evolution had been the name of that meditation weekend I’d organized back in the spring of 2000. As much as it was heartening that Lukáš truly believed in me, that’s how much of a pain in the ass it was, too, when he tried to apply those principles to business.

I had a little problem picking up the money, though. Through Elizabeth, I’d met a lovely girl named Moonbeam. I started helping her with her English, and she started helping me with everything. She’d gone with me to the bank to translate. She’d showed them my passport, but then left it sitting on the counter. When we went back, it was gone. On the one hand, it meant one more complicated situation with bureaucracy I’d have to deal with, but on the other I was having a fine time in Kaifeng and decided not to worry about it too much.

Early one morning we were buying breakfast and I got a warm soymilk. An old woman motioned to me that she was hungry. I gave her my milk. She motioned that her husband was hungry. I went back to the soymilk stand to buy him one. As I stood in the line a young girl pushed over my shoulder to try to get in front of me. I gently pushed back her arm. She called me San Jim Beam, but that is not a Mexican whiskey, it means crazy man.

“Fuck you!” I answered. English is so eloquent.

Her boyfriend, who was standing next to her, started swinging at me immediately. I was fighting both of them and I tore his shirt. I yelled to Moonbeam to call the police but she just stood there. The crowd that had gathered was obviously against the white guy.

I was moving in a circle like a WWE wrestler, staring them all down. One young boy came from behind and slapped me on the side of my head and ran away. I laughed with relief as the police arrived. My attackers had gotten a call off.

We were all taken to the police station and again I was in trouble when I should be lying low since I was not sure about the Tianjin problem. I agreed to pay for the boy's shirt and we both apologized. He had never been in a fight before but saying fuck to his girlfriend was a major offense even though she had called me a name first. Come down to it, I should not be bothered that she called me crazy, I am crazy and I'm proud, I'm crazy Jack Pazzo, the Guru of Crazyiness.

As we were leaving the station I tried to understand Moonbeam's lack of action.

She understood the whole situation but said that I had been too loud. "Chinese not make trouble," she said. As if on cue, because that's the way the universe works when I'm around, we saw three men grab chairs from an outdoor restaurant and run inside where apparently they were beating the crap out of somebody. I laughed as Moonbeam pulled me by the arm and we ran away.

These were good times. Mr. Guo would take me for feasts and encouraged me to bring foreigners to visit if I met any during the day. I found a good acupuncture masseur who worked on me. An hour and a half session only cost me \$5 and included the needles so it was much more than massage. A massage is skin deep and feels wonderful, a massage is like a kiss on the lips, but acupuncture gets right into you.

I met a student from the local university who lived in a boarding house near the school. He arranged a bedroom for me there, at only fifty cents a day. The students there thought that was expensive but it was great for me and came with use of a shower. The water was solar heated so, most of the time I could get a reasonably warm shower. Even cold, though, it was a shower.

I was living on less than a dollar a day, and could still afford the occasional extra crispy egg in a crepe from one of the street carts as a treat.

I was calling Hui Bo every day but after a few weeks she surprised me with the suggestion that we split up. I should have seen it coming but I hadn't and it hit me like a slap in the face. I sat on a bench in the park and cried. Along came a strange, old woman. She sat down without a word, held my hand and cried with me.

I wandered the streets of Kaifeng, alone with my loneliness now, living on a dollar a day but wondering why I was living at all. I had a camera with me and I found it was a convenient prop for my mood, something I could hide behind. I began to take more and more pictures of this incredibly beautiful city.

I took pictures of buildings, I took pictures of flowers, I took pictures of children playing and families or couples out walking. I took a picture of an old couple selling soft drinks in the market and they cried when I gave them a copy. They'd never had a picture before.

Chapter 58

If you can make people laugh, you can cause a revolution – Guru Sharab

Every university in China has something like the English Corner that I knew from Xi'an, and Kai Feng was no exception. It was inevitable that I would find my way there and soon I became very popular.

The crowd was getting too large, though, so I asked if there wasn't some space where we could meet and people could be more comfortable and be seated. I was told that if there was an empty classroom we could go ahead and use it without asking permission. I suggested that we meet at the main building and find an empty classroom. When someone asked what the topic would be, I replied with a single word: sex.

Actually, I wanted to talk about AIDS, and my brother Carlo, but to get to that point a lot of basic Sex Ed would be necessary. On the appointed Thursday the crowd was larger than ever. Again, I advised everyone that this lecture would be on sex and that anybody who didn't want to hear it should leave.

I started my speech and a student in the crowd said I couldn't talk about that subject. I told him he could leave. He did not. I carried on speaking. I was starting with fundamental stuff, boy/girl/baby, with extremely simple English and plenty of hand gestures. There were some nervous titters and awkward laughter, but mostly there was rapt attention. After a few minutes, maybe half an hour, some officials from the University administration showed up. I was escorted to their office. It was all very polite, but they laid down the law. I was not allowed to lecture on campus without prior consent. Nothing was said directly about the topic of sex.

I apologized and promised to be more careful in the future. It was a minor incident but it would come back to haunt me.

I had to steer clear of the English Corner so I was spending more time in the food market just outside the west gate. One hot day I was walking through the market and I noticed some large outdoor speakers in front of a barber's shop. I went in and talked with the boys inside and they let me put on my Lynyrd Skynyrd greatest hits CD. It sounded great. It sounded like freedom.

“If I leave here tomorrow, would you still remember me? For I must be travelling on now, ’cause there’s too many places I’ve got to see.” I was just listening to the music but I was seeing approving nods from the merchants around and big smiles and I realized I was dancing, so I got into it, once the crowd is locked in on you, you can’t stop, “but if I stayed here with you, girl, things just couldn’t be the same. ’cause I’m as free as a bird now...” I took off my shirt. “and this bird you can not chaaaange, oh, oh, oh, oh.”

People were laughing and applauding and it was a wonderful afternoon. I would hear about it from the secret police later, but on that day I got away with it.

I couldn’t completely stay away from the English Corner, though, and as long as I didn’t go crazy and get the crowd agitated, it seemed to be no problem. One of the things I enjoyed about being there was the lunches in the cafeteria. I would generally pop in there after an English Corner morning.

While I was walking to the cafeteria one morning I put on the bedouin veil I had from Dahab, just for a laugh, and walked, tapping my cane, towards the English Corner. The joke worked too well, and it didn’t work at all. It certainly attracted a crowd, and piqued their curiosity, but nobody thought it was funny. One girl asked “What does it mean?”

“I’m scaring away the evil spirits,” I said.

I could see it made people uncomfortable, though, so I took it off when I got to the cafeteria. After finishing my soup, I took the bowl to the washing station in the middle of the room but instead of just handing it to the lady I decided just to wash it myself and then thought “Well, what the heck?” and washed a bunch more, I was there clowning around with the ladies and making everybody laugh when, after about twenty minutes a young man arrived with some mean looking lads in black leather. Someone had apparently been bothered by the veil prank and given them a call.

He told me that I had to go with the men and that they were the secret police. I went outside with the men but then asked to see their badges. Students were pouring out of the cafeteria to see the commotion.

No credentials were produced. (Badges? We don't need no stinking badges.) A young girl stepped forward to assist me with English. The crowd around us just got bigger and bigger and began moving in waves as the police chased one side away and the other side moved back in. Public gatherings are illegal. As the girl was explaining the situation to me the young man who had called the police brought his arm back and hit her in the face, hard.

“Stop that! Are you crazy?” I stood between him and the girl.

“You...no good man! You...no good man!” the young man sputtered. I ran him off, chasing after him and shouting “Chong-guo bishushi miay fay da! Chong-guo bishushi miay fay da!” China must be free!

