



**My Life as a Gypsy: a rocker blown by the wind**  
MC Radiance

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Should I have stayed in NYC?

I had gotten some mad offers my last week there. I passed on the possibility of a permanent three-way with two hot redheads... All for a chance to go sleep on a dusty, concrete, basement floor in Philthadelphia! What the hell was I thinking?

This is what I was thinking: Do not stop. Do not slow down momentum to investigate such temptation experiments. Why not? Cuz I was mobilized, man. I'd given notice on my warm studio apartment in Park Slope. I'd kissed my annoying job at MTV Networks goodbye and goddammit, I was moving to West Philly! My U-Haul was parked outside. I was committed and all excited to join a real live band with some very talented musicians. A funky world rock band, to be exact.

It was brisk and wet that November. The old Greek man next door was not happy about the existence of our practice room.

"Shut up you farking iceholes!" he would yell down over the fence.

The Philly basement proved to be damp and chilly at night. I lay in a thin sleeping bag between the water tank and the bassist's Hartke 4x10 amp. My rollercoaster life as a gypsy had begun.

Within two weeks our popping bass player quit.

"I've gotta dedicate myself full-time to my ska band. They're already playing out and making money, see? Sorry guys. I knew you'd understand."

Yup. Bigger better deal takes care of number 1, so new arrival steps in number 2. Our five piece unit was suddenly short a player. Maybe we didn't need two guitarists after all. Uh oh. Perhaps one of us two could switch to bass guitar... but which one?

The other guitarist was my best buddy from high school. I had taught him his first open chords and blues licks. Since then he had evolved into a Hendrix wailer with some mid-eastern scales thrown in via Frank Zappa. We looked at each other across the corral.

"Dude, you're a much better musician than me. You'll pick up the bass way faster than I ever could!" he flattered, that snake-tongue. "You'll be like Sting!"

"No way!" I countered. "I do all the vocals, plus master a new instrument at the same time? I can't possibly juggle all that," I said even as I caved in like a soggy cake.

Somebody had to throw some coal in the bandwagon engine now that I had moved to Philly!

After two months of sleeping like a homeless man in that basement, I landed a roommate situation in a big old Victorian house west of the college. Me, two Iranian guys, and 10 sorority chicks...

And do you imagine that would be Animal House Heaven? Panty parties and bathroom blowjobs? Not exactly. Let me tell you. Those lazy ass girls would pile up dirty dishes in the sink like the Tower of Pisa. Must've all had maids back home. Every time I passed the counter, I'd nervously peek over, scanning for rats, cockroaches and health department citations. And when I couldn't stomach the eyesore anymore, I'd put a clothespin on my nose and spend hours washing the lot by hand.

Still, our new practice space was in their basement. The coeds affably tolerated the roar. Our pounding frequently shook their walls. Although we tried to insulate the ceiling with boxes of Alfonso Mango Pulp and slabs of foam bedding, it just didn't muffle much of anything. Maybe we were farking iceholes, but at least we were rocking the world of some purdy dirty girls!

16 months of shredding, wood-shedding, honing, songwriting and recording demos later, we got a few gigs. We debuted a show of epic, funky art rock tunes! We played a frat party. Some downtown venues.

Immediately we attracted a scathing review in the only paper that reviewed local talent. A demoralizing torpedo from a bitchy punk rock Nazi who felt that we were "bloated, pretentious and pompous". And that was not our only problem, either! Our talented guitarist was devolving into a non-functional, heartbroken drunkard; our keyboardist had to decamp for grad school at Stanford soon.

So we did what all great bands do! We imploded.

I recorded a few sessions with outside players after that. Then I set my sights on somewhere less conservative/old money. Somewhere more bohemian in general. San Francisco! Things could only get better, right?

...Or so I imagined, before my eventful trek to the West Coast.

My live-in girlfriend and I rented a 'one bedroom' Ryder Truck. We spent a morning loading up, crunching our kneecaps, breaking our backs. Then we set sail toward DC.

By the time we climbed toward the foothills of West Virginia, something was very wrong. The van was a voracious, gas-sucking

lemon! We were filling up so freaking often that we would be flat broke before Kansas!

Over the phone, the rental company agreed to swap out our truck.

“Just swing on down to the Louisville depot tomorrow,” they calmly advised us.

The Shenandoah State Park road gate closed behind us after dusk. We almost didn't make it over the mountaintop. With the crest of the road just up ahead, the truck started sputtering and dying.

“Oh no! Please, please, PLEASE baby,” I coaxed. “Please just make it over the top of the mountain!”

The truck conked out 20 feet past the crest.

We coasted in neutral. No headlights. No engine. Cruised down the long, far side slope, down into the spooky night.

“There's got to be a gas station before the bottom! There has to be!” we cried.

God had thoughtfully set one down there. We filled up and pulled a marathon across state lines through West Virginia into Kentucky where we laid over at the Red Roof Inn.

The next morning I was a bit groggy. Should have had another cup of coffee before I pulled up to the manager's drive-through window, because I was totally forgetting one important detail: the height of our truck.

I bashed into the carport overhang at a skull-stunning 4 miles an hour! This slug-speed collision amazingly left a fat hole in the passenger-side, top corner of the truck. Plus a nice long crack that ran straight across the entire front panel.

“Don't worry. It happens all the time!” chortled the motel manager.

A cop took down our details, noting that the manager's insurance policy would completely cover his carport damage. “Ha! Happens all the doggone time!”

We eyed our damage and smiled wanly. I taped a plastic garbage bag across the hole in case it rained on us, and we headed for the state capital once again. We made one brief stop at a breakfast buffet bar for some quick scrambled eggs and bacon.

Should have looked the food over properly first...

On the highway, barely 20 minutes later, there was an ungodly grinding sound from somewhere behind us. I pulled over on the shoulder and climbed up on top of the cab.

Wow! The entire roof of our truck had peeled back like a goddamn sardine can lid! It was a cheap, clear-plastic, replacement sheet... Obviously, this had happened before. The 70 mile an hour wind had pushed through the hole in the front panel and the resulting pressure inside just blew the whole top off the truck.

I gaped down at our furniture and our boxes, now brightly lit by the sun.

"We got a bit of a problem, hon," I yelled down to my girlfriend.

At the Louisville depot: "You two folks are going to have to transfer your entire one bedroom apartment's worth of stuff into the new vehicle." All under the blazing noon day sun: 100 degrees and 100% humidity.

Strangely, the employees were suddenly all very busy with other projects: much too busy to lend a hand, don't ya know.

One mechanic was helpful. He pointed out that my Honda 750 Shadow, parked in the rear, could not legally be transported this way.

The repair bill they handed me had a whole lot of zeros on it... \$1400.00! Oh my freaking Lord, that would be two months rent right there. This couldn't be happening.

Later in the afternoon, we finally hit the road again. But somewhere in the rolling hills of west Kentucky, the pure adrenaline was wearing off. And those eggs and bacon were catching up fast! My girlfriend was turning green around the gills and barely hanging on to the steering wheel. My stomach hurt too...

Those eggs! They must have gone bad while sitting out on the morning buffet! and now they were having their revenge. What if our churning guts exploded before we stopped?

We approached the massive spaghetti junction at the Mississippi River.

"Which way, which way?" my girlfriend screeched.

"I don't know, I can't tell!" I shouted back, because I hadn't expected any spaghetti. "I've only got a map of the United States here. I got nothing! No detailed insets! No downtown close-ups in the corner, see?" I stabbed angrily at the spread-out map with my finger. In pained exas-

peration, she squealed to a halt on a painted median and promptly dissolved into sobbing tears.

“Don’t worry, baby. We’re almost there,” I offered, unconvinced that we could hold down our vomit much longer. We switched seats.

Finally across the bridge, all we could see was a row of riverfront skyscrapers. No budget hotels, not even a cockroach motel in sight!

We would have to hold out longer... all the way around to the far side of St. Louis, where there was finally a suitable stop.

I grimaced and hobbled into the motel manager’s office and got us a key. We parked in front of our room and then both ran, and I mean RAN. She for the toilet, me for the sink.

It was quite a symphony! We heaved and heaved until we collapsed onto the double bed, wrung out, too damn weak to stand. Just grateful for air conditioning.

A couple of hours passed. “You gotta get us a couple of cans of ginger ale,” she whispered. How did I know it was going to have to be me?

We toughed it out the next morning. Couldn’t afford to lounge around. Just trying to keep moving, we blasted through Missouri.

Up in Kansas, we got hit by Weather.

A mean squall from the northlands buffeted us around like we were windsurfing. The wipers could barely keep up with the dark torrents of rain. The truck jiggled crazily in its slippery lane. But the terror kept us alert. Wide, wide awake and focused on something other than food poisoning.

As dusk fell and the rains got left behind, we took an off-ramp into a one horse village and pulled up to a little rural motel.

