

# (T)here

By Gary Marks

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I had a dream that I died. Most of the time people who dream they're dying wake up before they're dead. But in this dream I actually went all the way to being dead. It was very disorienting. In the end, words actually disappeared from my mind.

Also, as in most real near death experiences, I saw the tunnel filled with light as the nerves in the eyes began to tense up and wither. I saw dead friends and family members as my brain drained all but the most primal images from its memory banks. But when I actually died things went blank. There was an imageless floating sensation. And that floating sensation was being consciously recognized by some "ex-self" observing it.

Then I woke up. Much like a near death experience experienced by others, the images having no words to it colored all my waking moments for a long time.

My name is Jacob Echelle. I am a stranger to myself, and a lover of the sky's unseeable air. Sometimes I can't seem to get myself to care about anything but the most joyous thoughts and experiences. Other times I experience everything else. The world needed to learn to survive without me. That's what death told me. It said the actions in my life were far less important than I imagined. And that everything including action itself was mostly just some form of group imagination.

My father, a kind and playful man, an athlete at heart - though no better than the average 40-year old jock - had lost his spandex knee wrap. Two weeks before he had hurt his left knee playing basketball but the stretchy wrap allowed him to play through the pain.

One day, I was about four at the time, he caught me playing on the floor stretching his knee wrap with my feet, then rolling it around my body. I looked a little like a badly prepared mummy.

“Hey, where did you find that?” he asked, putting his water bottle on the kitchen counter. He had delayed leaving for his game that Saturday morning because he was searching the house for what turned out to be my play toy.

“I found it,” I said.

“Where?”

“In your car, in the back seat.”

“You took it from my car?”

“I *found* it in your car.”

“You don’t find something that’s sitting right there on the seat.”

“But *you* couldn’t find it!” I insisted.

“Right, because you took it!”

“Oh yeah.”

That’s when it first dawned on me how every action you take creates a circular chain reaction that always leads back to yourself, for better or worse.

You learn lessons all the time from memories here. They just pop up out of nowhere, and either they pass by like a breeze while you’re not paying attention, or, if you concentrate hard enough the memory will also tell you the lesson it’s trying to bring you.

Memories can be beautiful in that way. Even the ones you don’t want to come. Because, we need to know everything.

There are other odd things about here. For instance, time shifts. There is no way of knowing how many hours have passed, or why it’s suddenly night instead of day. These things just seem to be random. They come as a part of the scene, switching as easily as you might take a breath.

The other odd thing about here is that we all seem to remember this existence as normal, dating back to long before we last got here. But we never knew about it when we were back there, on earth.

So where am I?

I live in both places. I can be here and there, but not at the same time. I don't know if there are still other places. Maybe there is a heaven? Or maybe there are other universes with a completely different system of existence and non-existence altogether? Different laws of physics? Different mathematical answers? Sometimes I sense that. But I may never know.

None of us know the answers to these things here. Some like to wonder about it, some don't.

One thing I know for sure. Memories are not necessarily an accurate reflection of "the past;" they may not be accurate reflections of what actually happened at all. But they are metaphorical fragments of how you think. They reflect your self-reflection more than anything specific that happened to you.

The first memory I had was about my dad and his spandex knee wrap. The next one was about flying money.

I was lying in the back of my dad's convertible after a long morning of fishing. I was nodding off, in a half dream state that sometimes feels a lot like here when suddenly I saw money flying in the air. Some of it was curling down from side to side like feathers. Others seemed like they had invisible motors on them like the speed boat we were in. That money was really moving fast, speeding past me onto the highway.

"Flying money," I said groggily. The words came out of a half sleep, I didn't know if my dad heard me. So I said it louder: "*Flying money, flying money!*"

Suddenly my dad let out some sort of common epithet, pushing on the brake, although on a busy highway with hundreds of cars behind us all going sixty miles per hour there wasn't really anything he could do.

The money was being pulled out of his jacket pocket as the air swooped down into the speeding convertible and acted like a vacuum, sucking up two weeks of his salary.

I wondered what that memory was there for. My father was dead now. I don't know where he is. What was this memory trying to say?

There were also memories about my mom: mostly ones where she took me to the beach on summer days when school was out, while my dad worked at the factory. She would set up an umbrella to create shade. She brought a big plastic jug where you turned the nozzle sideways and purple juice would come out cold into a little plastic cup. I'd gulp it down. It took away the stinky salt taste of the ocean water still in my mouth from swimming. Then the next cup full tasted sweeter with the salt gone. It was cut with water to save money so it wasn't sickeningly sweet. Just sweet enough. And snowy cold. You could hear the ice chips rattle around when you tipped the jug towards you to make the last of the juice come out faster.

My mom never wore a bikini like the teenage girls on the beach did. Still, plenty of guys would stare at her as they walked by. She wouldn't meet their eyes. She'd just pay even more attention to me until they were out of staring range. I noticed all that, even at seven. She was a young mom with a figure like the number eight and the face of a movie star. That's how my dad described her too.

Maybe what I'm supposed to learn from that memory is simple: my mom loved my dad. And I wanted to know love like that some day.

I may have met my dad after he died.

It was another one of those dreams I had. I was in a valley, and music was echoing in the air. It was “Sherry,” by the Four Seasons. “Sherry” was his favorite drink. He would sip it before bed sometimes when we were on vacation, while finishing up some work on his lap top.

And “the four seasons” of course is a metaphor for “all time.”

I wandered towards where the music was coming from until I saw the band, “The Four Seasons,” singing the song live. Frankie Valley was the lead singer. We were in a valley. There were people standing in front of me watching. People sitting in the grass swaying to the song.

And then I spotted more people across the way sitting in wooden bleachers. I was about to move closer to the band when a face in the crowd caught my eye. It was a man’s face in the bleachers that looked just like my dad. I mean exactly like him. But that couldn’t be.

I somehow drifted over to the bleachers, like you can do in dreams, until I found myself making my way across a row of people, and sat in an empty space right next to him. I stared at his face for a long time while he was looking out to the stage watching the music. It was him for sure, I thought.

“Dad?”

He turned to look at me, “Hey, boy!” he said casually.

This stunned me. Only my dad called me “hey, boy.” It was him!

“But. . . I thought. . . you were dead!” I stammered softly, the words almost not making it out of my mouth.

Suddenly I felt myself being pulled out of the dream, lifting up into consciousness, back into the world of the living, and clocks ticking, and smothering sheets, and a flushed face, but still half sleeping in my bed.

I didn’t want to leave the dream, not yet. Just as I was being pulled away I asked him, “What’s it like to be dead?”

And as I awoke to a room void of even a speck of light, I heard his voice whispering in my left ear, “It’s great!”

It’s great?

Amazing! Something finally made sense. Dreams, days, death, all felt okay, because my dad said it was.

And so here I am somewhere, not in a dream, knowing, believing, as my dad did, that everything is all right. Even if we can't ever know what's going on.

At some point in my early teens I finally discovered that I was what some people call “psychic.” But really I hate that word, it makes no sense.

The way my professional therapist described it, I was picking up random energy as if I were caught in a dream, but at the time I didn’t know what this energy was -- whether it was my imagination, or some outside force.

One night as I was surfing the Internet I read an interview with a famous Russian psychic. I didn’t believe all of what I was reading, but I knew some of it was true, because I could identify it in me.

A lot of people don’t believe there is any such thing as “psychic” energy. It’s all a bunch of BS made up by power grabbing egomaniacs, or nuts, if indeed there is a difference between the two. Like I said I hate the word. It’s become too hackneyed to mean anything really.

I also know for a fact that most people who call themselves psychics are either mentally unbalanced, or professional gypsies, and/or are often sticking their nose in other people’s business when they should be paying more attention to their own life instead.

Not all of them are fakes, because some are picking up on other energy occasionally, but mostly they misuse it.

If you tell people that you know all about their future, you are misusing it.

If you charge money to impart information, you are misusing it.

If you try to use the information for your own advantage, it usually backfires. It’s not an energy to be misused or abused. It doesn’t treat those people kindly when they try to manipulate it.

Here is what I know if I leave that word “psychic” behind. Here’s simply what I know:

There is a here, where we all seem to exist together in this illusion of time. And we talk about a world of present, past, and future as if it’s a ride down a one way track headed towards our destiny. We’re alive in a whirling wonderland, with everything a mystery. And it is, all of those things, here.

But there is another place I’ll call “there,” where others exist in timelessness and no-space, where the present and past and future merge like the eye machine lenses at an optometrist’s office. And once you’ve experienced that you realize that it’s the only truly clear way to see the world.

When you only live here, it's like being deaf and blind in many ways. When you are here but you try to live there all the time, you are truly crazy, unable to function in either world.

But when you learn to scan both worlds at will you are what I call "(t)here."

You can will yourself into either world and function in both. It's hard to learn. But it's been my goal since I first learned about what was going on. From Kelsey. After the turning point, where I learned to function in both worlds, the rest of my life became something I could begin to describe in words.

A yellow moon three times the size of the sun, moving and growing larger as I drive up the hill home, rising slowly above a mountain ledge.

Chicken pot pie heating in the oven with gravy being whisked on the stove. My mom and dad around the dinner table laughing about something that happened to the tree last Christmas.