Pandemonium was breaking out. An old woman who spoke English asked me where I was from and when I told her the USA, she said “Run!”

I did not, but as the police tried to get me to move away with them I simply lay down on the ground and began singing “We shall overcome” at the top of my lungs. They didn't quite know how to deal with that.

Eventually, they did lead me off to the campus security office. It was there that I first met the woman who would later deport me. I was told that I should not be on the campus without permission. I apologized and promised to stay away. They let me go.

Again, my time in Kaifeng switched back to the street outside the university. There were a few girls running a boutique and it was great fun getting to know them. They loved to talk openly about sex. They had just gotten a new puppy and I had to tell them to feed it meat instead of bread. One morning I found the poor puppy crying. They had left it locked in a closet overnight. I set it loose and found some meat scraps for it in the garbage. They loved the little puppy. They were simply ignorant about the proper care of a pet. In China, animals are for food.

I bought a small vase from a street vendor there. He assured me it was old. I took it to Hu and asked her about it. She said it was new. I took it back and asked for a refund. The street merchant refused and in a heated argument I knocked over some of his goods and a plate broke. I just left in disgust but later felt bad about the way I had over reacted. My American conditioning

was showing again. The Chinese way was to take 3 steps back as Jianwei had told me.

Kaifeng is a special place, a rare and sparkling gem in a mundane world, but it was getting a bit too hot for me there and it was time to be moving on.

Chapter 59

Of all the gifts that can be given

The best is just to be forgiven – Guru Kalehuru

I took a bus to Xi'an to say goodbyes to my friends and also to take care of that little cheating problem there. I returned to the English language school run by the three boys Jeremy had introduced me to. They agreed to help me with the antique salesman.

We gave him a call and had one of the boys tell him that I wanted to buy more goods. We set up a place for the meeting near old town. I told the boys with me to stay close to him. I expected him to run when I told him that I had been cheated and that is exactly what he did.

We ran him down on the busy street and as I grabbed him I tore his shirt. A secret policeman surprised us and was there at once. When we told him about the problem he insisted that he would take over, much to my distress. I did not want to be involved with the police again.

They talked to him for an hour and got him to agree to return \$2,000 to me. I'd paid \$5,000, but I still had the goods, so it was a fair resolution. I'd gone there hoping for just that result, of course, but I was kind of amazed it had actually happened. I gave him a shirt, because I just happened to have one on me, and we waited for his wife to show up with the cash. She was as terrified as he was. I took the boys out for a nice dinner to celebrate.

I called Hui Bo and gave her the good news. She said she was very happy for me but gave no indication that there was any chance we might possibly, conceivably get back together again.

Now that I had some cash I went back to Kaifeng. I bought some scroll paintings from my good friends in the market building and paid \$200 for a cloisonné horse from Hu that was as big as a St. Bernard, had beautiful stones all over it and looked ancient as hell. I sent the last \$300 to one of the three boys to buy more turquoise and ethnic ceramics.

I went back down to Shanghai and stayed with John Taylor for a couple of days. He was alone now. His wife had left him and taken their young daughter and my red dildo he'd borrowed.

It had been my Mom's dildo. Not that she ever used it for its intended purpose. I wouldn't know about that, of course, but my Mom was a big practical joker, a lot like my Dad had been, they had that in common. Mom used to dress up our dogs and cats all the time and take pictures of them.

Anyway, she found the dildo once, when lots and lots of people were over at the house, I think it was Christmas. She suspected it was Mike's girlfriend's, but nobody said a word as she walked cheerfully into the living room, holding it over her head, and said "Whose is this? I just found it but don't know who it belongs to." It was Mom's after that, and she let me take it with me to China. Neither one of us had any idea what I'd use it for.

John had a new girlfriend. "Dude, she used to be a prostitute. AND she swallows!" I told him I was happy for his good fortune.

I got a new passport from the US embassy but needed a visa. I was nervous as I waited for the new seal but to my pleasant surprise there were no complications. I was ready to go back to Czech and I booked a flight.

Wang Bo was happy to see me and I took her back to John's for some lick, lick. I was still in love with Hui Bo, I was still pining for Hui Bo, but Wang Bo was present and willing and it felt real good.

However, John's girlfriend was aggressive to Bo for no reason I could understand, just plain bitchy, and Bo left in tears. The next day I helped David put his hysterical lover out, we literally had to physically carry her when she refused to leave on her own. Then we made some hash brownies. I packed some for my flight the next day.

I took one box of ceramics with me to the plane and arranged for the other goods to be shipped the next week by boat. At the airport I munched on a brownie. I was nervous as I approached the immigration desk to check out of China. My warrant from Tianjin came up and I was detained. As I waited with one of the officers I snacked on the brownies. He asked what it was. I offered him some. He waved me off. I sat there stoned and wondering what was next.

Three officers, one of whom was a woman translator, arrived by plane from Tianjin. They never searched me or cuffed me, surprisingly. They

treated me with great respect. We all spent the night in an apartment, like old friends. They made arrangements for my friend Mr. Chang to pick up my box and bags.

We flew back to Tianjin. There, these officers started searching the law books to find a way to set me free. Then they laid the biggest surprise of all on me.

“Hui Bo still love you. She come now.”

When she showed up she was all smiles and assured me that I must not worry. She talked to the police for a long time and the police decided it was all up to Ben Michaels, if he wanted to press charges or not.

They got him on the phone and I begged for forgiveness. He agreed, but made a real point of insisting that it was only because he was too busy for a trial, being the super important businessman that he was. The police told Hui Bo to take me home and make me happy.

We returned to the very same hotel where I'd gone nuts, where all the trouble had begun. We spent a week making love and it was a fascinating experience because, while she was still Hui Bo, my sweet, tiny Hui Bo, she was no longer the humble shop assistant I had first met. She was the #1 Chinese person working for that damned carnival. She was surer of herself in every way.

During the day I tagged along on her work trips. She had just been released from the hospital after a serious bout with ulcers. She was reaping the rewards of success but, on another level, she was paying the price. She gave me a coconut shell with the words “I love you” carved into it. I cried. She understood my childish actions and forgave me. I felt my own heart open, and even felt the scars of rejection from my childhood heal a bit.

Hui Bo felt emboldened by the fact that most of the Americans involved in the carnival were busy with their prostitutes. She had helped Jianwei to get a job there and his first task was to arrange girls for the boys. I found out that my main problem had not been Ben, but Ben's boss Jason.

Hui Bo told me about Jason's obsessive need for a clean shirt everyday and

his habits of control. He was busy using his position over her to control her. She had been torn between his words and mine.

Jason had spent the night in Hui Bo's bed the night I stole the laptop and mobile phone just to 'comfort' her. She was blind to his manipulations.

I had met Jason at that fateful dinner in Shanghai. He did not like the way I dressed and the fact that I spoke my mind. To me these carnival people seemed narrow minded and hypocritical.

It was an O.K. carnival. Lots of food, music and entertainment. Plenty of one-armed bandits. The Chinese love their gambling. The owner of the machines was an evangelical Christian, who could launch into a lecture on morality that would make Jimmy Swaggart proud, and occasionally did. He had a picture on his wall of him shaking hands with George W. Bush. They made me sick, the whole bunch of them.

I headed back to Shanghai and stayed at John Taylor's house. When I checked the chest of ceramics that had been picked up at the airport by Mr. Chang I almost cried. Many pieces were broken, probably when the crate was taken off the airplane in haste. I sorted out what was still worth taking, and flew back to the Czech Republic.

Chapter 60

Everything you touch, every building you walk into, has history. History is all around us. We walk through history. – Guru Sharab

The ceramics didn't bring in much profit, there weren't actually that many good pieces left, but there was a big shipment from Mr. Chang on the way. I stayed with Matyáš and Lukáš at a basement flat in Žižkov (Zheezhkov, where the zh is kind of like an sh, but with a z). It was cold, dark, and depressing, but cheap.