My girlfriend seemed nervous. “I saw Something... There! Lurking behind the office screen door! Did you see that too?”

I had seen it too. A couple of chainsaw eyes, glued to a menacing gap-toothed face. Norman Bates’ brother?

Whoa no! We pulled out again mighty quick. There had to be more normal hotels nearby.

The one we located was up on a hill. It was a lovely spa, so modern and cozy and welcoming that we just wanted to curl up there for a week and forget to pay the bills.

Impossible, of course. The next day, racing across the plains of Colorado, we ploughed into further weather. This time it was a yellow fog, a

towering sandstorm that seemed to devour the landscape like the Blob. (Actually, sandstorms aren't nearly as bad as they sound.)

What did sound bad, though, occurred as we hauled ass up the steep highway into the Rockies.

Past Denver, our van hit a pothole in the asphalt. There was immediately a sharp crashing, splintering sound. Once again from the back of the truck.

We both knew exactly what had happened. I sadly put my hand on her shoulder. At the next rest stop we swung open the rear doors.

In shards, there lay both of her 6x6' dance mirrors...

We didn't say too much after that. Nevada's mountain ranges and desert plains came and went. At the California border there were warning signs posted. Fines for the illegal importation of flora and fauna and of... motorcycles in trucks. Miraculously, they waved us through.

Our luck was turning! Cali, at last. The Pacific Ocean along the horizon. A new life!

With relief, we descended the winding highway past Lake Tahoe. About half way down to sea level, my girlfriend pulled over to refuel. Unfortunately, she was still a bit shell shocked from the shattered mirrors.

She forgot where the back end of the truck was. She cut the wheel too soon as she turned the corner at the pump island.

That's how our van's side panel got wedged up against the inverted U barrier... and stayed there.

Neither of us could budge it: not forward, not backward.

We were saved from tow truck humiliation by a German. "I know how to do this, ja? I am a trucker in Europe."

This savvy tourist came to our rescue and managed to disengage the vehicle. Some paint was scraped off the side panel in the process, of course.

Welcome to Cali. Add it to my \$1400.00 repair tab, thanks. (Memo to self: win the Lotto soon.)

"I'm sorry, babe. I didn't mean to do it," my girlfriend groaned. "Oh dear. What more could possibly go wrong?"

Descending into the plains, I was steady on the brakes. The cars around us slowed further and further. We slowed right down to a crawl. Seems we had joined a goliath traffic jam! According to the local radio it

snaked, unbelievably, from urban Sacramento all the way to freakin' San Francisco. 87 miles.

Perhaps we were trespassing out here? and these were all omens to GO BACK...

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We had zero friends or contacts in the City of Fog. So that first week I tore around on a rented scooter, desperately scouting up studio apartments while the meter continued ticking on our replacement van.

Breakthrough! We scored an apartment in a pastel blue gingerbread house. Right in the bohemian Haight district! The price was doable. Home at last!

You guessed it: a basement. Nicely renovated, but a basement nonetheless.

We had missed the Summer of Love in '68, but we were certainly going to try to make up for it! We evolved into a pair of mop-haired hippies who worked as word processing temps to cover the bills. [Younger readers might need to google the term 'word processing'.]

I cruised around town on my burgundy 750 Honda. Hey, life was pretty good.

I felt confident enough to put together a band of my own. A funky world jam trio. The bassist we located was a beast. He used to play his Flying V in the Boston subways all by himself using delay loops to overdub. A jovial black cat... who had a real hard time avoiding homelessness. He'd tread water for a while, then sink, then climb out again, then sink.

He hooked himself up a naïve little flowerchild. She actually got herself hitched to him a few weeks after joining the band during a goddess ceremony out in the green fields of flower power. Soon, alas, the marriage was on the rocks. The sweet young thing discovered that she was way, way over her head due to his various, er, delinquencies.

But MAN could that brother play bass! And never drop the beat. He set me free to space out on guitar like I had always wanted to, during my own bassist days in Philly.

I became increasingly counterculture while living in SF. Mother Jones. Utne Reader. Raves. Spiritual parties with Pleaidean technology:

imagine room-filling pyramids, anchored by crystals the size of boulders and lit up by red laser beams.

I enjoyed trading stories with other conspiracy heads about the navy black budget and various black ops and Tesla dimensional portals to Mars from Montauk.

Channelers visited our abode. I delighted in poring over the mysterious glyphs of the Mayans. Were they communicating with me?

My girlfriend even started channeling symbols one day. [I could explain, but let's just say we were pretty far out, man.]

After four years of temping around downtown SF, I kept getting sick. Flu, bronchitis, etc. It seemed to be triggered by all the office buildings I was working in. Those giant Petri dishes had no external ventilation. They endlessly circulated the same, stale urban air through the same germ-laden filters.

Hackers were always coughing on me in crowded city buses—so there was no escape. [I was taking the bus cuz my motorcycle had crapped out. My mechanic thought I said that I would be replacing the air filter. I thought that he had already done it. Months later, there were barely a few crumbs of sponge left in the filter box, and ugly scraping sounds were coming from the cylinders. A sad end to a great motorbike...]

I was sitting all day at work sniffing and coughing in front of computers, getting eye strain and wrist ache and a sore ass... and a nagging feeling that this lifestyle was quite unhealthy for me.

Was the radiation from the computer screens dissolving my neurons? What kept making me sick? I re-read Jose Arguella's *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology*, and I wondered if this whole digitized corporate world was not the solution.

Maybe it was in fact part of my problem.

My jam band had written a ton of progressive songs and was at last ready to record a proper demo. My girlfriend surprised us: she upped the ante with the following idea.

"I wanna shoot a TV pilot that will feature your band playing a couple of songs live. A rock'n'roll cooking show. I am gonna call it *Let's Masticate*."

And so it came to be! The pilot episode got shot, on location, out in a cow field in the Hayward hills. The stage and backdrop got painted up all psychedelic. Not like Grateful Dead style: more like a funny kid's cartoon.

It was pushing 100° that day too. The drummer's chick fainted, but the rest of the crew was in a lively mood. The sound rental van, driven by our bassist, finally arrived around 5:30.

Our audio engineer was the crew member who opened up the rear doors of the van. He was the one who uncovered the Big Problem! The microphone box was supposed to contain 5 Lavalier mikes that we had ordered... But there were only four.

Four? Not five?! Oh crap. It was my credit card that had been opened to sign for all this rental equipment. And already something crucial was missing? The sound company must have goofed, that seemed obvious to us.

On the phone, the rental company denied it... Stalemate.

After the shoot wrapped, I bit the bullet and made the rental company a noble offer. Since it would always be their people's word against our people's word, I offered to split the costs with them 50/50. Fair's fair, right?

They responded to this gallantry by slapping the full \$500 replacement charge on my invoice!

Oo, that pissed me off! I dreamed of kicking their ass all over small claims court, but was (incredibly) advised by my legal counselor that I would likely LOSE this case.

I totally refused to pay. No way, Jose! I sent letter after letter to them, explaining. I talked to peons in the company, each time having to start the entire story over from the beginning. But bureaucracy is like a Wall, and you can't slip concepts like fairness and split the losses through the Wall.

I banged my head further against the inevitable. Bullheaded, I still refused to cave in to this flaming injustice.

Fine. I would never use that card ever again! Fine.

But slowly, steadily, the interest piled up regardless. One day my credit card actually maxed out... and then the harassing phone calls began.

We had to stop answering our land line, like two paranoids screening all our calls out of fear. We began to feel trapped in our Basement World. We were defenseless, hiding from the giant corporate carnivores!

My bassist, perennially short of cash, disappeared to Arizona not long after our pilot show was edited. He never returned either. His timing

was suspect and I couldn't help wondering: as honest as he was, could he have screwed me over about the missing microphone?

Months later I figured out how finally to get the credit card collectors to stop torturing us. It's simple, once you know the magic combination. Just write a letter citing Paragraph Badabing of Article Badaboom in the California Code, and... presto. [Of course, opening the mailbox was still no fun at all.]

One afternoon I came home tired from work to find a sweet black puppy dog wagging its tail inside my front door.

"Happy Birthday!" yelped my girlfriend and a couple of pals, clapping their hands and jumping around. "Isn't she just adorable? Isn't she so cute? This is Maya. She's your birthday present!" They all eagerly awaited my next reaction.

I stood there dumbfounded for a minute. In my head, all I could see was the paragraph in our lease that clearly states: No Pets Allowed.

It was too late. Couldn't take her back.

She never barked, bless her heart. Pretty, happy, but thick as a brick. She was a mix: Australian sheep dog and terrier, and for six months she gave us much joy, despite her inability to understand basic POTTY TRAINING.

Until the landlady spotted her one day.

"She's cute but you guys knew you are not allowed to have a dog down here!" she reprimanded.