Lights dim, a candle burning on the night stand.

Watching the Forty Niners beat someone, (anyone these days would be nice!) with memories still lingering of the dynasty of Joe Montana, Steve Young, Jerry Rice.

These were the things I loved about the world then.

I was sixteen. . . .

My friend, Kelsey, often laments my mental times away, but she has grown to understand. She too has a psychic sense, but not as magnetically charged as mine. She is not pulled there as strongly as I am.

My birth name is Jacob, but I was born in New York City. And in New York, I suppose because everyone is so rushed for time, all names are shortened to one syllable. Sherry is “Sher,” Gary is “Gair,” so Jacob of course became “Jake.”

I never really felt like a Jake since it’s associated with more brawn than brain but it did offer me a bit of protection when first meeting people. “Hey man, this is my friend, Jake,” sounds a lot better than, “Rambo, this is Jacob. Jacob, meet Rambo.”

Kelsey was the first friend to call me Jacob. She thought it was nicer than Jake, and I wasn’t going to argue.

Kelsey was my high school girlfriend. We met at a baseball game. I was playing shortstop. She was there to watch her first boyfriend pitch, but we knew right after our introduction that something odd was going on. I knew because my “psychic” instinct knew, and I immediately had to calm myself and not ask her to marry me on the spot. The feeling was that strong.

One could attribute the immediacy of my feelings to her looks. After all, most red blooded American high school boys would be more than a little excited to meet an innocent faced curly haired natural blonde with dark blue marble eyes and skin as soft as a cumulus cloud. She didn’t try to dress like the other girls. She had her own style. No make up, she didn’t need any. And I never saw her wear anything but beat up sneakers unless she was on the beach in bare feet.

She looked straight at me, surprised to see me, even though it was the first time we met. I could also tell that her boyfriend was so far only a platonic relationship. I knew this from intuition.

I waited a few weeks until the word began to circle around school that she and Dev had broken up. (“Dev” was a New York abbreviation for “Devon.”) He didn’t seem to be all that upset and quickly turned his interests to an aloof girl with very rich parents, a brunette named Sharon Denmar, “Shar.”

Kelsey loved the ocean. Her name means “Of the water.” But when I told her what her name meant one day she just took it as an interesting coincidence. She said she was named after her father’s Irish grandmother and that was that. She was of Irish, Swiss, and French descent. She said she was also part dolphin, but again when I brought up how that wasn’t surprising given what her name meant she ignored it.

She was a great swimmer, and wanted to learn diving and scuba. She loved boats but hated to fish. She could feel their pain wriggling on the line. She even felt the worms in pain. Fishing was the last thing she would ever have wanted to do. But she would take a boat anywhere, any time.

At the end of summer, just before the start of our senior year, I insisted we end our platonic relationship. She didn’t say yes or no, so I took it as a yes. I’d had this image all summer of us lying on top of five thick blankets in the dunes at an empty beach in Point Lookout. I couldn’t get the image out of my head. It excited and tormented me. I wanted it to happen so badly, yet the setting and the timing had to match the image. It was also supposed to be sunset. With no one around because it was a weekday, and the weather was starting to turn cooler.

Then I found the spot I was seeing in my mind all summer. I simply made the dream happen from there.

It was the first time for both of us. I fell into a long dream afterwards and couldn’t speak. I just kept listening to her heartbeat. I felt waves of joy and sadness. I tried to come out of the dream but I couldn’t lift the wave of energy off of me. It was almost drowning me. Finally I came back to present time and asked if she was okay. “Of course,” she whispered. “And you knew I would be.”

Her answer confused me, but I was so completely stunned with the experience of feeling sensual love for the very first time I didn’t think to respond.

She add, “You know other things too.”

“What are you talking about, Kel?”

“You know we don’t make it. You know we aren’t supposed to be together forever, but you don’t know why. But you know.”

I was shaken, unable to open my mouth to speak. Why was she saying this? How could she be saying this? How could she know my thoughts?

“You’re not the only one who knows what you know.”

“Kelsey, did you feel the wave of energy I felt. . . ?”

“Yes. I have a sense like you do, Jacob. It’s not as strong. But I sense what you see and know sometimes.”

“I thought you were just . . . just *normal!*” I stammered. “I didn’t sense anything like that in you!”

“I told you, I’m part dolphin,” she smiled. “Dolphins just kind of know things quietly, and try to love life anyway. Despite what they know.”

But there was also a sadness in her eyes, because she knew what I knew, and it was right - I would know her long into the future. But not as my wife. And not as my lover. This was our time for that. This season of our lives. But then a new season would come.

Again, she read my mind: “It won’t end,” she whispered, “not yet. We have time.”

Then she added, “And I know you love me. That’s the other thing I sense from you. Or I never would have come here.”

I did love her. I still do.

But the mind is like an illusion magnet. It gathers up little metal fragments and pulls us into believing things like time, and concepts of death -- pulling its fragments into an hour glass that are then wrongly called reality. Until the hour glass runs down.

Kelsey had never told anyone before that she could occasionally sense future events. And I never knew that she could. My ability (which felt like a disability most of the time) to sense things was apparently far stronger than hers (which also meant that she felt far more “normal” than I did most of the time).

“Sensing” (I prefer this word to the phrase “psychic ability”) is far less powerful or useful than one might assume. For instance, unless it’s an extraordinarily clear sensing moment it’s not possible to pre-know the name of a card randomly picked from a deck; or to know if it will rain tomorrow; or who will win a horse race; or lose an election.

That’s because there is usually no way to focus the ability onto a subject of my choosing. In my case it usually chooses the subject without me consciously wanting any information about anything, exactly like a dream chooses the time and subject in the middle of the night.

Also, the more I wanted to sense something about a specific thing or person, the less it was likely to happen.

I would also often confuse my normal instincts with my abnormal insights, and my abnormal insights with my hopes or desires or fears about the future. I would think maybe I knew something but it wasn’t totally clear.

But then as soon as I had a true sensing moment, I would remember, “Oh yes, this is how clear it is when it happens.” When I knew, I knew that I knew. It was like music you hear in your head while you’re walking around through the day. Others don’t hear it.

But I could fool myself too. Like with the music in your head. It’s not what your main thoughts are focused on, but if someone asked you to sing that song you were hearing, if the song was conscious enough to you at that moment, you could do it. But, if it wasn’t playing loud and clear at the moment you were asked to sing the song, then your mind, knowing it *had* been hearing some song might stretch the truth by searching for a song you *could* have been singing, and stating out loud that was the song . . . . then it’s up to you to assess how sure you are about what you just said. A lot of times you’re wrong.

Neither Kelsey or I had discussed our ability to sense things with any of our peers. It wasn’t anything they would be able to understand, or believe. You’d be either called crazy or looked at as a spooky freak. So we both learned at a very young age to simply let it be. Other than my parents secretly trudging me off to a psychologist for a few months, nothing concrete really would have come from telling anyone.

But now that it was out in the open between us, Kelsey and I would talk about it often, sometimes in whispers after a secret rendezvous.

One day we took a long walk through a state forest near the beach. It was late autumn. For some reason on this particular day we tried to analyze exactly what this gift or curse was, why it was, where it may have come from, what exactly it could do to help us or hurt us.

She said to me, “Knowing we won’t be together at some point is the saddest instinct I have ever felt. But at the same time it’s not imaginable in reality. Today it feels like we’ll be together forever. And normal couples would assume they might be in our circumstances. They’d make plans, talk about getting married some day, having kids together. But for us, it’s like we have some terminal disease. We know those images and hopes are not our future no matter how hard we try to make it be. And love sits in my stomach all day, and I see tears running down my face sometimes and I don’t know why I’m crying until I remember.”

I knew exactly what she felt. “But there’s no forever for anyone, death separates everyone. One day no couple is ‘together’ any more. Maybe that’s all we’re sensing?”

But we both knew too much. There was no marriage, no children. . . .

I thought about us eloping, getting married, and proving our instincts wrong. But I also realized that whenever I tried to do that in the past, the instinct would only be wrong temporarily, because the main thing I sensed at first would still be right later somehow. It was never a good thing to try to “fool mother nature,” as the old TV commercial used to say.

“I wish this sense we have could help us pass a math test,” I laughed. “Imagine being able to know the test answers known by the great genius nerd, Stanley Cooperville, and seeing equation images in our heads as he’s writing them down on paper, without ever having to peer over his shoulder!”

She smiled, “I never thought of that one exactly. But I did think it would be great if I could tell my dad what lottery ticket to pick so we could win a lot of money. Then he wouldn’t have to work any more.” She thought a bit longer about that idea then added, “Then we could buy a sailboat and sail together like we did once when I was ten.”

I could tell that event was very special to her. I suddenly remembered intimate times with my dad, little things, like going to get ice cream after dinner on a school night, just the two of us. But my dad never took me sailing.

“I’m afraid of sailing,” I admitted. “For some reason, or lack of reason, I’m afraid of drowning. I can’t swim well and I don’t feel safe in deep water. In fact, I also have tidal wave dreams.”

“You do?” Kelsey’s eyes widened. “I do too!”