Vlasta was still stonewalling, but money was trickling in from the goods at the carpet store. I sent Hui Bo a computer and \$7,000, which she was quite pleased with, and I expected her to invest it all in the next load of merchandise. With her doing the shopping and me selling, we couldn't lose. Now that she had a computer, we could talk to each other on Skype and even had phone sex. Phone sex is not sex but if you're going to jerk off, you might as well jerk off with someone you love. Thank God for Skype.

Lukáš wanted to be a smuggler like I had been, and his plan was to go down to Turino, in Italy, buy a bunch of hash wholesale and bring it back to Prague to sell. He'd met some guy the year before and had called him to confirm the price but at every subsequent phone call, the closer and closer we got to meeting up, the price seemed to increase. We borrowed a Volkswagen Rabbit from Filip Vesely and went down.

Once we got there and managed to pin them down for a meeting it became obvious that these guys weren't interested in selling at any reasonable price, but Lukáš wanted to persist, to walk the streets and talk to Hippies until we found a more willing vendor. It might have worked, in a different time and place, but as we walked around Turin, I definitely felt a weird vibe. It looked like America in the 1950s. Why was that?

Then it hit me. There were no Hippies to be found. I didn't see any tattoos or piercings anywhere, nobody wearing shabby clothing, the only person in sight with long hair was Lukáš. It was early in February of 2006 and they were getting ready for the Winter Olympics. They'd cleared the streets of homeless people, degenerates, Hippies, anybody who didn't fit in with the demographic they wanted to attract: well dressed middle aged tourists with lots of money.

“Lukáš,” I said, “this doesn’t look good. We need to just get out of here right now.” He did not argue with me.

He was such an innocent young boy; he knew nothing at all about selling drugs. He’d just been impressed by all my stories and wanted to be just like me. It’s dangerous having disciples. We drove back to Prague. It was one of the few times a car borrowed from Vesely did not break down.

Lukáš, Lukáš, sweet, noble, dysfunctional Lukáš. He could screw up so spectacularly and then turn around and do something brilliant. When we got back to Prague, he found us a shop. It was spacious, right in the center, and old, incredibly old. It had been there, in the basement of that building, since the 1300s. It had been a massage parlor (quite recently), a wine shop, a residence, and a pub. It had been hundreds of different things to untold thousands of people. As we moved in, we saw a tour guide taking her group through the building. I felt connected to history. I felt this was the reason I was in Prague.

The rent was very reasonable because the building was part of an art gallery run by a Polish girl, Maja (Maya), who became our new best friend. She rented another two rooms out for weekly exhibitions. We abandoned the flat in Žižkov. Lukáš and I would sleep on the massage tables and take our meals and showers wherever we could; when you have lots of friends you have everything.

Now, we just needed to get all the merchandise out of the carpet store, which wasn’t a problem as they were perfectly happy to let us have it back. It wasn’t a big item for them.

We also needed to get all the stuff out of ‘Vlasta’s’ warehouse. I arranged to meet him there after dark, when the owners wouldn’t be around, telling him I just wanted to see what was still there. Some items weren’t and we debated about those for awhile but for the most part I was being conciliatory and nice as pie.

I told him I would like to sleep there, for security, and also because I had no place to go, which was not at all true but he bought it. “Can I trust you, Jack?” he asked and I said “Sure, sure, no problem, I’ll just leave and shut the door behind me in the morning.” As soon as he was gone I called Lukáš who was nearby with some friends and a truck. They came over; we loaded

everything up and got out of there in about half an hour. Since Vlasta had no paperwork on any of the goods and we had the receipts and customs declarations for everything, it was the perfect heist. The goods were ours. We took them back to our beautiful warehouse.

That was the beginning of a wonderful time. We would sit around the shop, or in the building's courtyard, drinking tea all day and waiting for customers. There was a Czech woman who came by often, and she claimed to be an expert on Chinese Antiques, walking around the shop and evaluating everything, and we really liked her because she thought everything was real, and old, but in fact she had no idea what she was talking about and deep in our hearts we knew it. There were also the Chinese and Viet Nameese merchants who came in, who were our competitors, they also had shops, but sometimes they bought stuff, too.

Chapter 61

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction – Newton's third law of motion

Karma is nothing but Newton's third law of motion, expressed in terms of human development – Guru Sharab

A lot of stuff was still unsold but I was anxious to get back to China, so I put everything into a van and went to Queen's Day in Amsterdam, it's a wild Dutch holiday when anybody can sell anything in the street and everybody wears orange. Got rid of the lot.

It felt good to get back to China, it had been a long time.

Small Man wanted nothing to do with me, except maybe to kill me. He was not at all happy with how the last load had worked out.

Hui Bo went with me to Zhengzhou, not far from Kaifeng, and we had a fantastic shopping trip, but then she rejoined the carnival at a city in the South, well south of Shanghai, almost down to Guangzhou.

I was not at all happy with the fact that out of the \$7,000 I'd sent her, she'd given \$1,000 to her mother, but we'd done great with the rest and I was still madly in love with her so it didn't seem like a big deal at the time.

I followed her down. Jianwei was also working for the carnival, too, and he had the flat below hers. They were lovely, modern apartments.

I became the Chinese wife. I scrubbed all the floors and had a hot bath waiting for her, with rose petals floating on the surface, when she came home from work. But, Jason was always there in the background. Publicly, he was dating Baozhai, Caleb's old girlfriend, but Hui Bo worked for him, too, and there was one thing Jason liked above all others and Hui Bo had it right between her legs.

She threw me out after an argument and I lived in the town for a week but couldn't actually tear myself away and then she called me back. There is something very special about makeup sex so I was feeling great and confident, potent and powerful, when she told me she had a crush on a

young Serbian guy who worked at the carnival. I suppose I could have handled it better.

My jealousy was evident, but she went overboard when she called him while I was there. “Come on, Bo, I’ll take you out, we’ll have a nice time,” I said but that just set her off, she started attacking me with the phone and her fists and then she told him – in absolute perfect English, she was so different now from the shy, little shop girl I had met in Shanghai not even two years before – that her boyfriend was beating her up and he should come over right away.

That really ticked me off and I shoved her out the door, slammed it behind her, and locked it. Then I started throwing her clothes out the window, eight stories to the ground in the cool, night air. But, I’d learned my lesson from the hotel room heist and left her passport and her phones alone.

While she was outside, picking up her things, I went down to stay with Jianwei. After two or three days there I headed back to Shanghai, to store all the goods at Mr. Chang’s office. I called Hui Bo a week later, totally not knowing what to expect.

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?” she asked.

“What?!” I reminded her that she was the one who was sleeping with other men and I told her I loved her and wanted nothing more than to be with her, and she told me that I had to try and see things from her point of view, she had to be with the carnival and there was a lot of pressure on her and she said “I just want to be loved” and it made me a little crazy because I was doing everything I could, I thought.

I realized that Jason was my problem and it infuriated me so I came up with a plan. I wrote an e-mail to Ben, telling him about all the immorality going on at the carnival, how Jason was not only screwing his accountant, which everybody already knew about because they were boyfriend and girlfriend, but also Hui Bo and, as evidence, I included a photograph.

I thought I was showing restraint. It was just a nude photo of her, it wasn’t one of those of us actually having sex, and it was just in an e-mail to Ben, in an attempt to save her, which it did, sort of. Jason lost his job over it and went back to the U.S.

I did NOT post the photo on the internet.

Ben must have shown her the e-mail, though, because I got a phone call from her about an hour later. It was a very short call. “I never want to see you again,” is all she said, and finished the call without even giving me a chance to open my mouth. When I tried to call her back, there was no answer.