She reached down to pet Maya, but I snatched up my pup first. I knew Maya would be so relieved by a stranger's touch she would pee on the carpet.

"But wait! The people upstairs have pets. We know they do!" my girlfriend protested, truthfully. "They have two cats!"

What the hell kind of double standard was going on... Were cats superior to dogs? Just because we three lived down in the basement didn't mean we should be treated like lower species on the totem pole.

Apparently we should.

"Ah, but those tenants have been here a while. Their cats are indoor animals. And their lease is different from yours. They are afraid of fleas being brought into the building. Which is exactly what your puppy will do. Now. Since you've broken your lease, I'm going to have to ask you to

move out. I'm certainly not going to ask them to move out, am I? I have to keep them happy. They pay way more rent than you two."

"But fleas are airborne around here! Everyone knows they come in with the fog! Nobody's immune! Besides, Maya has a flea collar. Plus she gets baths, and..."

"Sorry, kids. That's how it's going to be."

Grrrr. The burning vertical axis of Hierarchy snapped into ugly focus.

So we grumpily but obediently started scouting around for a new dwelling. We quickly discovered that dog-friendly apartments were few and far between. Our lease was about to run out! There were 24 hours left before I was going to have to drop Maya off at the pound!

I sat on a Golden Gate park bench, twisted up with anguish. Maya just dashed around, romping under the sun, blissfully ignorant of her impending doom.

A young boy rushed up to her. "Look, mommy! Mommy! Look!"

His mother coozied up to me on the bench. "What a sweet dog. You know, that is exactly the kind of puppy we've been trying to find. Do you know where we could find one just like that?"

Angels were smiling. On the spot, I handed the boy the dog's leash. "It's your lucky day, young man. She's yours! Come by my house and I'll give you all her gear!"

And so it was that a hippie couple got flushed out of their moldy basement brain by Maya. Maybe a puppy had actually done us a huge favor?

Maya stretched our minds wide open until we could see past our illusion of being stuck in the ground, to see that a higher power was indeed taking care of us in our hour of need.

So the hippie couple decided to do something really radical. We'd take a healthy vacation, yeah!

We flew to the Yucatan in Mexico. Without a plan.

I brought a backpack and a zarb drum and an acoustic guitar. I really wanted to go to Chiapas. I was feeling the pull of those beautiful pyramids of Palenque. All those glyphs, all that artwork, all those stone carvings...

We figured maybe a 3 week break, then we'd return and land ourselves a new place.

Little did we know!

I played my drum atop the Pyramid of the Magician in Uxmal. I dallied in the palapas on the beaches near Tulum with my pale but fine feathered girlfriend. Our cross-peninsula bus got stopped and searched 4 times for guerillas and Zapatista weaponry—that was exciting.

Finally in Palenque we got to make spontaneous love atop a waterfall, right there in the forest.

A few caps of psilocybin mushrooms into one tropical evening at our Palenque campgrounds, I was introduced to two masters of the drum. One was a joyful Brazilian shaman who had brought along his African drum and his berimbau, a two note percussion instrument that looks like a primitive hunting bow strung with a wire. The other chap was from France.

They saw my zarb and, after a short conference, they decided to take me under their wing for the night.

The shaman built a small campfire near the edge of the forest for the evening's ritual. He chanted native prayers and threw some offerings into the fire. Then we formed a triangle and laid down our beat around that primal core.

Something magical began happening! Drumming in our loincloths, we got more and more attuned to subtleties. The shaman sang Amazonian chants through his blindingly wide grin. I kept feeling like I wanted more Fire, so between beats I inched both me and my zarb closer and closer to the flames. Practically crawling onto the burning logs.

My initiators nodded approvingly as I opened up my soul. They encouraged me to rise above my talents, to go beyond my mind's limitations! Patterns came to my fingers that I had never played before! The two masters actually managed to haul me up to their level of play. All around us, the swirling ambiance of cicadas settled into a pulsing groove, in sync with our beat. The insects were listening, alright. And from deep in the jungle the hidden howler monkeys unleashed their bel-lowing like punctuation. Their roars sounded like they were saying W-o-o-o-O-O-o-o-o-w!!

Animals were obviously enjoying this groove as much as we were. We were all One! There was no denying it.

The hours passed. I sensed a part of my soul many thousands of years old... and I say that not in any pretentious way. Just a fact of life, in all its wondrous interconnectedness. But another part of me wondered how

long any of these beautiful woodlands would endure if the protected Mayan monuments of stone were gone.

I didn't psychically pick up anything new from the Mayan glyphs. So I decided I'd leave that whole topic to the decoding experts. Meantime, my poor Pakistani desert drum had not been built to withstand such levels of direct heat. Its skin sagged and never recovered—yet in the end it was a cheap offering for me to pay Palenque for my priceless initiation there!

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We hopped from that happy Yucatan jungle clearing back to the US, into Tampa's suburban sprawl. A rapacious sprawl that was devouring every natural acre of swamp in its path. Developers would tear every tree out of the unspoiled lands they planned to 'improve' by throwing up indistinguishable subdivisions and 6-lane streets. No regard for the ground animals that already lived there.

Where my folks lived, bulldozing developers held sway.

And they were seemingly unconstrained by common sense. No green principles, little sense of esthetics. They purchased and razed any small stores that showed unique personality, all in the name of convenience, coming soon! With all the sensitivity of a robot planting chips onto a circuit board, the builders installed ever more interchangeable, prefab shops onto the county grid. Erecting a borderless, sterile, predictable Motherboard of franchises... while pocketing quick fortunes.

No village greens anywhere. No consumption-free gathering places for the masses to meet. The only places to gather amid the sprawl were at an air-conditioned mall or around the TV hearth. Or at the many sports bars—which were of little use to those who are not interested by sports or alcohol!

If you don't have the money to afford a car in Tampa, you're totally screwed. Hope you weren't thinking of bicycling, however! That could prove mighty risky.

My folks lived right next to a golf clubhouse which they could never afford to join. It was ironic how the total American dream could be so close and yet remain so elusive—even after one had earned the requisite comfortable house and nice car and pension. Looking up the ladder, one might still find oneself sorely lacking...

My whimsical girlfriend and I suddenly got an offer to visit New York City for two weeks. Yes, our adventurous trek could now restart and launch us out of Florida!

An old friend of mine from French high school had gone on to rent an artist's loft in downtown Manhattan. She now lived in Soho, the artist's quarter, smack in the middle of all the creative action and excitement.

Being that we were free as birds, we quickly took her up on the offer.

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Her loft was huge! High ceilings. Like a theater. Lots of space to breathe in, lots of space to think expansive thoughts in. Her canvases were equally huge. Some portrayed witchy goddess energies. Others were attempts to synthesize her male and female sides. Some illustrated a desire to get pregnant. I guess she was at that age where women feel ripe for the plucking.

I sure wanted to pluck her. She was undeniably beautiful, a voluptuous Euro beauty. The moment we met, some old feelings stirred in me again even after 15 years apart.

But this artist's sex life in the interim had gained quite a different focus. Her lovers now were all buffed, black-skinned men. As if she was reaching out from her Caucasian history and trying to create a balance in herself.

Well, a skin-deep balance, at least.

She was still going through lovers like Kleenex. That hadn't changed. I guess she was perennially dissatisfied in her quest for the Right Guy. I think she wanted a man who could overpower her iron will... For she could be overbearing toward any boys who were blinded by her 'science'. I found myself putting on more than a few forced smiles in her presence.

t she was still a nature girl under it all, who loved being nude, who dreamed of island jungles and huts and warm sun and soft sands. These dreams endeared her to both of us, fresh from our own Yucatan jungle...

Since uncorking her peculiar talent for channeling symbols, my girlfriend and I had been having fun. We had developed a system for doing spiritual readings together. We called our readings 'The Purple Ray'. All our hosts would be curious about it. Moreover, my girlfriend was talented as a chef... and I had been uncorking a buried talent for doing character voices. In short, we made sure we were good guests, entertaining to our hosts.

One night, we were walking up Canal Street with the voluptuous artist, talking about the New Age, and the merits and wonders of purple energy. My painter friend was marveling at our own free-spirited coupledness. A bit envious of us I think.

We all paused outside a fish store.

"I wish you would help me find a purple boyfriend!" our shapely friend announced, looking at me dead in the eyes.

So gorgeous, yet so oblivious. But what could I really tell her?

Here I am, the one that you always needed, but now my skin probably seems to you the wrong color. Or, my purple soul had so much to share with you, but now it's rather too late, baby.

She sure liked to talk about her 'type' and clearly was not referring to my physique—even if the theory of finding a purple-energy mate held strong appeal. Could I feel free to point out a couple of character flaws that lurked behind her Venusian mask of sensual glory? Or should I bite my tongue in gratitude for the free lodging? I knew we only had a couple more days left at her place...