So we told each other about our tidal wave dreams, and how we eventually run out of breath and then wake up,

Later we kissed behind an old abandoned shack off the forest path. We merged into a tight little ball of energy, sinking under the ocean that we were together. Leaves tumbling from trees were like the spray of a wave; they fell upon our hair as we kissed. We fit together perfectly. Our hearts were so deeply connected in that moment. We didn't make the other feel alone, or like an outcast. We sensed who the other truly was, and accepted and loved the other totally.

So how could it all end? Why?

Just before our senior year began, with another summer having gone by, and our relationship growing more intensely beautiful by the day, Kelsey and I decided to take our first “vacation” together. We billed it as a weekend away with friends, except I think both her parents and mine knew we had no friends. But they also knew how in love we were by then, so they agreed to let us go. I think they figured it was a step up from being strung out on meth, or serial dating. It was better than us having bad grades and not being able to get into college, having no future. That’s what I liked about our families. They always looked on the bright side.

We decided to drive out to the tip of Long Island to Montauk Point. Dad lent me his car. Kelsey and I scraped up enough money to pay for a small cabin near a nice beach. The cabin had no heat, and a single faucet with a slow stream of cold water. Since there was no phone we promised our parents that we would take our cell phones. Needless to say they stayed tucked away in our suitcases. No one ever called us but our parents and each other.

We took magical walks in the hilly woods above the ocean. And we took beach walks amidst thousands of shells, errant driftwood, emerald seaweed, and endless pounding waves.

On the last day together, just before sunset, I began to experience a terrible dark brooding feeling. I assessed it as a bad mood, for reasons completely unknown. This had been the best time I had ever had in my life, without a doubt. I was so totally in love with Kelsey I completely forgot what we sometimes sensed about our future. But this feeling persisted.

After dinner I told Kelsey I needed to take a walk down to the beach alone but that I’d be back soon. She offered to come but I said I needed some time to think.

She seemed concerned.

“It’s not about you, or us,” I remember telling her.

“I know,” she said earnestly.

But even though she did know that, I remember the worried look on her face as I turned to wave goodbye on my way down to the water.

Usually the sea soothes me. But nothing could that night. I began to imagine something bad was going to happen to Kelsey. I didn’t have a psychic sense of knowing that, it was simply an image that came to me. Still, the image grew, even though I doubted it.

I turned and ran as fast as I could back up to the cabin. I didn’t want to chance . . . something.

She was inside packing up a few things for our morning departure.

“Hi,” I said out of breath.

“Hi back to you. . .Why were you running?”

“I don’t know. I just had a feeling I should run back here, to kiss you.”

She walked towards me to comply but then I had another episode of darkness overcome me.

“No, not now. Something is wrong but I don’t know what it is.”

I sat on the small bed next to her suitcase. She was silent. She knew not to question these things.

“Should would go home?” she asked. It wasn’t said in a disappointed way.

“Yes . . . .I think we should.”

We packed our knapsacks and started to put some remaining food in paper bags for the five hour trip back.

Just as I was about to zip up my pack and bring it to the car the cell phone inside of it began to ring.

I fidgeted for the phone, which had fallen all the way to the bottom under a web of clothes and shampoo; my fingers accidentally got blocked by my toothbrush. Finally I got to it, lifted it out, and saw the number beaming on the caller I.D. . . . .“Hi Mom . . .s’up?”

“Jacob!” she was crying.

“What’s the matter? What’s going on?”

“Jacob!” she repeated, sobbing. “It’s your father. He’s had a heart attack. We’re not sure yet what’s going on, but he’s on his way to the hospital. You need to come. . .” her words were broken. “. . .home.”

I was able to get her to tell me the name of the hospital before she broke down entirely and hung up the phone. Having already packed, we raced to the car and headed back to the city.

As we were driving Kelsey said, “No wonder you were in a bad mood, Jacob.”

As soon as she said it I knew she was right. I didn’t know it at the time, and I hadn’t thought about it since the phone call, but it was clearly true. The emotional pieces now fit together. I had sensed it.

As we were driving I tried to tune in. I loved my father, he was a great dad, and even a great friend. God couldn’t let him die now. That would be impossible. He was only fifty years old, and still playing basketball every week. He seemed to be in perfect health.

I tried to sense how serious things were, searching the night air as I drove, with Kelsey quiet, hands in prayer, seated beside me. I got hypnotized for a while by the white lines of the road flickering quickly by. I was trying to sense that my father would be alright. Searching for that knowing. But every time I focused my mind there something blocked me.

My dad died the next week. He was in a coma by the time I arrived. I never got a chance to say goodbye.

He was a great man, a great husband to my mom, and so loved by her. This was all repeated over and over again at his funeral. I held my mom's hand. I leaned against Kelsey whenever tears came to my eyes. But that was the outside picture. Inside, my mind was somewhere else. I was searching for him. Searching hard. But I couldn't find him anywhere.

He was lost to me.

Until the dream where I saw him in the valley, with the music playing, many years later.

Imagine this: I am playing a game of chess with Kelsey one rainy winter night. In the middle of this particular match I suddenly come up with a brilliant winning progression. It was a mini-revelation! (I was always competitive -- it was a part of my father's legacy. Sports, school grades, whatever I tried, I wanted to do better than everyone else.) Now I could feel my competitive spirit rising. Not that I wanted to beat Kelsey, or prove anything to her, or be better than her. I just wanted to prove to myself that I was good!

I thought to myself, wow, I'm getting pretty talented at this game. Look what I've just come up with. . . .It would all begin with one crucial initial move. . . .I looked over the board and planned out multiple moves beyond it one final time, scanning the board with my eyes.

After this initial move, it appeared that every possible response by Kelsey eventually led to her being checkmated. Whether it was in two moves or seven, I had the game won.

I made the initial move triumphantly, excited to see which trap she was about to set for herself.

She looked at me curiously and smiled. Did she KNOW I had her trapped? I smiled back -- how fantastic that she saw what I saw, and saw with me this far ahead, and applauded me even! My heart opened, and I began to recite a thousand reasons why I loved her. And what a gracious and wonderful loser she was!

Finally she said, "I don't know why you did that, but . . ." and her bishop slowly slid diagonally far across the board and took my queen.

I was completely shocked. I never saw it coming. How could I have missed that? My eyes had scanned the board over and over looking for danger. I saw only multiple paths to victory.

Minutes after I went down in flames, with my king captured and unceremoniously disposed of, I realized how typical this was -- how moment to moment, and day to day, our thoughts, and conclusions, can mislead us with such supreme confidence.

The mind becomes convinced that it actually "knows the way," to make something work to its advantage, only to find out at some point after implementing the strategy that something has gone terribly wrong with "irrefutable logic." Our queen gets blind sided. We're caught in a lie. Some wonderful plan turns into a disaster. It seems like it's always something. Nonetheless, our mind convinces us that this time we won't get caught. This time we're in control.

How much of the time, even in a normal day's thinking, do we end up being sideswiped? In fact, what if *most* of our daily thoughts were as intrinsically flawed as that "perfect" chess move?

This was the first time, but would not be the last, that I realized our thoughts are a lot like the wizard in "The Wizard of Oz." Amidst the smoke and bravado and whirling gismos, when the curtain is opened, who is really behind it all? The Self? The Truth? Or just another pawn in the mind's game?

It was late summer. We had graduated high school. We'd both gotten into the same college. We had so many plans. Kelsey's dad took her sailing to say goodbye to her. He loved her. But he knew everything was going to change. He wanted a final intimate time, to talk about life, the future, how proud her mother and he was of who she had turned out to be.

She was happy that day. She wasn't usually happy without me around, especially lately. Some piece felt missing. I felt that too. We were magnetically charged to attract in body and spirit. We couldn't see enough of each other, or kiss too much, or talk too much. None of the rest of the world mattered or was even taken into consideration.

But this day she was happy without me. Her father offered to take her sailing and all the warm memories of her earlier childhood sailed back to her. She was eager. She was ecstatic. She would tell me all about it when we saw each other that night.

We had so many other things to discuss. We had both been accepted to Boston University. We were a month away from a huge transition.

Here's something to remember about this day.

Not only don't psychics know all of the future, most don't know anything about their own future. And whatever future events they do have an intuition about are not set in stone. Nothing is completely pre-determined. Anything can change.

Kelsey didn't sense a thing, even seconds from being thrown from the boat. The rogue wave that hit them and knocked her father unconscious struck them from behind. They had no time to fear.

She told me later even the drowning part came upon her like a flash of light in the middle of a sightless dream, and the flash stayed, transforming all shapes and color and time itself, all the way until the transition when she died.

After Kelsey drowned I went into complete solitude. No one could reach me on any level. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to feel or think or care about life. The pain was so overwhelming sometimes I felt like I was the one drowning. But somehow, something, some energy, always pulled me out at the last moment and forced me to breathe. "Kelsey" means "of the water." Looking back, I think it was a dolphin that saved me from killing myself. . . . That moment I knew I had to take a breath was the first time we reconnected.

At some point I began to sense she was around. It wasn't frightening because, of course, at first I thought it was just my imagination. I thought some healthy part of my mind wanted to save my life for reasons unknown, and reinvented her so I wouldn't kill myself. I credited myself with saving my life. Until I found out at one moment in time there was more to it.