She was not the only one pissed off at me. Caleb was deported a couple months later, over a triviality, really, and I’m sure Baozhai’s family, who were well connected, had something to do with it.

I went back to the Czech Republic with some beautiful merchandise, but a broken heart.

Chapter 62

Better out than in – Shrek

The eight crates of goods from China were already in the shop. Lukáš and his friend Milan had picked them up in Hamburg. There were some amazing items: Samurai swords, with sheaths made from woven corn stalks, Mongolian armor, axes, bows and arrows, stuff like that.

Milan was a Czech policeman, who must have known somebody because he managed to circumvent the customs house in Hamburg and we ended up paying no VAT or customs at all. We started making good money for a change.

One day, we were sitting in the courtyard, drinking tea and letting the customers browse. I was a bit hung over. Šárka was there with her dog, a beautiful Irish Setter who she talked to as if he were a human being. Bára the Slovak girl was there, and had come with a really big, fat joint. A bookish, young Czech man named Radek was there, he hung out with us at the shop a lot, and a friend of Šárka's, Andrea, who was a lawyer. An old Chinaman was looking around the shop, picking up every piece and examining it, obviously checking out his competition. I took a big whiff on the spliff and it just totally heightened the post-alcohol binge nausea, and I ran into the shop, picked up the nearest vase and puked into it, a huge and noisy cascade of bile and chunks, into a receptacle which may or may not have been eight hundred years old.

He looked over at me but did not say a word, just kept picking up vases, looking them over, turning them upside down, looking inside them, until he got tired of it and left.

I felt great after that.

Chapter 63

We're all a little weird. And life is a little weird. And when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall into mutually satisfying weirdness—and call it love—true love. – Robert Fulghum

I packed up a couple boxes of stuff and made another trip to Amsterdam. It was to be a life changing trip. There was a woman staying at The Ark named Lisa, and it was her 50th birthday. Now, the 50th birthday in Holland is kind of a special event. Women become Sarah and men become Abraham. They put up banners, and huge effigies of old people. She had a banner strung up in her room, '50 Sarah 50 Sarah 50 Sarah' in silver and blue and she'd just said to Andre, "Yes, I'm Sarah. Now, where is my Abraham," when I walked through the door. She took it as a sign.

We were a lot alike; in fact our lives were parallel in many ways. We'd both had very conflicted childhoods. I don't know if you'd describe her mother as bi-polar or schizophrenic but all the neighborhood kids thought she was great, funny, eccentric, she used to carry a vastly oversized purse and pull strange things out of it to play with, or fun snacks. But, you never knew. Sometimes she would respond playfully like that, and other times the simplest question or request would send her into a screaming rage, which could turn violent. She beat Lisa horribly and often locked her in a dark closet for extended periods of time.

We both had a healthy disrespect for the law and authority, we both enjoyed dumpster diving and a Sunday night scavenger's walk became a regular part of our routine, we would find dishes, clothes, flower pots for the balcony, all sorts of cool stuff. Amsterdam's garbage is rich.

She'd worked as a prostitute and, still skinny at 50, sometimes still did. She had been a madam of multiple brothels and a crusader against human trafficking. She had made a fortune but lost it all because her partner had the money, millions of dollars, in a numbered Swiss account, and then he died suddenly, a cold turned to pneumonia and she eventually convinced him to go to a hospital and thought everything would be all right and he died suddenly in hospital and she only realized after a couple of weeks, dealing with the shock and the grief, that he'd never given her the account number.

The bank just totally blew her off when she called, the bastard on the other end of the phone actually laughed.

We became a couple at the Ark. She would bring me breakfast as I hammered away at the keyboard, writing down the notes that would become this book. She would bring back bisexual women and we would have threesomes. I was the Shit Guru and she was the Slut Guru.

Every day I would chant my Gayatri Mantra and breathe through the left nostril, a technique I'd learned 37 years previously.

They say the grass is always greener and to some people that is just a way of rationalizing where they are because they lack the ambition, or the energy, or the courage, to cross that fence, to walk over that hill, to set foot in their neighbor's back yard, but to me it's a compulsion, as inescapable as the urgings of testosterone.

When I am in Prague, I am always talking about Amsterdam and China, when I am in China, I am always talking about Prague and Amsterdam, and when I am in Amsterdam I spend hours extolling the virtues of Prague and ranting about the mysteries of the semi-hidden kingdom. Eventually Lisa caught the bug and agreed to come back to Prague with me.

She was a natural.

But, after a few months I felt China pulling me back, Lukáš was more than capable of handling the shop except that he was always far too nice and didn't charge near enough for the merchandise.

Also, the more I thought about it, the angrier I got that Hui Bo had siphoned off \$1,000 of 'company funds' to give to her mother. I had nothing against her mother, but her family had done nothing to help make the money and I am not one to bury my grievances. Be up front about everything, get it out in the open air, that's the way I feel about it, so I planned another trip to Tu Xun Di.

In the meantime, Šárka had fallen in love with an American man and followed him to America, leaving Artur in total control of their real estate operation, which had turned into a powerful, well oiled, money making machine.

Chapter 64

When you are a stranger in a strange land, you see new things every day
– Guru Sharab

This time, though, I had a visa that allowed multiple entries, but only a month at a time, I figured that would be enough but after a month I had absolutely nothing done, I spent the time seeking out some people and avoiding others, fooling around at the markets as usual and bang, before you know it, a month was up. I went to Laos, just to come back, but I stayed a couple of weeks and it felt great – a vacation from the vacation from the vacation. Nobody knew who I was.

There were two ways in which Laos was the same as China, and they were two ways that are very important to me. The people were very friendly and there were plenty of markets where I could go and make friends. I met a woman who sat all day at the market with her children, maybe lots of people's children, and she gave me tea and snacks and said "as long as you sit, we sell."

Then I went to Tibet, I suppose that's a must-have-been-to place among those on the path to enlightenment, but it just seemed an interesting place to go and we went with some people from Shanghai we'd met along the way, accommodation was cheap and pleasant but, oh, the food was sour. Yaks milk, eggs, and sour tomatoes. As one travels, one experiences all the foods and tastes the sour with the sweet; and then sneaks out for Chinese.

Jianwei met me in Shanghai and for the first ten days he kept me hidden in a bath house. He was worried because I owed a lot of people money, notably Small Man and Mr. Mu. I gave massages to all the girls and they liked that. They also enjoyed my stories, and the adventure of the situation, and the fact that I was not a customer. It was an interesting place and, as I understand it, typical of Chinese brothels. At the street level there was a sauna and lockers, on the next floor up there was a buffet (plenty of fish dishes) and they also did a bit of theater, like a Chinese vaudeville. It was a very respectable public place still. The next level was like an interim floor, a way station, a buffer zone, there was just a couch and a TV, and then all the action took place up on the 3rd floor - or 4th, depending on how you count.

We went to Jianwei's mom's home. It was in a rural area of Henan province, same province as Hui Bo, but Jianwei's family were relatively well off, his mother had a nice, comfortable villa. It was boring as hell there.

So I went to a local bath house and there was a theater happening going on. I got invited up to the stage and I was doing my crazy dance and I could see a group of about 15 or 20 girls, who were very obviously hookers, so I leaped at them and chased them through the audience, it was a great laugh, I saw them later on in the chill out room and one of them reached under my bath robe and touched my dick and giggled and said "ooh, how big" and then all the other girls came by and touched, I eventually went ahead and paid the first girl for a massage, but in the end I just jerked myself off. The towel boy was getting off on it, too, just native Chinese curiosity.