No, we were just spaceships passing quietly in the night. Would my girlfriend let this unrequited love of mine be consummated? Doubtful. Would the artist go for a threesome? Not this lifetime.

I knew this frustration of mine was all just old, rusted junk in my heart, a distant crush lodged in the back of my brain. And my head was perched atop a rail thin, pasty white body. Sadly, I drew the wrong lesson from my short visit with that goddess. I came away with the sense that I was neither manly enough nor black enough to be perceived as sexually attractive. As if I had been found lacking, in physical ways that I had absolutely no control over! (She would have been a perfect shag mate for the Brazilian shaman.) She still didn't desire me, though, so I'd have to move on and wrestle my old fears and body image issues alone.

My girlfriend and I visited with several other friends from college while in the tristate area, but our furniture was waiting in a rented storage unit back in SF... and the meter was ticking!

We two flew back to San Fran, hoping to couch surf until we snagged ourselves a new lease.

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SF studio rentals were becoming appallingly rare, to our dismay. Where had all the open apartments disappeared to while we were away? We were fast running out of options.

I was sitting in the corner of a party one afternoon down on Haight Street. A friend of ours, a sort of west coast version of the Soho Aphrodite, was throwing a shindig but I could not relax. In fact, I was totally freaking out.

What the hell are we going to do if we can't find an apartment? ran the Mobius tape loop whirring in my mind.

That's when in strolled an older dude with a greasy biker ponytail. He was sporting mirrored Ray Bans and black leather street-riding gear. Said he owned an appaloosa horse ranch up in the Eagle Cap Wilderness. Up in the beautiful snow caps of the Rockies!

Paradise, by his reckoning.

"Anyone here want to go to paradise? Or at least to Oregon?" the guy offered.

We found out that he was half Lakota/ half Viking warrior, a macho guy who felt strongly that he had been the Red Baron in a previous lifetime. His BMW bike was parked outside, and after only two days in SF he was already itching to return home, to get away from the stinking city. But first...

"I need some help to get my truck back up to the ranch, while I ride the Beemer. And I could use some extra hands about the ranch, too. For a few months at the very least. No strings attached. Free room and board. Come on kids, who's coming?"

We are! Saved by the angels again!

\* \* \* \* \*

Clean air, pristine water.

It was impossibly beautiful up there. There was a sparkling mountain stream running through the teepee meadow; and many acres of steep forest behind it. (He felt it was his job to protect his pine trees from greedy, encroaching lumbermen.) He had deliberately planted his personal, green vision as far away as possible from urban Babylon and its swarming 'bipeds'.

Our Lakota savior ran a tiny, budding commune: a barn and a yurt and a roundhouse, all of which he had built himself. He had even constructed an artist's studio for himself where he made airbrushed album covers and pointillist pen-and-ink drawings of Native American elders.

Yes, he seemed to me a man's man alright. A god incarnate! The polar opposite of our NYC goddess: he was Mars to her Venus. He had

manifested everything an independent, self-made, artistic, nature-protecting, bearskin-wearing warrior could possibly want!

Problem was he just couldn't drum up a willing audience.

(Or a steady girlfriend. He could not lure a submissive girlfriend out into the back hills of Buttfuck, Egypt. No how. Couldn't tame none of those fiercely independent mountain women neither! Fact was, he was pretty much set to settle for a date with She-Bigfoot.)

As you can imagine, our lonesome rancher was a bit pent up. He sure had loads of mountain-man stories to tell us fresh-faced recruits! (Some tales taller than others.) All of which starred him in the role of Shane.

Hell yeah. Bucking the rules, beating the odds, defeating the System through guile and cunning, kicking the Park Rangers' asses and getting away with it all. The DEA had even raided his ranch a couple of times. Ski-masked men had swooped down in choppers, but they never did find any 420 evidence with which to bust him.

Much to his delight.

We helped him as best we could for a few months. I genuinely liked him. He didn't lose his cool even when I snapped off the key in the ignition of his old pickup. My girlfriend, on the other hand, felt he was overbearing. "He's full of statements and not nearly enough questions. I'm doing all the cooking and he still talks all over me!"

The rancher did grow sour that autumn when we decided to leave. My brother was going to let us house-sit his lovely home in Portland... (The ulterior reason for us leaving paradise behind? No way for us to replenish our monies that far from civilization!)

"Damn city slickers!" the rancher moaned, like this scenario had played out before. "They'll eat yer food and smoke yer weed but they never stick around when the going gets tough." Like when winter in the Rockies kicks your ass with 15 feet of snow!

I think he realized that we were just a pair of spoons, and what he needed instead were a couple of shovels.

Portland, Oregon. Such gorgeous weather. Delightful! For a short while...

it was gray, miserable weather that dragged on and on forever. Fortunately, my brother owned a lovely renovated Victorian home in a nice neighborhood. The tiny artsy district at the top of our hill was all about goddess-energy. But it soon felt like Tampa to us. We were now stranded in the big city without a car, far from downtown.

A screaming grunge band practiced in a basement across the street. And next door to us, a white trash couple had recently divorced. The sore loser ex-husband would pull up in his Ford and have regular shouting matches with her, right there on the front lawn!

The outside world sure seemed hyper-aggressive to us gentle hippies.

My girl and I stayed indoors mostly: sheltered from the Oregon rains and cold winds, trying to tune out all the screaming.

Dreary months of wintry introspection followed. We took turns on the house computer, pouring out our bottled-up creativity. We got busy digging in the dirt, doing spiritual self-searching, finding the secret wounds where our inner children had once been hurt...["Hey! Wait! I got a new complaint!"] I discovered that the brooding, overcast skies of the Northwest made my mind go down some very dark tunnels indeed...

We slipped into a strange psychic battle with each other:

Who had been more hard done to? Who was more perceptive about the other's issues?

She and I constantly tried to "fix" each others' flaws... with the best of intentions, of course. After all, how can "fixers" and wannabe 'healers' learn, except by practicing on the nearest patient? Even if said patient didn't particularly feel like she needed any repair?

Meanwhile, my girlfriend was nursing an overpowering fetish for Kurt Cobain. I sincerely felt she was trying to merge me and him in her mind... And since he had recently joined the ranks of the dead, it was fairly clear what she (as Courtney Love) was gunning for me to do!

So our game hobbled around, each of us trying to knock the other off-balance with our secret fears disguised as profound insights.

My brother and his life partner finally returned to Portland from abroad.

"I am so relieved to see you!" I laughed, but he and I quickly ran aground on some unexpected rocks too. Although we loved each other and hadn't seen each other for ages, our energies clashed to the point that we actually gave each other bronchitis.

What the hell was going on?

Well, in hindsight, my energy had been changing. I had been nurturing my secret identity as urban shaman. Helping my various hosts to change by clearing their dramas: this had been my somewhat thankless

contribution all along the journey. (I think our hosts generally preferred my girlfriend's delicious cooking.)

But my very own brother was making his living by creating dramas! Musical theater shows, to be exact, like *Les Misérables*, whose tragic message of failed revolution I felt to be less than copasetic...

Clang. The Irresistible Force had met the Immovable Rock. Which one of us needed the adjusting?

Coughing and hacking, I had to admit that my brother didn't need fixing at all. Here was a chap whose personal and professional life was working far better than my own countercultural drifting! Soon I realized I had nothing. Time to eat humble pie....

And thus I learned an invaluable lesson for all healers: let the seekers be the one to solicit the help. Frankly, few had profited from my "priceless advice" thus far on the journey.

And our next host wouldn't get much out of my insights either.

\* \* \* \* \*

Having relieved myself of my heavy duties as self-styled shaman, my girlfriend and I took a detour up to Seattle, Washington. My one-time Hendrixian guitarist from Philly now lived up there with his wife and their baby daughter.

Speaking of dramas...

There were dark undercurrents flowing through their small bungalow. He confided to me one night that his marriage was in deep trouble. The short worldly boy from Turkey and the tall sheltered girl from Alaska had been a difficult match from the get go.

"We're just can't seem to get along! It makes me so frustrated."

He had been raised to blow off steam, to vent and clear the air so that everything could go quickly back to normal. She, however, had been raised in soft tranquility without hostility. She was used to bottling up fear. Was she cruising for a bruising by this husband? Who knew? Her apprehensions about him fueled their clamped-tight tensions...

Right after we departed, we got the sorry news. His wife had taken off with the baby! and had sought refuge at the Battered Women's Shelter... She had brought with her a black list, you know. A diary of fears and grievances, with dates and everything. About that time he punched a hole in the wall when he was mad, and so forth.

Was she really in fear for her life?

Suddenly all his years of self-discipline in the martial arts, his schooling up to the level of aikido black-belt and to honorable dojo master, all that skill in self defense and how not to hurt an attacker... all that would now be used in court against him. On top of his Turkish background.

