

THE WHEEL OF LIGHT

by

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Dedicated to my friends the Russian family

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INTRODUCTION

A shadow is over my life. Recently I have been shaken up very badly by the loss of a young Russian boy. He was my friend, and he played the drums, and was probably the best drummer I ever heard.

His name was Serge.

I knew him a long time ago in America, and when I remember him today, it is with a sense of wonder, mixed with love and admiration. He was an innocent, happy child, but the artist life can be very dangerous, as he found out.

I will now explain how all these impossible events took place.

THE LAUNDROMAT

I began my musical career in London many years ago. At that time I was much younger, more hopeful and full of energy. For a while things went well. The music scene was blossoming in an exciting way, and it was glamorous, addictive existence. We lived for the dream, enjoying our elite, exclusive world, driving from club to club every night, and recording at the most expensive studios. We felt we might be part of music history, and never stopped creating, obsessed with perfection, often working all night long.

I became famous for a while. My band and I were recognised in the street occasionally. A top BBC radio DJ had our photo on his wall. When sharing a gig with a rival group, they were terrified to have to compete against us. We were creating our own, unique legend.

But then something went horribly wrong. The whole thing crashed just as fast as it had climbed.

There were many reasons. I was too young and inexperienced, with plenty of character faults. But this obvious immaturity was only the start of it. My entire lifestyle was arrogant and decadent, while I remained oblivious.

All these years I had been playing around with drink and drugs, generally living too fast, and then suddenly I was surprised when my family and friends did not want to know me any more.

At this point I began a relationship with a fiery, extrovert Italian singer called Marina. She was half gypsy, a child of the streets, talented, but very demanding, and would explode into temper tantrums at the slightest notice.

Inevitably we were soon washed up, beaten down and bitter. My original band had long since split up. At

night we crawled around clubs and pubs, looking for live music, but I was burned out at this stage, and hardly able to function.

However things now became even worse. The London music scene itself had become stale. Many bands were playing music that sounded more like a car-crash of loud, distorted guitars, and angry, nihilistic vocals with meaningless lyrics.

Eventually I could not take any more. For some time I had been hearing that the New York scene was better.

So eventually one autumn we packed our bags, and bought plane tickets for America.

As soon as I arrived there was an immediate shock. New York was hard, and the pace was fast. But I saw that the real music was here, for sure. Although this city was colourful and exciting, the danger in the streets was very real, I soon learned. Around the tougher, harder areas they would kill you for ten dollars. I knew I had to watch my back.

However as I roamed the clubs at night, it was easy to find exciting new bands and players who were better than I had heard in London, in the recent past. I understood that, given time, I might find something fresh, a dream band, a sound to change the world. It was obvious that I had come to the right spot.

Finally I realized I had to get serious and invest. So one morning, at the bank, I shifted a large amount of cash from London, everything I owned, and soon rented a cafe club in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The area was run-down and fairly dangerous, but it was all I could afford. This way I could book many bands, yet also nurture and promote my own acts too. I would have a chance to get to know these musicians personally, and maybe sign them up for recording or management deals. It would be another

way to make money. New York is always expensive, and the pressure to pay the rent was already a crushing weight on my shoulders.

At this point Marina and I split up. She soon found another partner. We continued to manage the club for a while, but gradually she passed out of my life.

One day, when out walking in my area, I noticed an ancient laundromat on the corner of the street. I looked it up and down carefully. Over the next few days I kept an eye on the building. An idea was forming at the back of my mind.

This laundromat was very run-down. I could hardly believe how low the place had fallen.

It had been neglected for years and smelled of decay. There were bloodstains on the walls, since the building had previously been an abattoir. Not many customers turned up any more, as this was a dangerous corner of the Lower East Side. You might find the occasional junkie sitting in a corner, facing the wall and shooting up. The windows were covered with grey filth, and one pane of glass was cracked. The huge industrial washing machines were ancient and in need of renovation.

Yet somehow the business had survived. And then one day I was fast-talked into purchasing the lease by a Peruvian restaurant manager with glittering eyes, and one missing tooth. After paying practically nothing to sign the contract, I still felt cheated. My sole reason for taking the place was that the earnings of my music club had already proved to be low and erratic. Perhaps a second business might balance things out, I calculated.

Tonight I had an appointment. At 8pm I locked up the club, and was stumbling south through drizzle, heading for my laundromat. The evening was dark, close and fairly damp, and I cursed the rain. My black leather jacket was

leaking at the neck. A thin mongrel was wolfing down some cast off food in the gutter as I crossed at the intersection.

Many businesses were boarded up and forlorn in the moonlight. Most people were out of town, but this area was depressed all year round.

I had bad news on my mind, and turned the thing around while walking. Mainly, my problem was money, or the lack of it. The club was now very badly in debt, and had been that way for a long time. I knew that various debtors were closing in on me. If they had their way I would be evicted, and back on the streets within a month.

However I was now on my way to meet a friend who might help. His name was Leo, and he was a red-haired, Russian musician who played harmonica, and who performed with his family, all of whom were on various different instruments. They had recently travelled from Russia to seek out a new life here in New York City. On discovering them I had booked the band to appear at my club. They were billed for the following week. I had heard that wherever they went, the place would be packed. This was a very good sign. Their show was making money. I knew that they could easily be signed to a record company fast, and now wondered what kind of cash I could earn with them, and how quickly.

This evening I had arranged for Leo to be waiting for me at my laundromat. It was a warm, yet rainy night. We had business to discuss. I needed to know exactly which dates he might play, and for what money, plus other details. The laundromat had been chosen as the meeting place since the club was being repainted today.