Then Jianwei and I went to Kaifeng and got enough stuff for another load. Jianwei was very much against the idea of me going back to Tu Xun Di and I didn't want to go directly against him, my one true contact, so I went to visit my friend Kitty in Beijing, planning to double back and do it later. This was the time of the Olympics, it was the happening place in the world to be, and fireworks were just the start of the action. On the train up, for a change, I'd made the acquaintance of a couple of fellow foreigners, an Israeli and an American, and Kitty helped us all find a hostel.

The Israeli had had a knife confiscated from him at the train station. "Just a little knife," he said, doing his best Paul Hogan impersonation, which was pretty bad. The American guy claimed to be a break dancer. On the way into the club, security found a vibrator in my fanny pack. I thought this was funny and was demonstrating possible uses, much to their confusion. The Israeli kid was staying as far away from us as he could be within the same club. There were about twenty military police with white helmets and matching sash, with Chinese lettering, they looked something out of Star Wars, but it was definitely a weird vibe.

The American kid was getting nowhere, staring at the beautiful women but making no move, starting no conversations. "When are you going to start dancing?" I asked.

"There's no room," he said with a resigned smile, the same weak smile smiled by millions of men in millions of discos around the world every night who are totally resigned to getting no nookie and are just going through the

motions.

“I’ll show you how to make room,” I said and went out and went nuts on the dance floor. The Federation Troops (Chinese military police) stopped me but I just started dancing with them and they retreated to their positions beside the wall, grudgingly, with what I’m sure they thought were nasty looks. Then I ripped open my shirt and they came out to stop me again.

I was wearing some pink, extremely elastic underwear that I’d bought in Prague because it was super cheap and it doesn’t matter anyway, nobody sees your underwear, right? So, I stretched it out, just to get a laugh, and the elasticity was amazing, it stretched and it stretched and it went right over my head. The police didn’t like that either, but the crowd was definitely on my side.

Somebody shoved me into the dance cage and I started doing a simulated sex thing in there, with a guy, it was all a big laugh, and somebody passed me up a shot but I’m really not a heavy drinker, just a natural wild man, so I poured it over my head and that got a laugh which gave me far more satisfaction than any alcohol rush, and somebody passed up a beer and I shook it up to get a fizz going and then poured the foamy mess down my pants and people were passing up drinks just to see what I’d do with them and I was a sodden mess, doing somersaults inside the cage, until eventually the police did kick me out.

I met the Israeli and the American back at the hostel. They were amused by my antics but the next day they each went on their way.

I stayed a few more days in Beijing, to see the sights and spend time with Kitty, but my month was almost up again and I’d made no more progress at getting my \$1,000 back, beyond letting my intentions be known.

So, I went back to Kaifeng but before going out to Tu Xun Di I stopped into the immigration office to try and get an extension on my visa. Laos had been lovely, but that was a long way to go.

Things did not work out like I planned. Instead, my past caught up with me. They brought up the English Corner incident and I was forced to admit that I was wrong to tell female students about sex, and I hoped that would be an end on it.

Then the door opened and a woman walked in and I saw who was out to get me. It was the woman who I'd first seen in the campus security office after the kerfuffle at the English Corner, so that made sense. Then, she opened her mouth and I was stunned at the words that came out. "Hui Bo didn't steal that money. You gave it to her."

They did not extend my visa. On the contrary, they gave me 72 hours to get out of China.

Chapter 65

You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run - Kenny Rogers

I didn't like that much so I went back to the market and told a girl there who had a stall, who I was keen on and if time and circumstances had allowed might have been my third Chinese romance.

She advised me to see a lawyer so I did and he didn't come cheap. He told me what they were doing was entirely illegal, they couldn't kick me out of the country just for talking about sex and besides, if they wanted to deport me they had to pay for the ticket.

So, I went back on the third day and told the woman that I wasn't leaving and if they wanted to deport me they'd have to pay for the ticket. She was furious. The translator was trying to just tell me what she said, but her tone of voice said it all. She took it as a personal insult that I was still there.

The translator was a kind man who was trying to give me the necessary information and maybe buffer the abuse a bit but when he said "You've really got to get out of here, right away," I understood the threat of violence, maybe serious violence.

I left the office and went to Hu and her husband and asked them to keep me in their house so I would be safe and explained the situation and they said no way, they didn't want that kind of trouble, but it was too late for me to catch a train, which was what they recommended, so Mr. Hu took me to a part of town where they had little, cardboard shacks for rent, just room enough to sleep. It was no more secure than a tent but it did have an actual door and it was dirt cheap.

I slept in fear, and went to the train station first thing in the morning. I took the train to Hong Kong, walked across the border which isn't really a border and flew back to Prague from there.

Back in Prague, I stayed in contact with the lawyer via e-mail and he insisted that I could appeal the case so after a few months I booked a flight and flew back into Shanghai.

They wouldn't let me into the country, wouldn't let me out of the airport, wouldn't let me call my lawyer, the American embassy, or anybody. They said they were going to put me on the next plane back to Prague and then marched me over to a gate area where an Aeroflot flight to Moscow was boarding.

This was not the triumphant homecoming I'd hoped for and I realized if they got me on that plane it was all over. Seized with inspiration, I clutched at my chest and fell to the floor, faking a heart attack more convincingly than Fred Sanford ever did.

The Chinese officials didn't believe me, I don't think, but the Russians didn't want me on their plane if there was a chance I was going to die on them, and I wasn't even one of their paying passengers. A crowd began to gather, some sympathetic, most curious. There was lots of hushed chatter, and plenty of people were taking pictures, and video, some of them may have even been press.

I was going to be on the news! I pulled myself up to a sitting position and shouted "Chong Guo shiu way da duh! Chong gue shiu way da duh!" (China is great!).

Then I saw two men approaching with a heart monitor but, not being a doctor, I didn't know what it was and it looked to me like a taser, or worse, and I started to skitter away on all fours, like a dog. They caught me.

That flight did leave without me, of course, neither the pilot nor whoever his bosses were wanted to hold up the flight and inconvenience their regular customers for a crazy man.

I spent the night under guard in a room at the airport, and when I woke up in the morning, realized that it was time to just give up. There were police there, and medical technicians, with all their equipment, standing by.

So, I was more co-operative this time, and got onto the plane. It was Aeroflot again, and I had Russian secret servicemen sitting either side of me. From Moscow, they didn't want to transport me the rest of the way to Prague and we argued about that for a while but, in the end, they didn't want a crazy person in their airport any more than the Chinese did.

Chapter 66

Eat what grows in the garden and you will be close to the Earth
– *Guru Sharab*

Fortunately, Jianwei was well on top of the business end of things, and another shipment was on the way. Lukáš had the shop well under control, his main vice was that he was an easy touch, almost viscerally opposed to making money, he was so agreeable he could be bargained down easily. Lisa must have been back in Amsterdam at the time, because she wouldn't have approved my next move.

She can be an insanely jealous woman. She once attacked an old girlfriend of mine with an umbrella as she arrived at the bus station at Na Knížecí for a strictly friendly visit, and then wheeled and went apeshit all over my head until the umbrella fell to pieces. That was Klára. You could say Klára did not have very good luck visiting me in Prague.

I decided to take Šárka to Venice. Her American prince had been busted for drugs and was doing time, and in her absence Artur had been running the business and had even taken her name off the bank account.

So I figured a trip to Venice would do her good. It didn't go well. There were some beautiful moments, but we argued a lot, she kept nagging on me to spend money on things; she wanted to stay in hotels, things like that. On the way back, in a city called Torreverde, she went off completely and left, by train, angrily.

It was a beautiful city; as elegant as Florence, as ornate as Rome, and far less crowded and touristy than Venice. I wish Šárka could have seen it that way.