Did it matter that he had committed no actual crime? That physically she towered over him? That he had never in fact hit her at all? Oh no, not at all. His Minority Report had come due!

In that northwestern land, soggy with goddess energy, my buddy was as good as hanged.

Every lawyer refused to take his case. Middle Eastern men, they're all wife-beaters! They're all the same! It was obviously an open-and-shut case to the racists of Washington, so long as women were being protected from domestic violence.

Finally a lawyer reluctantly took him on. Legal fees mounted by the day. The Turk and his ex were both broke and miserable, so their respective parents began (unhappily) footing massive bills.

Fortunately, both families started to realize that the only winners would be the lawyers—those pros who were hoping to milk the desperate divorcees as long as possible. So the families agreed to settle the war before everyone wound up penniless, and that was one small mercy.

I felt terrible! There was nothing I could do to help these people. No priceless advice I could dispense. I could only watch helplessly from a distance as their lives went up in flames! But alas, their mutual karma had been rolling since long before we got there...

\* \* \* \* \*

We were in desperate need of some comic relief from all the darkness. We got some in the sunny, brown deserts of Albuquerque, New Mexico. That was the home of the original Greek bassist from my Philly band.

He'd gone on to become a successful doctor of Western medicine. He regularly tended to the ailments of Native Americans, touring their pueblos in his jeep. He'd also translated a few ancient Greek texts into English, uncovering in the process some herbal remedies that had been long forgotten in the mists of time!

Here was a physical guy, a mountain bike champion who shaved his legs to stay streamlined. Mind-body-spirit, seemingly in balance. He seemed to have it all together as far as being a successful healer.

But above all, he was an unbridled hedonist with a broad sense of humor.

“Why don’t you two swing on down? My girlfriend and I can’t wait to meet you!” he offered, all puns intended.

This Zorba had always loved to play the generous host—not unlike the rancher, except that the Greek was comfortable in the big city.

What a smooth operator. I watched him in action one night on the town. He took the pair of us out to his favorite strip club. During the evening, he decided that he fancied one of the tattooed young dancers.

He actually talked her into following us home after her shift! I don’t know what he said or how the hell he did it. Sure seemed like magic to me.

After hours, we three lounged about on his living room rug, shooting the shit. She sat in an armchair right behind him, fondly tousling his hair, clearly planning to score herself a tall, handsome doctor.

As the three of us eventually made moves to retire for the night, the dancer grew peeved: “So, like, are we going to have sex or what?” she demanded of him in the hallway.

Only then did the Greek inform her that he could not... See, he had a girlfriend already!

There was time to kill during those long Albuquerque evenings. Inevitably the subject of sexual freedom reared its head.

“Maybe she could dance naked for us while you and me jack off?”

This suggestion came from him a few days after the stripper night. Now the ‘she’ he was referring to happened to be my own girlfriend.

That idea didn’t catch on so well.

Meanwhile, the Greek kept claiming he himself had a cute, petite blonde of a girlfriend. She was perennially busy, he assured us. We both started to doubt her existence.

Finally the mystery lady showed up at his house late one night. And she proved to be just as pretty as the propaganda! Some of us started wondering if the swinging thang was possible after all.

But that same evening I downed one shot too many and, in mid-conversation, passed out on the sofa. My girlfriend apparently retired to the guest bedroom, so that was that.

The next morning the doctor bounded all around me like Tigger: “We left our bedroom door open and the candle burning all night, just so you guys would come in and join us!”

I answered, “How the hell could we have known that? I was out cold.”

My girlfriend confessed out loud, “Actually, guess who woke me up in the middle of the night to ask me to join him and his girlfriend.”

“No. NO! He didn’t. Really?... Nobody came out to the sofa to wake me up!”

“I told him that the whole thing was your fantasy more than mine. I warned him you’d be real mad if you got left out.”

Hitting on my girlfriend while leaving me asleep?... That slippery Greek was still busy taking care of number One. Except this was time he got caught stepping in number Two!

\* \* \* \* \*

My girl and I decided to move along. We wanted to settle down somewhere fun already. A party town! Why not New Orleans? (This was eight years before Hurricane Katrina, and, in hindsight, there were several good reasons not to choose New Orleans.)

We started hitchhiking east out of Albuquerque in an attempt to save money. We were headed toward Louisiana. That junket turned into a bit of a horror movie! Read the whole saga at

[http://www.scorpioncraft.com/writing\\_files/A.S.S.\\_Book/BAD\\_VOODOO.doc](http://www.scorpioncraft.com/writing_files/A.S.S._Book/BAD_VOODOO.doc)

For present purposes, suffice it to say that we wound up back in Tampa. We landed on my parents’ porch at 6 o’clock one morning. They had no idea we weren’t still in Portland.

Thus we set up creative shop in suburban Florida, once again.

Soon my girlfriend had run into a friendly audio guy at a local coffee shop. He grew curious about her channeled poetry and about my song-writing abilities. This techie was apparently setting up a new recording studio in a small strip mall.

We three began collaborating and laying down an intriguingly different demo tape. As a musician, I now felt my time was more productive it had been than on the road.

One afternoon, my perfectionist mother was in her sparkly clean suburban kitchen, chatting away with us travelers. Absent-mindedly, she started cleaning while talking. We both noticed something unusual. My girlfriend had the temerity to point it out.

“Did you know that you are using your dish sponge to clean the floor?”

No, my mum was not aware of that. And she did not see a scrap of comedy in the fact.

We giggled. That wasn't a good thing to do. Confronted with the terrible evidence sitting there in her own hand, my mother had a total meltdown and went ballistic! Loca.

Evicted us from her house, on the spot.

Good thing she had a couple of gay New Age friends in town. They proved to be kind hosts while the dust settled.

One was a pretty boy toy who lived in an airy, tiled suburban bungalow. His place was filled with crystals on lit pedestals. It was like his own, personal crystal museum.

He had created a home studio which he graciously taught me to use. Now I'd be able to compose, engineer and produce the whole process myself without needing an engineer! Also he generously made available to me his collection of stringed instruments: electric guitars, acoustics, a 12-string... even a mandolin! And a synth. I went into recording overdrive! Soon I had created a radio theater project, Chief Tabu Monitor.

My girlfriend cranked out some dark gypsy poetry of her own which she called Full Moon Girl. To illustrate her poems, we furtively took B&W photographs of her nude in strange locations. Like in mall parking lots. Or up in swamp trees.

It must have whet my appetite to get the creative juices flowing again. But where had the months gone? Our three week vacation had somehow stretched into a two year, Kerouackian epic. A veritable couch-surfing shamanistic tour of North America! But now we sensed it was important to land. I in particular needed to settle down somewhere properly in order to feel my feet on the ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in SF, we loaded all our furniture into a rental truck. We sped down the coast to mini-San Francisco, i.e Venice Beach.

We had a plan. We were very optimistic.

"Let's manifest an apartment while we've still got the truck! We'll land a place on the same day that we pull into town & we'll be able to move straight in! It's all mind over matter. We can do this!"

We put the thought form out there, just as we had been taught.

Um, well, it didn't exactly work out like that. Crap! Off to a storage unit again.

We did find a relatively nice apartment on Indiana St. in the Venice hood—a Los Angeles hood that doesn't look at all like the stereotype. Not during the daytime anyway. Picket fences, small flower gardens. The pink home next door held a nice Mexican family.

If you walked up the street late at night, however, there'd be a couple of red laser penlights dancing across your clothing. A signal from the dealers to see if you "needed anything."

When I got to the U-haul storage unit to reclaim our stuff, I found the lock dangling open. My lovely purple Ibanez guitar, the one I'd used on the TV pilot, had been stolen.

Welcome to Los Angeles! At least they hadn't ripped off my shallow-back Ovation acoustic as well.

With no trusty motorcycle to get around on, we both were about to become pedestrians in Venice Beach. Gypsies turned locals, preparing to blend in.

The neighbors in my new building were quite the motley crew.

A tattooed Bluto lived up in the front apartment. He never opened his blinds. Wasn't at all ecstatic that a musician had moved in next door, for he wanted quiet in the evenings when he got back from work. In fact, he had been recently sprung from jail and was in Alcoholics Anonymous. White-knuckling it, too. Needless to say, the guy had a short fuse.

I sometimes wondered how long it'd be until he snapped and rearranged my face.

The aging couple behind us were memorable. She was a bit slow: a dreamy, naïve, stay-at-home hippy of a seamstress. He, meanwhile, was secretly treacherous. He flitted around town acting fey and glib—but I knew his M.O. He'd extend you a solid favor. Then you owed him. Except the favors he'd call in tended to walk on the not-so-legal side of life! I saw several fools limping away from their encounters with that weasel.

In the rear studio apartment lived a skinny chain-smoker. A lonely pack rat, sandwiched between a stack of accordions, crates of obscure albums, and a fat boa in a terrarium. He became a good friend of mine.