I remember the moment well. I had eaten a late dinner. My mom had left a plate of food in the fridge for me. Eating food was a painful chore since I saw no reason to feed myself. I felt almost guilty about it. But I knew that's what people did so I went through the motions, repeating lifting the fork to the mouth, chew, chew, lift the fork again, like a hypnotic or neurotic robot. It was the same chore I did the night before and the night before that. I had no appetite even when the food tasted good. I had lost a lot of weight.

I went back up to my room and locked the door, flopped onto my bed, and began to read. My mom and I were both living like strangers. She couldn't express her grief to me about my dad. And I couldn't express my grief about Kelsey to her. We couldn't bring ourselves to burden each other with still more grief. It was unbearable enough without doubling the pain. So we stopped talking about anything more than what errands she was going to do that day. No discussions about my future ever took place. She knew she couldn't force me to go out of the house, or eat, or live. She could only pray I'd find my way, cook me food, and show me love the few times I would accept it.

I didn't go to Boston University that fall. I couldn't. I was half crazy. I was a completely worn out eighteen year old "man" living out a worthless life in purgatory with a mother, a sweet earth-mother type, who was herself once so vibrant, but whose sun had been stolen from her solar system years ago. Now we were both wandering in some dark orbit.

Then, as I lay there on my bed reading, I heard her voice in my ear, very much like the time I heard my father's voice in my ear as I was coming out of a dream.

Kelsey said, *"Jacob, you are such a wonderful person. You are so precious. You deserve to live in peace."*

I was stunned, scared, shocked. I didn't want to believe what had happened. I didn't even hear what she was saying. Only that it was her voice, but it couldn't be her voice. I quickly decided it was my all too dark imagination trying to drive me clinically insane. But then she continued.

*"I want you to take these next words with you and imprint them forever into your mind, Jacob:*

*"We will always be. Your time here in this life is too valuable to fade away from. Stay in the time you have. Stay in the life you've been given, and learn what is good about that world until you feel its beauty, and you live in joy. It's possible to do when you know the truth. But only the very strongest can achieve it. You have that strength. Don't give up because of me. Live because of me. And find the way to me, in life."*

I dropped my book and stood up as if someone had lifted me with a string. I began hyperventilating, I was trying to decide whether or not sanity had completely left me -- like fearing you're blind and trying to see if you can see in the dark, and you can't. Just like that, I immediately came to the conclusion that I had no sanity left. I was sinking back into the darkness and fear.

But then Kelsey's voice came to me again, this time in a brilliantly clear memory.

I became calmer, more silent inside my mind for some reason. What was she saying? I didn't listen the first time. But now the words literally repeated themselves to me, word for word, this time not in her voice but as a voice-image:

*". . . . We will always be. Your time here in this life is too valuable to just fade away from. Stay in the time you have. Stay in the life you've been given, and learn what is good about that world until you feel its beauty and you live in joy. It's possible to do when you know the truth. But only the very strongest can achieve it. You have that strength. Don't give up because of me. Live because of me. And find the way to me, in life."*

Now I understood the message. But I hadn't a clue how to do any of the other things she suggested.

She wanted to teach me everything she knew. But she would have to come back to me again before I really understood.

A voice urges me to live. Another doubts the existence of the voice. Another doubts that the voice doubting the voice should even be a part of the debate anymore.

I was stuck there, between all those worlds, for a long time.

I was worried I was making all this up as an excuse to stop grieving. But I also knew there was more to it. I sensed the words were hers, not mine. So slowly, over the course of timeless weeks and months, I came out of my hole to look around. The sun was still shining. The day turned to night then day again. At least in this elemental way, nothing had changed.

That next September I left my home forever. Boston University had accepted me one year later, just as they had done the year before. I would be a nineteen year old freshman, certainly with no more confidence than an eighteen year old freshmen. I was in a time warp. Time was dissolving day by day for me as I saw the meaninglessness of counting hours.

The university was a vibrant place. A place where I hoped I could make a new start. Kelsey's words were still with me – I was determined, despite my ongoing pessimism, to understand how to love again, and to become at least moderately happy.

Boston and its neighboring city, Cambridge, were places I began to relate to. I loved Harvard Square, and the intellectual merging of Harvard, and MIT and the Berkeley School of Music into the area's culture. It was invigorating to just walk down the street sometimes. I still found myself taking huge gulps of air frequently, as if my body was forgetting to breathe, or awaking from a bad dream. But I didn't feel badly about allowing myself to breathe anymore. I was determined to move forward.

Professor Riker was my favorite professor. He was teaching transpersonal psychology. A class that basically tries to show a relationship between the mind, life, and the connective spiritual thread between the two. It was a subject that fit where my life was at the time. I didn't question how or if the class would be relevant to my post-school days. I needed the information. I even began thinking about becoming a psychologist some day, since I had to find something to do to make money at some point. I was glad to realize I was thinking a day beyond the day I was in. When was the last time I even cared about my future?

The professor was a tall, slender, with straight brown hair that was a little too long, coming almost to his shoulders. His last name was the butt of a few "Start Trek – The Next Generation," jokes. Some students even called him "Number One" behind his back.

Before I walked into his class I had been expecting a mad scientist type, someone in his mid-sixties, with white hair and a trimmed beard, walking slowing into class with a cane. Instead here

came a confident smiling man, maybe in his early forties, with no beard, no professorial wire rimmed glasses, no suit, nothing that signaled the expectation of some perfunctory command of respect. He was relying entirely on what he taught to capture our respect and attention.

His delivery when he spoke was strong, but not over the top. Instead he sounded kind, frequently humorous. But he also expected a discipline from his students. And he was never afraid to use drama to get his point across.

“Morning class, welcome,” he sat down at his desk as a few kids murmured in the back of the hall.

“You back there, let me tell you, I don’t think you want to pay all this money, and spend all this time sitting in this badly designed airless room just to hear yourself talk. You are paying me to talk, isn’t that so? So please listen to what I have to say. It will affect your life if you dare to hear me out. Believe me.”

Now it was dead silent.

“Please read the outline I have put on your desks. You can also download it from my web site.”

He gave us a few minutes to look at it, and think about it, before he spoke his first word:

# Soul Logic

The Road to Peace, Love, Wisdom, Happiness, and God (if you want one)

1. *Whatever you allow your mind to think, expands.*
2. *Mental Muscle*
  - i. Learning how to “talk back to yourself.”
  - ii. Learning the initiator - responder game
3. *Understand there are long-term consequences of everything you think and feel:*
  - a. Searching for “the one.” . . . .The Assassin Story.
  - b. Attempting to be happy rarely works.
4. *Soul Connection*
  - a. How to access the soul’s voice.
  - b. The power of meditation
  - c. Why is a soul connection important pragmatically.
  - d. Why is a soul connection important spiritually.
  - e. God, faith, and other choices.

A lot of students couldn't even guess at what the outline meant, or where it was going. And during his lectures many students weren't able to focus in on the abstract points he was trying to make. Some dropped out within the first few weeks. He went into his subject matter very deeply very quickly, and didn't slow down for the students unwilling or unable to get what he was saying. But I found myself excited from the first day, and willing to work as hard as necessary to keep up.

His first full lecture went something like this:

“Do all living beings have a soul, or only beings that are human? Or is there any such thing as a soul at all?”

“Another less controversial way to put it might be -- Do all living beings have awareness and consciousness, or only human beings? Or, if the question were a bit less human-centric, are any humans really aware or conscious? Do we even know what it means to be truly conscious?”

“According to our deepest mythologies, Adam and Eve were blissfully unaware of their ‘nakedness.’ Eden was a place of contentment in the present moment, with no awareness that there was anything else. . . . That was apparently God’s gift to the original world.”

“But the tree of knowledge was also put there by Adam and Eve’s God. He gave us a choice to know more, but in doing so, lose our innocence, as suddenly we had to choose between good and evil, beauty and ugliness.

“Animals are not aware of such knowledge. Maybe the animals are the ones that chose the right path, and we’re still searching for the way back. Maybe their form of awareness is far more enlightened than ours.”

He waited for a bit of nervous laughter to die down.

“One basic question is, why do humans go on this quest for deeper knowledge and awareness? Why are they compelled to look for wisdom beyond the knowledge of how to survive from one day to the next?”

“Maybe humans are constantly trying to connect (or reconnect) to their highest source of creation. Spirituality may be a human instinct. Many would say spirituality is just another survival mechanism. Humans fear a permanent ending – death. So they have created in every culture an imaginative way to survive even after they are dead, to cope. You could say humankind’s survival instincts are simply more inventive than the animals, but not necessarily more true or real! And that’s the end of the story.

“But while the invention of religion is likely to fall more clearly into that broad definition of ‘coping mechanism,’ spirituality is quite another dimension removed. Religion might demand

their believers adhere to the dogma, and that we even go to war over their beliefs versus some other beliefs. But pure spirituality by definition is about a personal quest for a connection to the soul, through God, or with no God necessary perhaps.

“Back to our ancient story, the method we found for gaining awareness in Eden was eating the serpent’s apple. But then, once we were cast out of Eden by this very self-reflection that we gained, we had to choose the right course without God’s help.