I went down to the tourist office and they give out free maps but with teeny, tiny print that was hard to read even with strong glasses, but they were good enough for my plan. I took a bunch of them and was handing them out to tourists along with a line of bullshit and an offer to show them around and I got a little spare change and a couple of meals out of that but it was uninspiring so I stopped doing it after a day or two and started busking.

Busking must be easy, it must be a piece of cake for people who can actually

play a musical instrument or sing. I think of them as amateurs, pikers, they don't know what it's like to have to try and hustle change without any such talent whatsoever.

I would stand on the street corner and shout out the songs, it wasn't singing, and dance like a maniac, which had served me so well in China, but most people just gave me dirty looks. Then the police came to shut me down but a man came from across the street, a Cherokee Indian, and he said "Hey, man, how would you like to come sing with the Cherokee?" and I said sure, and the policeman walked away and I had a new set of friends.

There was another day I wound up fooling around with an organ grinder and I played the monkey and that was a funny routine for an hour or so.

While going through the garbage one beautiful Italian afternoon I came across a bunch of old books. I couldn't read them, of course, they were all in Italian, but I took them to the old book seller (that is, he was a guy who sold old books, not an old guy who sold books) and the thought did go through my mind "What if he's the one who threw them out, he'll know I found them in the garbage and he'll kick me out of his shop like a stray dog," which he didn't. I didn't get much but it was a profitable venture and I made the acquaintance of the ever amiable Alberto.

Alberto would smoke joints in his shop, made a very nice espresso, and had a sizable collection of Pinocchio dolls. He didn't speak any English at all except he'd memorized a lot of songs and he would communicate that way, when somebody told him where they were from he had a song ready: Sweet Home, Chicago, L.A. Woman, I Love Paris in the Springtime, When Irish Eyes are Smiling, and so on. He sometimes came up with something totally out of thin air and stupid and wrong because he didn't understand a word but he didn't give a fuck, people were happy and they bought his books, or mostly didn't. I doubt the bookstore was a major money spinner.

I met a girl at that bookstore, Rossanna, who lived in a vinyard deep in the green hills of Tuscany just outside of town. There was a building with the servants' quarters and she lived up above that with her little girl, barely more than a toddler when I first met her. There were kegs stacked all around the yard.

Rossanna was impressed when I found a bunch of rose petals in the garbage

and laid them down in the walkway that led to her door. I began to live with her, and continued to do so through seven or eight trips back to beautiful Torreverde, two months here, three months there. I would bring coal from the Czech Republic which was greatly appreciated. Sure, it is Italy, land of sun and gorgeous summers, but we were up in the hills and it could get right nippy during the winters.

Like me, Rossanna loved living close to the Earth, and I can still hear her sweet voice saying “Jack, would you please go out and pick some bay leaves” because they grew there and that is probably why bay leaves are such a standard thing in classical Italian spaghetti sauces.

Another time she asked me to go into town to buy bread but on the way in I forgot what kinds, she’d told me three, but there are so many impressions coming in all the time, the trees, the birds, thoughts of everyone I’d ever known and dreams for the future, sometimes the information in your head just gets recorded over and is lost. I explained my dilemma to the baker and he said they had dozens of different breads from seven different grains and I just said “Give me one of each,” and went home with a seven loaf sampler. Rossanna was happy with that.

Torreverde was a little paradise on Earth for me, a garden of Eden in the Tuscan hills, but on one of my trips back to Prague I decided to take a side trip over to Bulgaria – trains are great but you have so much more mobility, so much more chance to just get up and go when you have a car – and visit my old buddy Kryštof, who was living in a beautiful but dilapidated town of stone buildings, unpaved streets and ancient, worn, stone bridges across the swiftly running stream. He was working with another guy and whatever volunteer travelers who were passing through, trying to restore an old building using the most green technology possible. When I was there there were a bunch of English guys, and one Bulgarian.

All over the world, at random points here and there, there are people trying to build their own version of an ecotopia, people who are really trying to make the world a better place. It reminded me of what I was trying to do at Gaia Farm. I stayed about a month there, but Torreverde was calling me home.

Probably on about my 3rd or 4th trip, I was hanging out in town and I saw two black men walking and asked them where they were from and they

were Americans. “Italia loves the black man!” I shouted and they were amused by that. They were actors and working on a Spike Lee movie so I took them to a pot dealer and got them some pot and then took them to sort of an upscale restaurant, a place where Tom Cruise had eaten, and sat there talking with them for a while and then they asked the way to the train station and I told them but warned them away from one restaurant on the way which I knew was a racist place and a Hippie friend of mine had been stabbed there and they started walking but I shouted after them when I saw they were about to miss their turn and they started running. I guess they’d had enough of me.

The last time I was in Torreverde was with Caleb and Lisa, we had a plan to sell pot to finance the trip, we cut it up but it wasn’t dry yet so when we got to Rossanna’s place we parked in the driveway and set up a drying operation in the barn, basically just laying everything out flat on some paper.

Rossanna was with this guy, she didn’t like him, he was kind of an abusive, domineering jerk but he was her daughter’s father. He was also into voodoo, and not in a white wizard sort of way.

I went into Torreverde to try and sell some of the pot, leaving Caleb and Lisa with Rossanna and the creepy guy. The daughter was staying with her grandmother, she did that a lot. Well, Caleb is a quiet man, he never causes trouble with anybody, but Lisa did not like Rossanna right off the bat, for extremely unfair reasons. Rossanna had been her mother’s name. She also wasn’t taking any crap off creepy guy, who was really angry with us for bringing the weed and ‘legally endangering his family.’

Lisa tried to phone me to say she wanted to get the hell out of there, she hated these people but I didn’t answer because I was already on my way back and she went crazy over that, like even if I’m 5 minutes away I’m supposed to answer the phone to let her know, which is silly, so the next day we drove her up to Milan and I put her on a plane back to Prague, but that was, essentially, the end of my relationship with Rossanna as well.

Meanwhile, Šárka had managed to convince Artur to let her back into the business. In fact, they split it into two divisions and each ran one. Also, she had promised to pay him a lot of money, but started stalling after making a payment or two and then just flat out said she wasn’t paying any more. Artur wouldn’t press her for it. He just couldn’t bring himself to do that.

I offered to help. I bought the debt from Artur, so he got something, which is better than nothing (the total she owed him was almost 200,000 Kč, which was about \$15,000 at the time) and prepared to take Šárka to court over the rest. I enlisted the help of Andrea, Šárka's lawyer friend. For her, like for me, this was just business.

The thing that I need to point out here is that suing people is really rare in the Czech Republic, almost unheard of. If you spill coffee on yourself at a restaurant, tough luck, that's on you. Slipped on ice on your neighbor's steps? You should have been more careful. It's like the polar opposite of America.

The court process is long, and tedious, and most people just say 'Forget about it. Too much trouble.' In a way, that's sort of why it worked, it was so unexpected. We set up a meeting with Šárka and her lawyer, who advised her to pay up or she might lose everything, and so she paid. She wasn't happy about it, though.

Artur got a Jeep Cherokee and a bit of cash and I got enough cash to keep me going for quite a while. This was good, because there was only a little bit left of the Chinese stuff from the last couple of batches, of which I would sell a thing here, a thing there over the next several years, almost up to the present.

Lukáš had a bunch of T-Shirts that he'd bought in Turkey along with some leather goods, when he'd gone there with his very exotic Algerian girlfriend. Some of the shirts were black with white skulls on them and heavy metal lettering but Lukáš had, in the meantime, discovered Jesus and wouldn't sell them and wouldn't let me sell them. "Jack," he said, sort of sadly and condescending, as though speaking to someone who had not seen the light, "would Jesus have sold these T-shirts?"

He gave a bunch of shirts to the inmates of a prison in Brno but said he was going to burn the ones with skulls. I stole a few of them, just to save them from the fire.