Unfortunately, he was busy plotting homicide. His ex-wife was some fat bitch who'd apparently cheated on him, used him, scraped off her shoes on his neck, and then dumped him. Nice guys finish last was the lesson he took from his fiasco of a marriage! But she sure was gonna pay for the evil she had done!!!

I spent many long hours talking him out of rash plans, there in Venice Beach.

On a happier note, there were joyous drum circles in the Venice Beach sand! I smile just remembering.

Drum circles, of course, usually devolved into a stampede of elephants. A slew of amateurs would show up, all pounding on similarly-sized djembes. But drum circles were all about enthusiasm and democracy, not about hi-fi production value! And anyone who tried to seize control or organize the beat was immediately dismissed as a tyrant.

So I basked in the smiles and cacophony. We passed the peace pipe and danced in the sands and cheered on the Sun God as He dipped over the horizon on weekends.

At night mostly, after the boardwalk had emptied of vendors, the homeless vets emerged and congregated. Dumpster divers scoured the back alleys. Dealers got to work.

Personally, I never got hassled by anyone from walking around the hood at night. My theory was: keep smiling and wear crazy clothes. That'll keep 'em guessing.

Of course, we could never forget that we were living in a rough area, either. Police choppers regularly shook the walls of our building.

"Ghetto angels," we'd say, nodding wisely as the searchlights swept overhead, tracking some alleged perpetrator. Once in a while you'd hear a few pop-pops in the near distance. You'd pray that it was nobody you knew, but all the neighbors were in agreement that there had been a nasty gang war here not long ago.

"Why don't you go play guitar on the boardwalk?" a few hippies counseled me. That seemed like sensible advice. I took my acoustic down to the edge of the beach... but nobody stopped to listen.

I quickly discovered that my quiet instrument was totally inaudible against the roar of the passing crowds. So I bought myself a car battery to feed my little Fender amp, and rustled up a shopping cart in which to haul gear around.

But I quickly discovered something even worse.

Without a band, or virtuosic flamenco speed, I was simply not a compelling act! Time and again my empty tip jar scolded me: dreamy solo playing doesn't warrant much love.

Oh my God, I was a dud.

Depressed, I retired back to my 4-track home studio and buried myself in creating audio far, far away from the judging ears of the public.

A chunk of time passed. My girlfriend and I were by now working each other's nerves. We had been over-exposed to each other's energy. The strain of being at each other's side 24/7 for so many years was taking its toll, and I needed her off my payroll.

We had to separate, but I didn't want to coldly kick her to the curb. So I graciously set her up with a new boyfriend. She bolted and moved straight in with him. Phew!

That created an unusual triangle, but at least she was housed and therefore I could relax. Or could I? Her departure created freedom for me—but quickly rent became an issue.

You know, I often let people in transition crash Chez Moi.

I now allowed a bass playing friend to park it for a month in my living room. He and I tried to put something together musically, but I soon decided that he overplayed and our styles just didn't mesh too well. He left without contributing financially.

And that's where I was at—living alone in the one bedroom and thinking about getting a proper paying roommate—when the landlord stopped by for a visit.

“Dude, this property has been taken over by a management company. They wanna renovate all the units. I'm afraid you're going to have to move out, bro. You'll be able to move back in, if you want to, in a couple of months. But they'll be jacking up the rent by about 20%.”

“Twenty freakin' percent!!” I couldn't believe my ears. “I can't afford that!”

“I know it's a lot. Unfortunately, there's really nothing I can do about it.”

The gentrification tsunami was about to toss me out of house and home!

That was how I discovered that the real estate boom had been driving prices through the ceiling all over Venice—indeed all over California. Hiding under my headphones, rubbing elbows with the bottom feeders, avoiding the corporate world and its mass media like the plague, I just never saw the wave coming. A major unexpected blow—from which it would take me many years to recover.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first, I thought I'd be able to surf the wave.

A talented DJ that I knew and a friend of his were shackled up in Hollywood. Kind of a squat. They had extra space though. I agreed to go in on their scene... Sight unseen.

The day I was due to move in, I hired a one bedroom truck from downtown L.A. I parked outside my apartment building.

No sign of the two local friends who had volunteered to help me move!

They had just 'flaked' on me in typical California style, right during my hour of need. Unbelievable.

Stranded without help, I had to move everything into the truck on my own. While I was sweating my ass off hauling furniture down the alleyway, life got a lot uglier. I received a phone call. It was the DJ's friend.

"The whole deal's off, man. We all have to get out of the Hollywood place."

"You're shitting me."

"No, dude. I don't know what to tell ya. Sorry? I gotta go. Bye."

All my plans were crashing about my ears!

I finished loading the van, my head spinning. The reality began to sink in: I had just slipped through the proverbial cracks. I was falling, and this time I was going all the way down to rock bottom. I was now officially homeless in Los Angeles.

In scramble mode: by early afternoon I had organized the all-too-familiar storage unit. At least it was not too far from the beach. Briefly I pondered the logistics of living inside the unit: no water, no bathroom, no A/C, and illegal anyway. No can do. The afternoon was speeding by, and I had to rush that van back downtown by 6 pm.

I tore across L.A.

At 6:01 I pulled up outside the downtown U-Haul gate. Guess what? The bastards would not open it for me! They would not let me in because I was one minute late.

"You're going to have to keep it overnight and pay for the extra day," said the daytime employee as he nonchalantly knocked off for the night and walked away.

I slept in the truck. My own meltdown began.

I returned the truck the following day, slapping all these unexpected expenses onto my backup credit card. And my brain just stopped functioning for a while. The gregorian calendar abruptly lost its meaning.

Days, nights, whatever: I drifted down Vine and Fairfax. I couldn't sense any difference between me and the derelict shopping cart pushers around me.

Homeless. Unbelievable. Why were my friends abandoning me when I needed them? Why would the Universe be punishing me like this?

Perhaps because I had jammed my financial head up my ass. Not making solid money. Just creating away and toking up and oblivious to signs of any looming disaster. Reality check, son!

I knew one thing. I did not want pity or welfare handouts. I had slipped into a deep pit, but by God, I was going to climb out of it under my own steam! I would find out how self-reliant and resourceful I could be under pressure.

\* \* \* \* \*

I ran into an old black man with a classical guitar on Pico. His gray suit was a bit ruffled from sleeping in alleys. He was also a little red-eyed either from booze or from crying, I don't know which. But he had a deep voice and was frighteningly sincere.

"I know how to do this!" he assured me. "Let me show ya."

His brave plan was this: blast into cafes, clubs, etc and just start playing and singing for the clients. For tips.

I tried to buy into his desperate enthusiasm. The guy certainly had a charming voice: a robust baritone with vibrato.

But swanky cafes along Santa Monica Boulevard had something else in mind! They had fully tweaked, high-end stereo systems blasting trip hop and euro-techno. Smooth, ambient, super-produced music.

No poor man's classical guitar could possibly compete against the volume knob of a plush audio system. Moreover, the servers just couldn't deal with any guerilla mariachis/ homeless beggars ruining their carefully tailored upscale vibe.

Hanging by a thread, in public, how dare we?

We were quickly ousted from one joint, after another, after another...

This town sure wasn't no New Orleans.

I started playing guitar with an original rock band. The organizers provided me with an amp, an axe and a practice room floor to crash on for free. Ah, just like the old days when I first got to Philly!

But after a couple of months, I was asked to push on and find my own place. One whimsical artist friend in Venice pulled through for me then.

She knew of a place: \$100 a month. Granted, it was a closet under a stairwell, Harry Potter style. But she had lived in it for a period and survived. She called it The Womb, because she had decorated it quite colorfully.

Irony: this tiny Womb was in the bedroom closet of the very bassist who had stayed for free in my apartment.

The lady who sublet the spaces in this particular house was obese. Huge! She rarely stood up. She never got out of her suite except to cook pork trotters with lard, which didn't seem like an optimal nutritional choice. This lady had once been a budding blues mama and opera singer. Now her room reeked of cat piss. But I wasn't about to quibble! I just needed shelter, pronto, and the Womb with no view would have to do. It's not like I was gonna be living in her sector of the house anyway.

Her building was smack in the center of the hood. All the young crack-dealing chicks on the sidewalk outside kept their merchandise in brown lunch bags that they squirreled under our hedge. Thus the cops couldn't catch them 'holding the bag', as it were.

I got a dismal, stagnant feeling in that abode. Not much sunlight made it in. A waif of a freelance body-piercer and her hick boyfriend slept on the two living room couches. They were nice people but they sure didn't seem to be going anywhere in life. The Scorpio bassist kept completely to himself, but he had divorce problems: major child support to cough up every month on a live musician's gig money.