“Now here is where the Eden metaphor really becomes interesting: Cain killed Abel. Remember? Because Cain felt like God valued Abel, and what Abel did with his life, more than God valued Cain. This was Cain’s envious, crude self assessment of God’s thinking. Self assessment would never occur to an animal. It was a new human capability. Cain had self assessment but it wasn’t a practiced art form. It was just following some crazy voice he was hearing, a voice we call ‘thoughts.’

“Abel had these self assessments too. These thoughts going by in his head. But he also still heard God’s voice to temper them. He was still connected to the natural creative force, the all. Cain, on the other hand, was not connected to any morality or spiritual dimension. He became disconnected from his soul. His thoughts were his religion! Sound familiar? Most religions fall into the same trap, don’t they? They establish teachings that go far beyond the sacred and spiritual teachings of their great original master teacher, until holidays are born, and churches rise up, and priests and rabbis claim special knowledge that the mere mortal can’t possibly have, and prayers are spoken with certain words only – until we have a one-size-fits-all morality – all of which they claim to be God’s words and God’s will. God says this and that, not that and this. Not *their* way and their prayers. Only our way.”

“You see, religions drink their own Kool-aid. They go off message from the religion’s founder very quickly in historical terms. If the end result causes pain and anger, and division and guilt amongst their own believers, and squashes all freedom to doubt, and even causes fellow brothers and sisters of other religions to be killed or tortured, so be it -- sayeth Cain.

“Is the ‘Cain gene’ in each of us as well? Cain was listening to his own small voice chattering away minute by minute. He built his reasons into a personal church, to hate, and to mistrust. Instead, Cain, like all of us, created a self-made serpent of twisted thoughts, which in turn built inner stories without wisdom, without a connection to the soul. He was banned from Eden and was left to wander the earth in mental desolation, never to return to his source. We have all since followed in his footsteps in many ways.

“A famous best selling book, the book of Genesis, says this: ‘Cain was furious, and he was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you furious? And why are you downcast? *If you do right, won't you be accepted?* But if you do not do right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it.’

“What did Cain’s God mean?” We were all transfixed with his words and too a bit too dumbfounded to say anything.

“Here is the first thing that everyone who is conscious *knows* is true: Whatever you think, expands and becomes more and more real to you. . . . Whatever thoughts you believe, you will think more and more of those kinds of thoughts. Whatever you focus on with your small voice, with your disconnected mind, will grow its own reality.

“A real world example now might be, if you find something you feel would be worthwhile to accomplish, like getting a passing grade in this class, for instance, but you think and say to yourself, ‘I can’t,’ because, ‘I can’t understand him,’ then you will become amazingly good at not understanding me, and failing the course, and then you will further convince yourself there are lots of other things you can’t do either. Even if someone shows you that you can do a certain thing, your mind will find a way to convince yourself that you can’t do the very next step of it.

“If you think and say, ‘I can,’ then you usually can eventually do that task, not by magically becoming smarter, but by getting better at taking things step by step. And your confidence then allows you to master the more difficult steps in time as well.”

“Now *please*,” he begged, “for those silly willies among ye who have seen or read ‘The Secret,’ or read the ‘Abraham teachings’ – ironic name there – don’t confuse what I am saying with any of that kind of rubbish. Because those teachings do not take into account the fact that the soul connection is the key, not the material world. Those teachings are for the children of Cain who still think attaining material things brings happiness, and that the universe is our fairy godmother and will wave its wand and give you your milky milk any time you open your mouth for her breast.

“The universe isn’t going to give you anything like a car or a girlfriend. The universe scientifically is a stinking mess! A huge spill that’s still spilling out trillions of miles in every direction! We are a quark in the spill. And the spiritual universe would no more hear your prayer for a new Ferrari and give it to you than I would. . . . And trust me, I’m not buying any of you a car in this life time. So, again, please, do not tell your fellow students I am talking about ‘positive thinking’ here. You will ruin my already rotten reputation around campus.”

Realizing he got distracted, and allowing the laughter to die down, he cleared his throat, touched his fingers to his forehead, and said, “Now, let’s continue after that little footnote.

“Let’s assume, because most of you are teenagers in this class, that you are in many ways pissed off, insecure, depressed, or all of the above. So how do you get from there to a state of optimism? I am talking about *the bridge*. How do you get to a happier place from where you presently are -- stuck in this mediocre university, in the snow, with too much homework, and a fear of how bad this class’s final is going to be? Isn’t that what you want to know?”

We all nodded silently. He knew he had us.

“Here is the answer: Follow the deeper voice in you, right there, just behind the wall from that small voice that chatters away at you all day long.

“Some call the deeper voice, ‘The Witness.’ Or “The Observer.” Some call it the Soul. Some call it God. Some call it morality. Some call it consciousness, or pure awareness. Call it what you will. But it’s beyond debate that it’s a wiser source of consciousness than the psycho-babble we listen to in our heads minute to minute, every waking hour.

“The next question that needs answering in order to climb Jacob’s ladder is: what exactly does this observing voice behind the daily chatter have to say to you?”

I noted the reference to my name – the reference to Jacob’s ladder --- and made a note to look it up on Wikipedia when I got back to the dorm. I didn’t even know where my name originated from.

“What does the deeper voice, observing your every action and thought, have to say about you, and about life? What is it’s message to you?

“For the most part, that is where individual human beings create their own art form, their own God, even. Each ‘soul’ is unique.

“But souls are also all the same in one crucial way! There is one universal: All souls have the goal of connection. So if we reach out to it, it will always reach back towards us, and it will then try to point you even further up the ladder, to the possibility of true awareness, and consciousness beyond the self.”

That was lecture one!

I had to get out of there as soon as possible. I ran as fast as I could to the café just off campus and drank a beer way too fast. Then another. Something horrible was going on in my “small voice” thinking. It was that I was at an extreme disadvantage. Kelsey had been taken from me, by God or randomness or whatever, and I was so angry, and so mistrustful of love and of the future that I might never be able to reach a deeper voice of wisdom within me. Everything I saw when I closed my eyes was hell-like. I was so angry at fate for giving me love and then stealing it away in an instant that maybe I didn’t care anymore, about being wise, or anything else.

Then a new thought crossed my mind: that was exactly the way Cain thought. He felt like God had treated him unfairly and he took his anger to an extreme.

More beers didn’t help me know anything. It did what it was supposed to do, and made me forget.

Days later, I felt nervous, and wondered if I should quit school altogether. Riker’s next class was quickly approaching. There was a connection between that and the things I was feeling.

Another odd thing about this course of Riker’s. The books on transpersonal psychology didn’t refer to any of the things that he said in class. We were expected to pass the tests on the information in the books. He told us that from the beginning. But there were no tests on the lectures themselves.

His next class began where he left off. But it was a very brief lecture this time. After which he simply dismissed the class and left the building:

“Here is the main point for you to take home and work on, dear students. This is life-work, not just homework: We all need to learn accurate self assessment in order to communicate with our very Cain-like mind. That is why it’s important for humans to create, and learn, and grow beyond their initial thinking. Accurate self assessment is one of the critical keys to understanding what our soul is trying to say to us. That is why I believe in psychology as a science and an art form. Psychology has only one basic goal: accurate self assessment of one’s own thoughts.

“The difference between Abel and Cain is what internal voice they followed. Because Cain was not listening accurately to his God, only to his infantile envy and rage.

“Remember my quote from last week -- God said, ‘Why are you furious? And why are you downcast? If you do right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it.’

“Cain instead trusted the assessments of his unconscious thoughts. He followed their tricks, set up by his jealousy and his anger. He committed the inexcusable – murdering his own spirituality. He murdered his alter ego, Abel. By doing so he murdered his own soul.

“But God, after Cain committed this horrible sin, told Cain ‘thou mayest’ overcome evil – the Hebrew word, ‘Timshell,’ means ‘thou mayest. Not ‘thou must,’ or ‘thou will.’ *There was no command.* And no set destiny. God was implying that Cain STILL had a choice, even after killing Abel, of whether or not to overcome his sin, and to find his soul. It was a second chance for Cain. God was a good guy, or a good mother, don’t you think?

But Cain couldn’t find the strength. Because he had too much practice at being mentally weak. He had listened to his base instincts, his needs, and his animal desires without ever questioning whether or not what he was thinking was true. There is no switch on the wall to turn things like self-awareness on and off. Especially back in those days! Self-awareness is a practiced art form.

“Cain had no practice at spiritual connection. So he was left to wander forever. Forever unconscious. He was banished to the land of ‘Nod.’ His soul was gone.

“Nod,” is an interesting word. Cain was doomed to virtually sleepwalk through the rest of his life, as do most of his descendents.

“Abel was ‘able’ to hear his own soul’s voice. His short life was filled with peace. Cain needed Abel as a ‘cane,’ a crutch, to teach him about the soul connection. But by listening to his smaller voice Cain killed his own higher self.

The only cane that Cain was left with was the one that helped him wander aimlessly over the face of the earth for all time, in a world without meaning.”

Soon my other classes meant very little to me compared to Riker's classes. I was smitten, to use a biblical term. I understood for the first time how my mind was tricking me into darkness. I had reasons to be angry and depressed and to give up on life. But maybe most people find their own reasons. Someone close doesn't have to die to come to that dark world. Each person can easily find the road to hell. But now I wanted to find my way out. I wanted to hear him, be around him, understand more about what he was saying, and how I could escape my chaotic thoughts.