Chapter 67

The advantage of flying over driving is that since you are only a passenger, you can go ahead and drink – Guru Sharab

I hadn't spoken to my Mom in a while which was unusual. She wasn't answering my calls and I was worried. She was 78. Also, Lisa had never been to America and this seemed like a golden opportunity for that.

I was not prepared for what we were about to see. We walked into the house, the ranch style house my Dad had built for us so many years ago when I was just a little kid, and found my mom in bed. There were no sheets on the bed and the blankets were stained with various substances and more than a little smelly. There was garbage, stacks of garbage, all over the house. You had to tread a narrow path to get through.

She had lost a massive amount of weight, it was clear she hadn't been eating and she admitted that she hadn't been taking her insulin, either. The dog would pee on the corner of the bed, marking his spot right there because nobody ever took him out.

The toilet was kaput. Mom had to use a bucket to bail water out of the bathtub and throw it down the bowl. The kitchen sink was leaking and the refrigerator was filled with garbage that a starving animal wouldn't have eaten.

I was furious with my brothers. Four of them still living within a half hour drive and she was living like this. One of my sister-in-laws occasionally looped by to drop off some food, but that wasn't doing anything to improve the situation.

We set out to clean things up, a job that was so bad that a cleaning company had estimated it at \$5,000. Just taking out the trash made a huge improvement, but there was so much more to do. Mom liked Lisa right away. "Where did she learn to throw stuff away like that?" she said, as Lisa tore through her life long collection of hoarded junk.

Louie the terrorist came over and we argued. He let his pit bull in and it attacked Mom's dog. The police came but with everybody shouting at once they couldn't figure out what was going on and arrested us both. Mike,

amazingly, sided with Louie, which surprised me because there's no love lost between the two of them, either. They threaten to kill each other regularly. They held us overnight and let us both out the next morning on the understanding that the first one of us to screw up was coming back.

I was released first and went straight home and pulled about 10 cartons of rotten eggs out of the fridge and smashed them all over the inside of his car. It wasn't actually Louie's car; it belonged to a friend of his and Mom kept saying "Oh, I don't think his friend is going to like that," but she was laughing.

Louie, in turn, called Interpol and told them Lisa and I were big time drug smugglers. But we both steered clear of the local cops for a while.

It took Lisa and I about another week or so to get Mom sorted out, and in that time I communicated with my brothers as little as possible. I did have one very interesting conversation with Brian, though. He said "I heard you had a little trouble at Shanghai airport," which surprised me because I hadn't told him about it. Apparently, he'd heard about it from a Chinese colleague of his (I was world famous!) and his colleague said the reason they wouldn't let me into the country was for my own protection. If I'd gone back to Kaifeng there were people waiting there to kill me. I could believe that.

Lisa is wonderful, Lisa is a saint, but Lisa's got some weird complexes and I was about to find that out on the flight home. We had set aside \$20 for the specific purpose of getting something to eat during our transfer at O'Hare, before boarding our international flight, and then I said I wasn't hungry. She went off like a volcano and started screaming at me and totally causing a scene, which is not hard in an airport, people sitting all around bored and waiting and starved for entertainment.

I said "O.K., we'll go get something to eat" but the damage was done and she ran off. There was nothing to do except go to the gate and get on the plane and hope she did the same, which she did, but it was a weird moment.

Once we got on the plane I tried to get a stewardess to bring us a free drink. "We just got married!" I said. I don't know if she wasn't buying it or just didn't care, but she made it clear that drinks were not free.

Lisa could see that my good passenger routine wasn't getting the desired results, so she pulled off the armrest and threw it in the aisle, ranting on about "fucking piece of shit airplane" and I looked up and very sweetly asked if we could change seats. She said no to that, too, but then she did bring us a few free drinks, just to shut us up I think, and somewhere over the North Atlantic, after four or five bottles of wine, those little airline bottles, Lisa gave me a blow job.

I'd been staying with Lisa in Amsterdam about a month and a half when she walked in on me sending an e-mail. "Who is that to?" she asked, and when I said "It's to you, baby" she knew I was lying and went straight into rage mode, so I had to get out of town for a while. I decided to head down to Switzerland and visit a friend there, she was a woman but not a girlfriend, and take down a vial of hash oil, and Andre gave me a couple grams of bud for the road. Europe had been becoming cooler and cooler about no border checks.

So, I hopped on a bus and went, but I forgot one little thing. Switzerland is not in the EU. We were stopped at the border and as soon as they looked at my passport, my name triggered a warning, due to my brother Louie. So, the cop searched me and first he found the marijuana. That wasn't much, but my case wasn't looking so good. Then he found the oil.

I don't know what he was thinking. Maybe he knew what it was and he was being cool. Maybe he thought it was some kind of hippie herbal medicine. But he sniffed it, closed the cap and put it back in my bag. After rummaging around a bit more, he held up the marijuana and said "This, we throw away."

"Yes, sir" I said. Throw away, my ass. Cops got high that night.

Still, I was free, and in Switzerland. I delivered the oil to my friend and for the next week she showed me the sights on the shores of Lake Geneva, some old Roman Ruins, the place where Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein one dark and stormy 19th century night, and a lot of cool parks and cafes, and we stayed high the whole time.

Chapter 68

If you expect gratitude, or appreciation, you are likely to be disappointed.
– Guru Sharab

I didn't go back home when my mother died. I'd already said my goodbyes and didn't feel like listening to my worthless brothers' phony sentimentality. I'd spoken with her several times by phone and she was in agreement with me.

I did, however, go back about a year after that. I was talking to one of my old Hippie friends from back in the days at Gaia farm and of course the old Kwance Maciji scandal came up. People still talk about that like it was the Civil War or something.

“What really burns me is that people think it was my fault, that's what Danny Smith told everybody. I could have really burned him at the time, if I'd just told the whole truth, but I didn't want to get him into trouble and I've kept my silence all these years and this is how the son of a bitch repays me,” I said, because Danny had been slandering my name all over the county.

“Well,” he said. “You need to tell your side of the story. Why should you care what Danny thinks?”

I could see he was right. It was time. So, I went to the newspaper in town and talked to a reporter, and he seemed sympathetic and was taking notes and I was already to open up the paper the next day and see the real truth revealed but what happened was that about an hour later I was over at Cara's house and we could hear a helicopter outside and I went out and looked up and they took off right away, but I'm sure it must have been Danny even though I couldn't make anybody out. I didn't know anybody else who hated me that much and had enough money for a helicopter, even if he'd just rented it.

I was amazed at how fast it happened. It was as quick as Hui Bo had called me after I sent the photo to Ben Michaels and I could see that pretty much the same thing had happened. As soon as I'd left the office, that reporter was on the phone with Danny, and now he was trying to intimidate me. I realized that the story was never going to make it into the paper.

Chapter 69

We're all just walking each other home – Baba Ram Dass

Where my road ends, yours begins. Have a nice trip! – Guru Sharab

Now, in the present, I live in Prague, and I still love it but Prague has changed. The whole Czech Republic has changed. It is no longer the land of smoke filled pubs with long, wooden tables. Some places don't allow smoking at all, or have separate sections, or don't allow it during peak periods. A few places don't even allow dogs any more. They no longer have the naked weather girl on TV.

You can't even buy pot in the Sombrero Rojo any more. It's O.K., there are plenty of other places, but it's a change I never thought I'd see.

They have embraced the West, and there are glitzy, modern malls everywhere you look. Things are more expensive than they used to be. You can no longer have a big meal, go out drinking until 5 a.m., come home in a taxi and write the cost off as negligible, but whenever I have visitors from the U.S. they still rave about how cheap things are.