I managed to graduate up to a free bed in the remaining bedroom. I shared the room with a nice girl and her speed habit. Her spoiled dog seemed to love me more than her.

"You traitor! Get back over here to mommy this instant!" she would protest as the critter crawled into bed with me.

All of us subleasers were irked that the cat piss landlady paid no rent whatsoever. She was sponging entirely off the other renters, Manhattan style. But it bothered us far more when we all got that pink Eviction Notice tacked to the front door one day.

Back in scramble mode, feeling like a cockroach trying to get away from the sprayer once again, I found myself running into the arms of a nearby commune.

Right in the heart of Venice Beach was the so-called Yes Center. It took in all kinds of people who were falling from high places or scurrying away from disasters.

The 'spiritual' head honcho there demanded a chunk of change for my security deposit.

"I'm sorry, sir, I just don't have it. I dunno... I do have one thing I can part with, though: there's this large painting I did."

I retrieved said artwork from storage and pleaded, nay, groveled with him to take it as collateral.

"But it's ugly!" he carped spiritually. "I don't even like it!"

I had predicted he'd say 'Yes!', given that we were in his 'Yes' Center. I begged on, shamelessly, until the grouch relented and put a new roof over my head.

I was now renting a couch in the living room of one of his commune buildings. \$250 a month for a sofa to sleep on. Seems kind of steep, no? My roommates included an aging porn actor, a lesbian couple, a British currency trader down on his luck, and various young delinquents. With 10 people shoehorned into a 3-bedroom apartment, our slumlord was clearly making out like a bandit...

Yet I also recognized that this was virtually a half-way house, and he was indeed performing a necessary public service.

Some residents there called it the psych ward.

I fell in love at the Yes Center with a curly blonde tomboy. She was contemplating how to heal various parts of her life before she took off on her next big spree: a global adventure, a year long tour of India and Nepal.

That would prove to be most of what she would talk about during the course of our relationship.

And it tore me up. Of course I wanted to be supportive of her dreams and plans. It's just that her plan, about which she was so excited, involved me being thousands of miles removed from her, for a really, really long time.

And in a while my sweetie started learning a little too much about me too. She would decide later on that I was too sexually focused, i.e. too

perverse. Sex wasn't that important to her. Such a perception of me really put a different kind of distance between us.

Which can be the price of seeing with eyes wide open, and witnessing the raw truth. Sometimes a couple just can't really get a handle on that...

Soon afterward, I got arrested for possession of a negligible amount of psilocybin. It was an ugly experience, I tell you, getting beaten down by the Man. That night, my straight arrow girlfriend was furious at having her VW van searched! She wasn't about to forgive me either.

By the time I crawled out the other end of the legal wringer, I had a big black ink stain on my record, a stain that would show up on all background checks. A stigma that was to haunt me in the paranoid aftermath of 9/11/2001, when I couldn't even land myself a sandwich shop job!

That conviction was like a punishment that promised to never stop punishing.

Still, I was doing better than two fool delinquents from my Yes Center flat. Together, they had been plotting to start up an ecstasy tablet business.

"We've got all the connections, we just gotta find some startup capital. If only we had cash. If only we had... the combination to that office safe upstairs!"

They broke into the commune office one evening. Banged the safe noisily down the stairwell, smiling at all the various witnesses. (Not the brightest bunch of thieves.) One of them smushed his finger against the front doorframe in passing. But they heroically struggled on and lugged it into their waiting vehicle.

Inside, a Louisville slugger was ready for the upcoming task.

The cops easily caught up with the boys in a West L.A. alleyway. The kids were bashing away at the impregnable steel safe with their wooden bat, waking up all the neighbors... but of course getting no closer to the money.

Although they wound up a lot closer to some new drug-dealing connections. In jail... One of the boys had presented me a nice blue shirt of his about a week earlier. He had said, "I won't be needing this where I'm going." Hm, maybe they weren't so stupid after all?

\* \* \* \* \*

One day I found out that there was a second commune founded on the teachings of Osho.

It was located down in San Diego. Unlike the psych ward, however, the SD commune had a plethora of resources and seemed far better organized. Computers, musical instruments, a fully equipped live stage, a DJ booth, a recording studio, plus a whole separate floor dedicated exclusively to yoga. A hands-off guru steered the ship from afar.

The place was called the Loft. It sounded like a fascinating experiment. Maybe Opportunity had come knocking! Time to move on?

Within my first ten minutes in San Diego, I got a parking ticket. Welcome to San Diego!

The voice on the Loft phone had told me, "No problem, just park the van out front and take the stairs up to the main desk. We'll come down and help you unload your truck."

However, 'out front' proved to be a zooming traffic lane on the main downtown drag, while the only other loading spot nearby was right next to a fire hydrant... Damned if you do, damned if you don't! That kind of set the tone for my experiences in San Diego.

My honey visited me a few last times. Soon she would be flying to Central Asia where she would be taking her yoga lessons from the true masters.

At the Loft, it became apparent to me that there were two divergent political factions vying for control. It was female yoginis vs. male artists.

The New Age cult wanted to draw everyone together into healthy lockstep at the feet of their guru. The art cult, on the other hand, wanted independence from hierarchies, plus bacchanalian lifestyles whenever possible.

It was quite a polarized atmosphere.

And at the heart of this spiritual collective, there lurked a terrible Dark Lie about which we subtenants had no idea!

We naturally assumed that the rent we paid was going straight to a landlord. Only a couple of members were in on the Big Bad Secret.

None of the rent was! All of our money was actually being siphoned off into the pocket of a lawyer. (This siphoning predated my tenancy.)

Seems a pro had been hired to defend the Loft's very existence. The real landlords, as we later found out, were Chicago mafia. And the mafia needed our Loft project terminated. They wanted everyone in the commune evicted.

We were being torpedoed from afar! Renovate and upgrade was the landlords' plan. Cash in on the big real estate boom. Fuck the struggling artists, who cares about them?

That damn gentrification wave again. Within six months, we were all out on our ears.

Three of us artists got into a dinghy and rowed to a small house in Kensington. We set up house, turned our backs on the past and went into creative overdrive! It was an 'intentional household' you could say. Our shared computer began cranking around the clock. During the following year and a half I created the next large project of mine, AlteredState Radio Theater. I also joined a shamelessly commercial cover band. Mostly alt rock material. Nothing to write home about, but we got a few gigs.

One day I bought a red convertible off a friend of a friend who needed cash. I hadn't had a vehicle of any kind in many years. It was a nice-looking Dodge Shadow. Freedom to move around?

I was admiring the artwork on its title one night, waiting at a red light, when I noted that half of the paper was dangling off awkwardly. I tore that half the rest of the way off and casually tossed it out the window. Without reading it.

Some of you know that what the paper I tossed out is called the Transferral of Ownership.

I didn't think more about that. Soon I had installed a pumpin' stereo sub tube in the trunk. I toodled around town with the top down, just stylin'. Fantastic weather down in SoCal, and it's sunny side up year round in San Diego!

I had not the slightest suspicion that there was anything wrong. Like that pinhole leak in my radiator.

A few months passed and I was not too far from home one day when the car started acting sluggish going up the hill to Kensington. Too late I noted that the water temperature gauge was pegged at the top of the red!

Oh shit! Steam emerged from around the hood! I pulled over, but the engine was not just overheated. It had completely seized.

The car was fucked. Some Iraqis ran the gas station next door to my home. They offered to take the pile of junk off my hands for \$200. I certainly didn't have a grand to sink into a new engine, so what could I do?

I agreed. I forked over the title. (It didn't have the torn-off part, of course, but the Iraqis didn't say anything.)

Their mechanics dropped in a brand new engine and put the car up for sale. Some homeless chick apparently wanted it, forked over a small deposit and promised to bring them the rest... She took off in it.

And promptly disappeared.

I'm not sure what happened next. DUI maybe? The cops pulled her over, I surmise, and for some reason confiscated the Dodge. Or she parked illegally and it got towed.

The car went straight to the impound lot. I would never have known anything about it, except that the impound bills started coming straight to me. At my address! In my name! Threatening my credit rating!

Now I've been hounded by collections before and I wanted no part of that scene, but the fees continued to rack up. Where the hell was that chick?

There was only one possible answer. She must have abandoned the car, presumably cuz it was all getting too expensive for her to handle.

The invoices piled up in my mailbox. What could I do? I broke down and made peace with the idea that this Shadow just wanted to come back to me. Like a dog that wanted to return home!

So I headed down to the Police Impound, paid off the clerk and retrieved a working Dodge for a lot less than the price of a new engine.

The universe was gonna cut me a break! Happily, I parked it across the street from my living room.

I looked her over. Oh, what the hell. Give her a new lease on life, why not? I decided to spruce her up a bit, which is why I threw some new hubcaps on that bitch.