I wondered if Riker practiced what he was preaching. Was he some sort of mystic hanging around Boston, teaching in his spare time to make ends meet? Or was he a professor with charisma so powerful that everyone just immediately believed his theater act?

I found out a small piece of the answer with his next lecture, which was all about using "insight meditation" as a tool to connect with the observing voice.

We all tried to meditate during that class. Which was pretty funny, because none of us could concentrate for more than a few seconds. But I tried meditating during the rest of the week as well, since it was our only homework from the class. After that week, I thought I must be the worst meditator in the class. Until I found out during the next class that, of course, everyone had had a similar experience.

Easter break came and went. Time had passed, life had passed, my eyes gained a little of its old vision back. I could see the world outside myself at times. And I began to wonder, guiltily at first, whether I would ever feel love again.

Kelsey was "the one" for me. Could there ever be another "one?" I would look at her face and feel an achingly beautiful feeling bursting from me, with no doubt, no hesitation about "us." Could that ever occur with someone else?

I had been stubbornly waiting for Kelsey to come back from the dead. But I also knew that I really shouldn't, couldn't allow myself to think that way any more.

The next semester, I signed up for Professor Riker's Advanced Transpersonal Psychology class.

The introductory class had dealt mostly with the foundations of transpersonal psychology. The outline he gave us that very first day so long ago alluded to some of the things that he was going to teach in this class. First the basics of psychology, and a barrage of statistics had to be thrown in our path. Then, whomever signed up for this more advanced class was considered to be "under his wing." He was to show special interest in each student, and reveal more about the outline from that first class.

In fact, at the first class of his advanced course, the same outline appeared on our desk.

But this time it said, "Be prepared to have your own personal experience. If you are unwilling to work on yourself directly using the principals on this list, please leave now."

Dr. Riker was also allowed to pre-screen each incoming student, who he first of all knew from his previous class. He had the right to reject whomever he thought might not be ready to work with the information. I thought he might reject me, but he didn't.

His first lecture was much more specific about how the mind really works than anything he had touched upon the semester before.

He started by quoting a man named, Gustov Flaubert:

"Intellectual incompetence usually begins from wanting to reach conclusions."

Then the Professor said:

"I am making an observation about our thinking process -- that all too often our thoughts and conclusions seem to be little more than internal advertisements, fleeting words, random images, or passing physical sensations, trying to convince us that reality is this, or truth is that, or afterlife is this, or faith gives us an excuse not to have to self-assess further, or that we need this or that person or material thing in order to feel happy or fulfilled, or successful.

"The fact is, something odd can happen when we inspect the EXACTNESS of what we believe. At a certain point in our assessment, the details of the logic, the truth, can become quite elusive, just as material objects are really not there, but are actually divided down into molecules, and atoms, and finally the space between atoms – even human beings in all their chemical wateriness are not made up of mostly water when microscopically dissected. We're mostly space!

"By momentarily suspending everything we think we know from the outset, we begin to lay the groundwork for a deeper place to observe from, especially during meditation practice, and we

thereby slow down the chattering moment to moment thinking we are all trapped in. Because we can come to question everything. Every thought, conclusion, and belief. We have a split second opportunity to put things in a bigger perspective, by turning everything we say to ourselves into an open question.

“Is what I am saying to myself true? Helpful to myself in the long run? What would be all the potential outcomes if I act upon what I am thinking? We must ask these questions or the thoughts we hear will make us their prisoners simply by going ahead and acting upon them!

“Thinking thoughts is never the problem. Even the most horrible or negative of thoughts is NEVER a problem! Unskillfully assessing those thoughts is the problem. Remember your brother, Cain? Same problem.

“There are other things going on other than just the thoughts that we are keying in on moment to moment. We have to wake up from that self-imposed semi-blind dream that has us wandering around in the land of Nod.

“It’s tricky, this invisible molecular world of truth. Is it the thought we are thinking that we can rely on to find reality? Is the deeper self assessment of those thoughts something we can rely on? Or is faith alone something we can rely on? And if really it all comes down to faith, how do we attain faith without a thousand thoughts and selfish desires tripping up the pure message of that faith? And what is ‘faith’? Must it include a God? Or can we have faith without even being sure if God exists? Don’t say no to that one, or you get an ‘F!’”

All semblance of all my inner rationalizations that I was calling thoughts -- all thoughts I was assuming were true for me, were called into question. What was the truth about anything? Kelsey was dead, that was true. Not much else could be known.

The time came for me to have my private meeting with Professor Riker. He met once a semester with each student privately for as long as three to four hours. He wanted to make sure we each fully understood what he was talking about, and also wanted to show us how to integrate one random part of his teaching into our personal life.

I walked into his office for the first time and looked around as he was typing something on his laptop.

There were quotes on his wall, written on simple white paper. He told me later that he wasn't the author of any of them.

"You may not know the subtle progress you are making. Therefore, do not stop."

"Spiritual beings are the ones who have to guide the world. They must be kind, yet courageous. Understanding, yet not weak minded. They should be like lion cubs, not like sheep."

He turned towards me and greeted me by my first name. Then he said, "If you have a cell phone please turn it off."

"I don't own a cell phone anymore," I responded.

"Neither do I," he smiled. "We are a country of two."

I shuffled over to a couch that looked like it was waiting for me to sit on.

"Are you ready to get started?" he smiled warmly.

I nodded. But I felt nervous.

He brought over a small stack of two by five cards and laid them face down on the oak table between us. "Each one of these cards has a part of the original outline that you saw the first day you took a class from me. We're going to focus on one of them today. You've signed a release before taking the advance class that you are willing to have a professional therapist-client relationship with me, yes?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Pick one. We'll let fate decide what we should work with today."

I reached towards the table and picked the card on the outside right and looked at what it said. Then I put it face down on my lap, as if he was a magician and I was waiting for him to perform his trick.

“Which one did you pick?”

“The Assassin.” I said, a bit perplexed and disappointed.

“Ah, that’s a good one!” he smiled. He rolled his chair back towards his desk. “Let’s begin.”

He looked at me: “Are you searching for love, or have you found it, or don’t you care?”

“All three,” I said.

“Explain please.”

I became very uncomfortable. “I found it, then I lost it. Now I am searching again because, well, she asked me to. But I don’t really have the heart to search. Because I still love her, even though,” I started to laugh and cry at the same time, but stopped myself from doing either. “Even though she’s not alive anymore.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

I covered my face a bit. I had never dreamed of ever saying this out loud to anyone, but if anyone would understand, it would be him.

“And, here’s the crazy part where you can call the psycho ward to come and get me. She has spoken to me, after. And she said, ‘*Don’t give up because of me. Live because of me.*’ So I’m trying to do that.

“I see.” He was somber. I’d never seen him like this. I could see that he cared on some level, really cared, even though he didn’t know me, and was trying to assess on many different levels.

“So now what do you see as your task?” he asked me.

“I’m trying to find the one. Another ‘one.’ I mean, I know she was ‘the one.’ But I am hoping there is someone else in the world that can also be . . . I can’t fake love. I know what love is now. And I can’t settle for anything less than what I felt with her.”

“Okay, I understand. That’s touching, really, I mean that.” He gathered his words carefully for a moment.

“I know finding that special one is very important. Everyone is hoping to find that kind of love.” He took a deep breath, exhaled, and said, “Okay, close your eyes. Sit back and close your eyes and try to relax. I am not here to judge you, I only want to help you, if I can, if you’ll let me.”

He took me through a routine that put me in a state of light hypnosis. Then when I was in a half dream state he said very quietly. “I want you to conjure up, keeping your eyes closed, an image of ‘the one,’ you have yet to meet as best as you can. What kind of person comes to mind, physically, mentally. Describe her face, her personality.” He waited for half a minute or so. But I didn’t respond. I had been driven deep into a fantasy.

“Describe to me what you are thinking and seeing now,” he said patiently.

My voice sounded lower in pitch than normal, and the words were spoken slower than my normal cadence. I said, “Ah, her face . . . is kind of pale, maybe a few freckles, soft features, a boyish grin, a kind smile behind it. Her hair is blonde. She’s very funny, she loves me, likes to see me laugh and feel free. She understands the pain I went through. She’s never jealous of the love I have for Kelsey. She encourages it. Likes to see my heart be open. I’m courageous around her. I feel strong.”

“Okay, very good,” said Dr. Riker in a warm tone. “After I’ve counted down from ten to zero you can open your eyes, slowly. Take a moment to be here. Then we’ll talk.”

I felt myself coming out of the dream he put me in. Thinking of ‘the one’ made me feel sad, not having found her was a big part of the empty, lost feeling I felt every day. I wasn’t hopeful I would ever find her. It just made me depressed and anxious to think about her. Because she could never be. No one could be like Kelsey to me. I had no surety I could grow a second heart. I only knew my first heart still belonged to the ocean girl who whispered to me from time to time.

I looked at him, waiting for him to say something.

“The one,” he said. “I actually know her. I know this person you described, I know who she is.”