On the bright side, there are a lot more good restaurants and customer service has lost a bit of its rough edge. It is still the city of a thousand spires, a fairy tale fantasy land that lights up at night.

I drove by the cemetery where I'd licked Bara's pussy as she lay on a tombstone and they've cleared away all the brush, trimmed the trees and cut the grass. You can see from one busy street right through to the busy street on the other side, so there won't be any more of that going on. Prague has lost a little bit of its romance.

Bara married an English guy and had a little boy, but she didn't like living in England, the marriage didn't last, and she moved back to the Czech Republic and now teaches in an elementary school.

I am older now, and the cane I always carried as a prop is a little bit less of a prop. Mostly it gets used when cars try to edge through the zebra crossing. If they are close enough to a pedestrian that the pedestrian can reach the hood of their car with a stick, they deserve to get whacked, so they do.

Some of my friends from the old days are still around. Damian, the artist, inherited a flat in Vienna and has achieved a little bit of fame there, but the rest of the Podbaba gang still live together in the big house near the theater where there is a big mural, about 2 meters wide by a meter high, showing all of us in the old days.

We have great cookouts and parties there, although the reasons have changed. It used to be ‘let’s all get together and get hammered’, but now it’s more likely for a wedding, or a kids’ party. The theater has survived two major floods and may eventually need to be torn down, but they’re hanging on as long as they can.

Motormouth Mike is still around, busking on the steps up to Prague Castle. He’s got a kid, a son who looks just like him, and he fights with the Mom a lot. They’ve both got volatile personalities and one day he said to me “I don’t even know if that’s my child” and I laughed and said “Mike, even I know that that’s your child” and it’s true, anybody seeing them on the street would know instantly it’s his child, they’ve got the same fierce mane.

Julian the Sufi poet is still there, and still organizing poetry readings, but now also posting stuff on YouTube.

Desmond is the surprising one; he has become a very respectable, drug-free member of the community. He lives in Amsterdam and works as a nurse in a home for the elderly.

Dragana did not fare well. I was back in Prague between trips to China when I met someone from that crowd and asked if she was still doing heroin.

“No, she gave up the heroin.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m so glad to hear it.”

“She’s dead.”

“What?!!”

It turns out that after she quit heroin, cold turkey, force of will, she started getting interested in men again which, for most people, would be a great thing, but her taste in men was as poor as her taste in drugs and she started

dating a guy who beat her to death.

So many dead. Sammy, the American guy who drove back with me from Amsterdam that time the football player almost kicked my ass at El Sombrero, the one who eventually came through for me, got hit by a car.

Kenny, the calm man who could weld two cars together, who walked through the eye of the hurricane that was the world of drug smuggling and never even blinked, died young. It was some sort of cancer, but he faced death with the same equanimity that he'd faced life. He was a saintly man.

Kryštof the crazy Canadian is doing real well, after Bulgaria he just kept going, and going. He's somewhere in Malaysia or the Philippines last I heard, trying to set up a low-rent island resort, a poor man's palm tree paradise with lots of hammocks and people sleeping outside and drinking beer and smoking dope around the campfire, and using his computer skills to finance the whole thing.

Eva, from Pension California, is not doing well. Gradually the demographic changed, a few alcoholic, near homeless, Eastern European types got in, the western backpackers stopped showing up, and it was a downward spiral. Eva is stuck with a bunch of nightmare tenants she can't evict. Her paradise has turned into a prison.

Kevin Bennet has settled down and found a little bit of paradise, he's living in Nicaragua, working in real estate, with a hot, young Nicaraguan wife and their little boy.

Bijali is also doing well. She has started to focus her art on stained glass and truly produces beautiful work. It is no surprise that stained glass is used in churches; the light shining through the intricate patterns of colored glass evokes the divine with far greater clarity than any of the words spoken within those structures ever does.

Katya, Parivara's middle daughter, has turned out to be quite an artist, too. That's great, because she's introduced me to a lot of up and coming Czech artists, like Bloody Barbara, so called because that is both an important part of her subject matter and, frequently, one of the materials used. Then there's David, sleazy weasel David, who Katya introduced me to and he agreed to let me keep some of my antiques in his art gallery on consignment

but they didn't sell well, it was kind of a total clash of audiences. Anyway, he had a break-in and the thieves were apparently not as discerning as the customers. At first he said he'd reimburse me for my loss, but after dodging me for a long time he just up and said he didn't feel he owed me anything and wasn't going to pay. Part of the problem was that he was hooked on Pervetine, the stuff Americans call Crystal Meth.

So, I got myself a big sign, a really big sign, so big all you could see was my head and toes protruding from behind it, and two sets of fingers to the side, and it said "Pervetine Kills" and I went and stood in front of his shop, harrassing everybody who went in and telling them the owner was a drug addict. A few older women told me I was doing a good job, some pervetine kids came by and were heckling me a bit, not in a mean way, just in a 'we're being really stupid but we think we're funny' way, saying "Pervetine is great! We love pervetine!" but they wandered off when the police arrived. The police also congratulated me on the wonderful job I was doing, but David did not get busted and his damned shop is still open.

Šárka won't speak to me. I saw her one day on the Metro and she saw me, too, and deliberately looked away. Artur is still friendly, though.

Janet, after she decided to go back to Arcadia, had a long and happy career as an art teacher. She was loved by a whole generation of students.

Twister is still in Prague, tending bar and doing all right. He still twists up perfect joints.

I still see Gamal and Lukáš often; Gamal just helped me sell the very last piece from China, or tried to, anyway. It was that cloisonné horse from Hu, a true prize of the orient. Eventually Andre bought it from me. He's got a new place, it's a restaurant and a meditation center and it's absolutely filled with my stuff. Lukáš is still with Jesus. Once that cult gets its hand on you, it can last a lifetime.

Hui Bo will never speak to me again, either, I'm sure, and I'm sad about that because I did truly love her. In fact, there are a lot of people in China who do not want to see me again. Small Man wants to kill me.

Wang Bo is actually doing pretty well, she and a lot of members of her family got new flats because of the Shanghai Exhibition of 2010. I guess

she must have eventually divorced Small Man because the last I heard, she'd married some guy and moved to Singapore.

Jianwei remains devoted. He still says he wants to take care of me in my old age.

In the end, I still wonder who I am. I wanted to be a great Guru, but life has taught me more than I ever can teach. I am a walking box of paradoxes. I founded a farm to be a paradise on Earth, a community of like minded souls, a place of connection to the universe, and it collapsed in acrimony and bitterness. I have rejected materialism, yet spent my life chasing money. I can say, to my credit, that whenever I have had money I have been generous, I have never turned away a person who needed help, when it was within my power to give. I am a nature loving, back to the Earth, recycle everything type environmentalist, but I love cars. I left America in shame and disgrace, but I don't hate America. I love Europe. I love China. I have met beautiful, kind, interesting people everywhere I have gone.

As a Guru, I would like to leave you with these parting bits of advice, lessons on how to live a happy life:

1. Dance. Dance a lot. Let the spirit move through you.
2. Learn to give a good massage, learn to cook, learn to do something that you can do for other people which will make them happier. If everybody makes the person next to them a little happier, soon we will be living in a happy world.
3. You can really live on very little. You do not need a big house. When you sleep, you only take up as much space as your body.
4. Recycle. You can find lots of cool stuff in the garbage.
5. Masturbate. Because it feels good. And relieves stress. And if you can't do it for yourself, how can you ever expect someone else to do it for you?
6. Don't do pervetine, or heroin. That shit will kill you.
7. Be your own Guru! The advice you give yourself may not be as pious and poetically worded as the popular pundit's platitudes, but it will be more relevant to your life. Don't listen to me. I'm a shit guru. I am THE Shit Guru.

May the wind blow your way in friendship.