A couple of days later: tires screeched loudly to a halt outside my house. I strolled to the living room window to see what was up. I was just in time to see two people leap out of a car. They looked around furtively. One was a chick: she had a key in her hand. Suddenly, she was opening the driver side door of my Shadow and getting in! Boy, was I shocked. Her guy leaped in over the passenger door... And the third person drove away the other car.

I raced out of the house.

"Hey! What the fuck! That's my car!"

They both flipped me the bird. The thieving pair gleefully peeled out and roared away! I immediately called 911.

Five minutes later a whole squad of cars was flashing outside.

"Don't worry, we'll get 'em. They're not far," an officer assured me. "But first we need to see your Transferal of Ownership."

"Um. I didn't keep that. I imagine the gas station or the girl have the title now. Here's my registration though."

"No no no. We need the Transferal of Ownership paper."

That would be the paper I threw away. This supreme error of judgment by me causes the cops much merriment. The whole chase is immediately called off.

"You don't own that car, buddy."

"I beg to differ, officer! It was abandoned by the person who bought it after me. It reverts to me. Look at the official Police Impound paper, see read right there."

"That impound ain't nothing to do with the Police!" They dissolved into peals of laughter, like I was the biggest idiot they'd met all month.

"Wh-what? They're not the official Police Impound like it's got printed here in BLACK AND WHITE across the top of this invoice?"

"Na. You actually didn't have to pay those guys nothing." What a sucker.

I could not believe my ears. "You're saying... this is all just false advertising? Ya mean... I've been rooked?"

"I guess you could say that."

"But that bitch is still riding around on my tags!!" I protested, to no avail.

"That's her problem. But that car ain't yer car, son." And they sped away. They just left me standing there on my doorstep, speechless.

According to DMV, I could not disassociate my name from that car in their records... but I didn't fully own the car either! It was like the frickin' Bermuda Triangle! Nobody up at head office in Sacramento could even figure out how to fix the disastrous paper trail. Apparently, the gas station owned the Shadow, and I owned it, and the homeless chick owned it. Of course, I had no way to get reimbursed for the impound fees I paid or for the new hubcaps I bought. I was in a daze for days. Bad trip, man! Really bad trip.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were signs on the wall by then that Las Vegas would be a better place for me. Well not exactly signs. It all started as a joke! I made up a character named Shiva Las Vegas, and the logic kind of grew from there.

I had never actually visited the city. But I did find out that nobody drives convertibles in Vegas because it's too blasted hot—so that became my rationalization for the demise of my own ragtop.

My roommates were moving on to a bigger house out in the distant exurbs of San Diego, so transition was in the air yet again.

Soon I met a dude online. He was looking for a roommate. He lived in a gated community up in the mountains overlooking Vegas. The publicity pics looked nice. He and I sealed a deal. It all seemed to be meshing like clockwork!

I of course had no more wheels, so I rented an SUV. I packed up and headed for a new life in Casino Town!

Where Major Disaster loomed unseen, just over the horizon.

Oh, the guy started backtracking right after we met face to face. Oh, by the way, there's this. Ohh and I forgot to mention this other thing... Bait-and-switch being the technical term.

By the time he had informed me that he had a fondness for gambling and that there was also an uppity live-in Philippine girlfriend (whom he had forgotten to mention), I was really steamed.

I slept on it, but still awoke with the distinct impression that the guy was a shady prick. I needed an alternative, and fast. I didn't even own a cell phone.

I started phoning from booths all around town, but I could not believe it! The Vegas roommate market that week was just as dry as a bone in the desert. I had no time to lose, but every lead was coming up a dead end.

I panicked!

My now ex-roommate in the gated community flatly refused to refund my deposit. The spinning meter on my rented SUV was kicking my ass, on top of the cost of hotels while I was out house-hunting. It was all too much!

Vegas. I sat down and wept. It was a bitter day that I was forced to admit utter defeat.

\* \* \* \* \*

I drove back to San Diego with my tail between my legs. Oh no. I could see the whirlpool in front of me, again. I was about to get sucked down into homelessness once more! My backup credit card was almost maxed out. The San Diego house had been easily re-rented already.

I now had no idea of who I wanted to be anymore. Or even what city I wanted to live in! I had to choose between another U-Haul van trip and a storage space. Couldn't afford both! I begged my neighbors to let me stash my gear under their stairs temporarily while I tried to get my shit together. (Outdoor stair. Under a tarp. All of it.)

My Venice Beach ex hit on an idea for me:

"Why not hook up with your old drummer from San Fran?" He and I had been collaborating on some material over the web with his new band before I headed for Vegas.

It was worth a shot. I ran the idea past him.

"That sounds awesome!" he responded. "We do need a singer. Unfortunately, this apartment I live in is super cramped. We've got no guest room or anything. But you can sleep under the kitchen table since it's like an emergency and all."

Man, was I grateful!

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in San Fran again, I started hearing about a 'dot-com bust'. I had no idea there had even been a dot-com boom. Whatever it was, it had completely passed me by.

But because of it, rents had been barreling skyward. Most band rehearsal spaces in town were being converted into condos. Lots of original bands were getting tossed overboard.

The drummer's band had rented one of the few remaining rehearsal lock-outs in the City. It was off Turk and Leavenworth: totally urban ghetto. Even I felt a bit nervous on the street there at night, opposite the Mission halfway house.

We rehearsed a lot. Live, the band was nothing like the songs I had heard on mp3. It was loud. Like Motorhead loud! Not so much jazz as math-rock maelstrom!

I tried bringing a rock rapper's influence to their table. None of them were too sure that it was dove-tailing coherently with their strangeness. I couldn't even hear myself much over the din.

They were on their last legs as a band anyway.

A second band who had lost their singer asked me to sit in with them. It was for a big festival gig in L.A. They too were progressive rockers, except with a great world beat influence that I liked.

They too proved louder than they needed to be, or was I just getting too old? They were not planning to gig much after that Festival. At least not until the new album got released, and who knew how long that would take?

We collaborated on both new and old material, until they decided that what they really wanted was a couple of ethnic Arabic singers instead of me.

Then I joined an alt-rock cover band. Earbleed loud! Nice, guys, but come on, we practice in an echoey concrete warehouse... Once I had learned their whole play list, they fired me. Was there a pattern going on here?

Meanwhile, I had thankfully gotten out from under the kitchen table. Thanks to craigslist.net, I got established on the suburban island of Alameda out in the SF Bay, in the maid's room of a Victorian house. The shady avenue outside my window was wide and leafy with big old maple trees.

My two main roommates were bawdy. I meanwhile couldn't find even one compatible female companion. I was lonely.

\* \* \* \* \*

Time to re-evaluate. I had been a crazy gypsy for many a long year, blown by the wind. Where was all this getting me in life? Why was I still not happy? What was really wrong with me?

One temp agent in Alameda, a smug kid just out of college, nailed it.

"I read your resume and the bio on your website. If you don't mind me asking, why has it taken you so long to have a career?"

I flinched. I turned bright red. Oh, I minded alright! I wanted to reach across that desk and punch that smug silver-spoon smile right down his ignorant throat.

There were so many smart ass answers to his question.

- "Because I was too busy shtupping yo mama, you fuckhead."
- "Because as an artist I totally suck. I'm just too damn stupid to give it up."
- "Because I took a wrong turn at Albuquerque."
- "Because I never wanted a 'career'; I have always been anti-corporate."
- "Because I wanted to have an interesting, creative life instead of something like yours."

· “Because I wasn’t on the path of consumerism, I was on the path of enlightenment, asshole.”

· “Because that stuff you see on MTV is just the flea on the fly on top of the tip of the iceberg of the music scene. None of what you see on TV has anything to do with the real life of any of the real musicians I’ve ever met.”

And the reasons could go on and on.

But the real reason was probably: “I had decided to live like a gypsy.”

Was I done? It had been colorful existence, yes, but it had also been so grueling. I had learned huge lessons about myself and about the people around me. I had absorbed their energies and heard the voices of different areas of this country. I had captured those voices on paper in many notebooks, along with my thoughts and drawings.

But I had never quite made a connection between the unstable turmoil of my life and the ongoing poverty of my musical circumstances.

I finally got it.

It’s hard to build on shifting sands and airy fantasies. It’s hard to make your plans manifest when you keep slipping away from them. And it’s hard to keep walking tall against the disapproving winds of the mainstream, year in and year out. Even when the disapproval is mutual.

What would happen if I let go of that core identity? What might I accomplish if I stopped being the solitary gypsy with no supportive caravan of fellow gypsies?

What if I put down roots, for real?

My life has always been the result of a series of thought experiments. Time to undertake the next self-experiment! That’s the power of choice which I have always exerted.

So I left California. I prepared myself to get root-bound! At long last, I was willing to believe in the impossible: a worthwhile life of integrity, even after gypsying.

The experiment continues.

THE END \* \* \* \* \*

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