I was stunned at first, but then realized it was a trick of some sort. “It’s Kelsey.”

“No, Kelsey is gone. The one is waiting here in this life.”

“It’s my mother,” I said, dejectedly, thinking pop psychology.

“No!” he laughed softly, “I don’t do that kind of therapy. It’s not your mother.”

I thought about this puzzle he was setting up. Could he actually know someone on campus I should meet? Could he be thinking he could play cupid for me and set up some sort of bizarre blind date?

“Is it really someone you know?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I give up. Please tell me.”

He leaned back so as to break it to me as gently as possible. “If you take off her mask, you will see, she is your murderer!”

“What?”

“She is your assassin, Jacob. She will murder your present moment, and kidnap you away from everyone who will ever try to love you, because, they won’t be her. And they certainly won’t be Kelsey. No girl anywhere can match the power of your fantasy.”

My head began to spin. “Then I have to escape her?” I said. “I have to ban my thoughts of her?” I felt compelled to clarify my thinking. “But I’m talking about the image I have of ‘the one,’ not Kelsey. Kelsey would never hurt me, not purposely.” I added.

“No,” he agreed, “Kelsey is not your murderer, Jacob. She is your angel. She is telling you to move on with your life. But you can’t. Because the one you are waiting for now, the one you just described to me, won’t let you. Nor will she ever.”

“So I have to get rid of that image of the one . . . “

“No, no, don’t do that!” he said firmly. “Don’t ever let that image go!”

“But you just said. . . “

“Look closer, Jacob. We have to get the image in a far clearer perspective. What is that image really about? Self assessment, Jacob. That’s the key. What is that image really trying to say to you? There is another mask to be pulled off. Pull off the mask of that murderer. Look who is behind it?”

I tried to play his game for a moment but I really had no clue.

“Do you want to know who is behind the mask of your assassin?”

“Yes.”

“It’s God!”

I was stunned into silence again.

“It’s the force within you that is so very capable of sensing love, and feeling it. Your heart is so dedicated and loyal, so sure and content with love. But you are also denying it to yourself now as some kind of punishment. You see it there, but not here. It’s in the future maybe, but certainly not in the present. But that’s a bad self-assessment, Jacob. That’s a lie to yourself.

“If you understand that what you are searching for and longing for is actually God, and not a real flesh and blood person, then you can feel that love for “the one” NOW. It’s there, permeating every second. You don’t have to wait. You can feel Eros in every touch of a blade of grass. Open your senses wide, as you are so capable of doing. You are blessed that way, not cursed! You can smell pure love in the wind, you know it exists everywhere when you stand at the edge of the ocean and look out.

“‘The one’ is *there*. Kelsey is there too. You don’t need anyone in the flesh to prove that love to you. They are giving all of themselves to you, without even being here.

“You are awake the moment you choose to be, for as long as you choose to be. You already know which way to walk. Because their love is guiding you every step of the way. Take the next step.”

The next few days were spent perhaps taking my next step too literally, because I found myself just wandering through the city. It was the weekend. I worked on my papers and read my school books at night, sometimes until the early morning hours. But then after a little sleep I just wanted to walk and walk towards no place in particular.

It wasn't like Cain wandering in the land of "Nod." I was sure of that. I was wandering back to a place closer to Eden than that, somewhere I hadn't been to in a long time, like during the time when I was with Kelsey, where I could touch something and feel it, laugh and lose control of myself, dream and let the dream carry me all the way out. And all they way in.

But for all the sensual intake and appreciation of the clouds and wind and seeing the goodness in the faces of all the people walking by, I also realized, after all the soul searching and beautiful quiet moments I was experiencing, that I was lonely for a real human being to love as well. Not in desperation, but just as a fact. I longed for the warmth of touch. I wanted to know and be known by someone else instead of hiding away.

I also had my ability to sense things. I didn't even bring this subject up with Riker. I thought he had heard enough craziness from me already. I appreciated his brilliance. But I didn't want to stretch my credulity too thin. Yet all during this amazing week of my life I was sensing so many things. Good things, bad things. It was like I was everyone's psychic dart board. They were throwing their thoughts at me. I was so open on every level that the intake was becoming too much for me to handle again.

I found that one way to combat that kind of mental-static bombardment was by meditating. So I spent a long time sitting in silence practicing insight meditation each day as Riker had taught us. Insight meditation is the practice of watching thoughts go by without reacting to them. Just watching them without comment or judgment of any kind. No matter how bad or good you think they might be. No grasping, no aversion. Just neutral observation. I had been meditating a little each day since that initial class. But now my meditations were becoming longer, some were hours long.

As the end of the weekend grew near, I contemplated what it would take for me to find true happiness in this life.

It was a tricky question. Riker said in class one day that almost all attempts at aiming straight at the goal of becoming happy usually brings the mind to an even higher degree of misery than when the attempt began.

So then how does anyone become truly happy? My senses were now open, my heart was open, but things hurt just as much as they felt beautiful. I tried not to judge or quantify the hurt, like a good student of insight meditation might. But it didn't make my heart hurt any less.

Meditation was not a sedative! It was only an awareness technique. It was a way to connect to the deep silence we have in us, where the soul exists, with a hand extended.

Sometimes I had the strength to reach my hand out too. Sometimes I didn't.

Sunday night -- the early morning hours of Monday morning actually. Classes would begin in a few hours, the sun would rise soon. I hadn't slept. I was at a cross roads, but both roads seemed frightening to me.

My senses were now full. But my mind was also completely overloaded. The hard wiring had been strained to its synaptual limits. I felt like I was going to burst open. And there was a lot of light that would burst open if it did, but a lot of darkness as well. Things I didn't want to see or feel, history I had no desire to re-live.

It was in that mental space, just as I was closing my burning eyes into a dazed sleep, when I heard Kelsey's voice come to me again.

It was as if I was entering the middle of a conversation that we were already having:

*"There is a 'there,' a place with what you might call "minds" – pure self essences -- communicating with each other. They all have pure intentions at this level of existence, but many of them don't know if there is a God or not, even here. And even though I strongly sense a God energy in some way or in some form, it still doesn't mean that I, or anyone, can know anything for sure.*

*"Maybe it's up to humans to find the answers for themselves, with no help from this place. Maybe that's why life is going on. I still don't know why I feel compelled to reach you and help you, Jacob, it simply feels right to do this. Although I know it's very rare. But the question of who is overseeing me, and the entirety of all worlds, or who or what is defining words like 'right,' is unanswerable, even from where I am.*

*"Here is what I do know. You are not meant to suffer. You are meant to experience bliss in the life you have. But the only way to do that in the form you exist in is to see everything that happens to you as an act of destiny. Part of the play of the universe. You can insert a concept of God into the reasons why life unfolds the way it does. Or what is behind 'destiny.' Or not. But the universe will have its way whether you think God is behind it or not. And whether you fight it or not. You can't fight the tidal wave, Jacob! Remember our tidal wave dreams? Just flow with it. Be patient. Allow life to unfold. I know you've been hurt. You know I know that. But still, in the end you have no choice but to trust it.*

*"Acceptance is the only way. Accept your destiny. Accept and care, and act from that caring. If you can see the beauty through the suffering then you have arrived closer to a place where I am. Beauty and suffering are not opposites. They are inseparable. As are we."*

There was a long pause, although I felt no earthly sense of time pass in the silence.

*“My final message to you, Jacob, is this -- the thing I most want to tell you about ‘here’ is that an overwhelming feeling of love exists in this place at all times, like a wave in motion for all of eternity, and it’s the key to all meaning.”*

And that was all. The next pause unwound into a sudden feeling of aloneness; she was gone.

I knew Kelsey's intentions were good, if it was Kelsey actually talking to me. But that was really the question. Because I had been so tired, so mentally spent and physically exhausted when she came to me this time that I again couldn't know with any surety if it was real, or if I was completely delusional. I was seriously concerned that I was going crazy.

The sun rose and dimly lit my room. I put on some fresh clothes while half asleep, packed up my class books, and headed towards the university. I had a nine o'clock class.

But as I walked onto the campus my feet turned in a new direction. They were headed for Riker's office. He was the only one I could face. I needed to know if I was literally crazy or not. I needed to understand what was going on.

I found myself walking faster and faster, afraid someone would stop me and say hello. I entered the building and began to run down the hall to Riker's office. I stopped to compose myself before knocking. Then I tapped calmly on his thick dark wooden door. No answer. So I tapped again, this time a little louder, just in case. But it was obvious he wasn't in. Finding myself hopelessly confused and sick to my stomach, my body crumbled down in front of his door.

I tried to meditate. I decided to meditate until he arrived, regardless of how many hours that might be. But I was physically so exhausted I quickly fell asleep.

About an hour later I awoke to see professor Riker standing over me. He had a pile of books in his arms, slightly hidden by a big black overcoat that was speckled with rain drops.

"Can I help you?" he said in a kind tone.

"I hope so," I shivered.

It was only then that he realized what I total mess I was. He put the key in the lock and invited me in.

"Fortunately," he said, "I came to get some work done. I don't have class for another two hours."

"I don't want to disturb your work," I whispered. At the same time I feared two hours wouldn't be enough.

"Well, at this moment, you are my work. And I feel responsible if what you're feeling is from our private session the other day."

"I don't know if it is or not," I admitted. I had given that possibility some thought. Maybe he had unlocked some door that shouldn't have been opened. Or maybe Kelsey had. I considered that.

“Excuse the mess,” he said as he held the door open for me. There were opened books everywhere, papers everywhere. He raised the creaky window slightly to allow in some fresh air and at the same time turned on the old iron heater in the opposite corner. It crackled and snapped awake. I could smell the odd combination of oil and dust as the gas lit. I was shivering, but it wasn’t from the cold air in the room.

He urged me to tell him what I was thinking. Every thought. Every feeling. Everything that had happened that weekend. In the process of the telling him I also mentioned, since I was sure he already thought I was mentally unstable and maybe certifiably so, that I was psychic.

I told him Kelsey and I both knew that we wouldn’t be together but we didn’t know why. My story came out in a jagged, oftentimes incoherent way. But he let me go on and on until I came to the present moment -- I described myself crumpled up in a ball in front of his office door, asleep. And then he brought me inside here.

“Good. Good work, Jacob. Your words told me a lot.”

I waited for him to say more. His praise of my being able to open my mouth and spew out an avalanche of sentences that didn’t seem to connect to the ones before or after them didn’t help my state of mind at all.

He saw my disappointment.

“What do you want me to help you with? Where should we begin?”

“First, I want you to help me figure out if it’s Kelsey speaking to me, or if it’s *me* speaking to me pretending to be Kelsey. I need to know. . . .”

“Why?” he interrupted.

“What do you mean ‘why?’” I said too loudly. “I want to know because if it’s true she’s talking to me then there’s an afterlife! But if it’s my brain pretending to be Kelsey then I’m totally insane. I’d say there’s a pretty big gap between the two potential realities!”

“I understand that,” he laughed softly. “The implications of both, or either, are pretty huge.”

I nodded, starting to feel a loss of faith in his ability to help me.

“But the truth is, no one has answers to those kinds of questions,” he said firmly.

I let out a big sigh which he correctly interpreted as frustration and disappointment. I was truly losing a grip on myself.

He sat back and said, “I’m not sure you totally understand what I am trying to say.”

I waited for him to explain but he made an odd joke instead:

“I once heard someone say, ‘Now that I’m in my thirties I realize that all the answers I came up with in my twenties didn’t have any questions.’”

I didn’t get it.

“Jacob,” Professor Riker said earnestly. “I am sorry I am not connecting with you. Let me try again. There is no way I can know from where I sit if what you are sensing is psychic, or just instinct, some of which turns out to be true and some of which doesn’t. And there certainly is no way I can tell you with any surety that you are crazy, because you certainly don’t seem so in my professional opinion. Not at all. You can make yourself crazy by defining yourself as crazy for a long period of time. But so far, you haven’t done that yet. You are still questioning it, not totally falling into the trap of that negative self assessment.

“On the other hand, you know, I can’t tell you with any certainty from where I sit that Kelsey is truly speaking to you from some other world.”

I appreciated his honesty. After all, how could he know that for sure?

“But there is another answer for you that I think is just as important as everything I just said, if not more so. It’s *the* answer.”

“What’s that?”

“Here it is. Don’t question whether or not Kelsey is real or fantasy, or whether she is you. And don’t question who or what you are. Only question what the words themselves are saying to you. Take the words you hear at face value and use them or discard them. That’s your choice. But don’t waste time trying to know where the words are coming from or what’s going on ‘out there.’

“Listen to the words carefully. What are the words are trying to say to you? Do they make sense? Do they help you grow as a person if you follow them? If so, then follow! That’s your next step! If not, then discard them as you would a dream that makes no sense to you. That’s the only real importance here, not where the words came from, but what they said. And then what you do with the message.

“If you get too hung up on the source rather than the message itself, then you *are* well on your way to being crazy! In fact, *so* crazy, that you could soon be qualified enough to start your own religion -- and repeat the same mistakes most religious zealots do when they ignore the original teachers’ message and concern themselves only with own their needs and fears instead.”

It was an unexpected answer.

It answered a question I didn't even ask.

But by doing so, Professor Riker had answered all my other questions as well. Focus on the message instead of the messenger. Or the message will be wasted regardless of who delivered it.

So I went home and slept for about eighteen hours. Then I went back to my classes and worked hard for the rest of the week.

At night I would try to write down what the messenger said. I would remember bits and pieces of the words, then I would study them. I meditated on them. I tried to absorb them into my skin. I didn't know where that effort would lead. But I knew the message itself was wise.

Soon thereafter I met Emma. She was in my math class. A 'brain.' An outcast like me. She had a swirling vine tattoo crawling up her right arm in blue ink. She had deer eyes and long brown hair that she used to cover her face. We connected to each other's shyness and pain.

Not long after our first date we slept together. I was anxious to break that emotional barrier I was so scared of since Kelsey's death. She was attracted to my hesitancy. It was a beautiful isolated moment in time. The universe gave us both a gift and we accepted it.

I thought for a while that we could be happy together over time. Or more correctly, that she could make me happy. But then I remembered from my classes with Riker that happiness shouldn't be the goal. It was a set up, a road to more misery. Only wisdom should be the end goal. Happiness would come from the wisdom. But what was wisdom? The truth about the world and its history, its politics, its business? Understanding how to make money? Understanding what love is, and isn't, and what it cannot be?

All the advice given to sons and daughters by parents, and by teachers of math and science and religion, that was not wisdom!

Whatever wisdom was, part of it was about self discovery. And surely I hadn't found it yet. Maybe a part of being wise is never being unwise enough to think you are.

Emma and I soon drifted apart as a couple, but I will always thank her for showing me the way back to my heart. Because this is one secret about wisdom that I became sure of: It's not in the mind. The soul doesn't ultimately dwell in the mind at all. It lives in the heart. It's hard for the mind to find its way there, and merge. But every attempt at compassion, or forgiveness, or humility, lays another stepping stone in the right direction.

I graduated Boston University a few years later with a degree in psychology. Professor Riker was my mentor, my advisor, my guide and inspiration for many years. And I would have been happy and grateful enough for the story to end there. But it didn't. There is still a bit more catching up to do.

Over a number of years of fulfilling my internship I befriended a number of wonderful people. I also had a few girlfriends here and there. I knew I hadn't met the girl I wanted to marry yet. But I sensed I would some day. But while living this seemingly normal and culturally successful life of an east coast psych grad in his mid-twenties, other occasional things were happening to me. They were unexplainable, but that was nothing new.

I had continued to meditate during these years. But after a while my meditations turned into my own indefinable form. I was no longer strictly practicing "insight meditation." I was not simply observing my thoughts. Something was happening when I meditated that was purely mine. Without Professor Riker's occasional oversight I would have again thought that a part of my mind was truly clinically insane by all the definitions I had come to study. But by my own definition, which in the end is the only one that counts, I was not at all insane. I was psychically attuned to places and energies that weren't "here" by any other person's perception of that word.

From the time I gave up trying to know whether Kelsey had been speaking those words to me or not, the channel between me and her, or some essence of her, or her spirit, continued to grow. My connection to her, or that fantasy of "her," widened.

I began to climb the ladder to where she was, a rung at a time. Year after year I would use my sense and intuition to find her there. I would find her, sometimes as a spark. Sometimes as a flash of light that would stay with me. Sometimes it would surround me and stay until finally I saw her human face. It was a dream, I knew it was, but I saw her nonetheless, and sometimes I held her. I would feel wave after wave melting in me. I woke up from these meditations crying. I had never been happier in my entire life.

I spent years connecting to her world from mine. I experienced that world to the best of my understanding of it. I tried to describe this place in the beginning pages of this story to you. I lived (t)here, in both worlds, until finally was able to visit her at will.

## Epilogue

Throughout my years marriage to a wonderful woman named Terry, and the challenges of keeping true love strong through time, and the raising of three amazing children -- throughout it all -- my time with Kelsey, or some essence of her in that other world, remained, but went unspoken to the ones I loved in this world. Their reading of this book will be the first they will know about any of it.

It wasn't so much a secret I kept from them as a dream I wasn't ready to share yet. I wouldn't have even known where to begin.

But I am sharing it now. Because something happened. Something that changed everything again!

Something happened to Kelsey, and I don't know exactly what to make of it. But I won't be going there any more.

I went to that world during a meditation to visit her spirit for the thousandth time, to play in the timeless fields of dream. And to feel again, so as to learn it well, the amazing electric brilliance of opening your heart with total compassion, with total trust, in the fullness of an unworldly joy - - and I found during this one frame of time, that she was gone.

Again she was gone . . . had left me, again.

I was existing there, bathed in blazing light, while at the same time realizing she had forever disappeared from that dimension.

I began to leave there, to assess this new event back in my worldly life, to try to understand what may have happened, when, just as I was floating back to the living, feeling my toes curled under my feet as I sat in trance, I heard her voice for the last time.

*"I have found out something, Jacob, it's so amazing! Something that love taught me slowly but finally. Something your father tried to tell you. Generations have pointed to it, but words can't exist here. It's so wonderful. So wonderful, Jacob. And I know, I am sure, you will come to know it too."*