The streets were desolate as I turned the final corner. On the left, in the alleyway, a couple of tramps had made a small fire, and were toasting bagels on sticks. The moon was rising and by now the drizzle had stopped. But it was close and clammy, and I knew that inside the

laundromat it would be worse. New York in July can be bad.

Finally when I pushed open the ancient door of the laundromat, I could not believe what I now saw and heard. An entire punk band had created a makeshift stage at the end, brought in amplifiers and an extra sound system, and were playing full blast to an army of leather-suited bikers, gypsies, squatters and what looked like hookers, leaning against a table under the window.

This was outrageous. It was my place, and they had no right to be there. But I knew I had to take it easy. This was a tough crowd.

Then I recognised Leo's flaming red hair and beard. He was standing near the stage. The noise of the band was deafening, and people were dancing. Smoke drifted from multiple cigarettes everywhere.

I could barely make out the words the band were singing, but it sounded something like, 'Row, row, row the boat,' the famous children's song.

A couple were making love on a rusty iron table near the door. The girl's legs straddled the floor and a dog licked her ankles through fish-net stockings.

The noise didn't stop. No-one paid any attention to my entrance. Punks staggered around, joints in mouths, laughing uproariously, occasionally fighting or crushing beer cans, and throwing them down on the floor.

I shrugged. This was New York so what could one do? I knew I would have to get them out eventually, but why now? It was obvious that I would have to wait. They outnumbered me, and were probably armed. I strained my eyes in the gloom and on closer inspection I could see that several wore knives in their belts.

By now Leo had sidled up to me.

"So this is your laundromat. Very nice place," he shouted.

“I was not expecting all this today,” I shouted back. “I am sorry for the disturbance. They are nothing to do with me.” His eyes were sparkling with merriment.

“Do they have anything like this in Russia?” I shouted, kicking out beer cans to make a space for us to stand in, close to the wall which was covered with fungus. He ignored my question.

“We have business to discuss,” he told me, cupping his mouth with two hands so I could hear. “Is there perhaps somewhere more quiet?” he wanted to know.

“How about behind the stage?” I suggested.

I now saw that the punks had swiftly constructed a rough, raw structure out of wooden planks and screens. We managed to pick our way through into an enclosed area behind. It was dark and humid as I turned to face my friend.

“Don’t worry, I will deal with these guys later,” I assured him.

Suddenly I noticed that there was another opening leading to what looked like a subterranean chamber where we might possibly escape the awful cacophony of distorted guitars.

“Here,” I called, “follow me.” Then I paused, noticing that many extra bricks had been displaced. “Wait a minute,” I grumbled, “what have these punks done to my laundromat?”

It was also true that I had hired some builders to reconstruct one of the walls in the last few days. But now I was shocked to see an actual tunnel leading downwards into darkness.

“This is not possible,” I said. “I must see what is going on here. Please follow me?”

In the last few months I had heard talk of an ancient, disused subway station that might still exist in our area.

“I always carry a flashlight,” I told Leo, as I brought it out. “Let’s find out where this is going. Watch out, it’s dark down below.”

For a minute or so we followed the stone corridor downwards. But then, finally as we began to round a series of corners, I became aware of lights ahead. We walked faster. And then we were there.

“It really is a station,” I whispered incredulously.

“But deserted,” he added. I looked up and down. It was brightly lit, and fairly clean, but with no advertisements on the walls. I asked Leo if he knew why, but he told me he had no idea.

A distant murmur began to increase until it became a roar, and finally the train hurtled into the station. Neither of us were surprised. After exchanging glances we got on the train, into an empty car. I had no idea why we were doing this. After looking up and down a few times, the train began to roll once more. At that I sat down wearily and put my head in my hands. He remained standing, grasping a metal pole for support.

“We still have some business to talk,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but it is not quiet enough, even here,” I muttered. It was true. By now the train was rumbling and crashing, and the sounds it made were echoing up and down the tunnel, and being amplified, thus creating a roaring sensation in my head.

“I agree,” he said. There were several more seconds of loud noise as I considered this fact.

“I must get those punks out of my laundromat,” I argued. “They have absolutely no right to be there.”

“Wrong place,” he agreed. “Why are they not playing at your club?” he wanted to know. I could not find any answer to this.

“It is a perfectly good laundromat,” I told him. He looked confused at this statement.

“It makes better money than the club, even though it’s not much?” I pleaded. “You know, I have many debts,” I confided, looking at him anxiously. The train suddenly lurched left with a screaming of brakes. He stared at me.

“I cannot hear you,” he shouted. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“Debts,” I shouted. “I have many debts. Debts!” He did not reply but advanced a little, always holding on to the metal pole.

Suddenly we became aware of an exhausted, old conductor, staggering down the car in our direction. But he passed, ignoring us totally, and had soon lurched off, out of sight into the next car.

“We must talk business,” I roared at Leo. “Debts. I have debts. You could help. You must play soon at the club?”

A few large flies were buzzing around my head. I could hear their spiteful droning even above the crashing of the steel wheels on the rails below. Sweat dropped from my face onto the ground. I could see that Leo was perspiring also.

Now our car was slowing down. The noise began to calm. We were pulling into a station. I waited for someone to enter the car but no-one got on. Peering out of the window I witnessed the fact that the new station was as deserted as the first.

With a great clanging of bells we started again, and now the train began turning ever more violently to the left.

“My washing machines?” I begged. “Do you know how old they are? Because they are supposed to work better,” I continued blindly. “There is hardly any business. The area is dangerous. You cannot walk safely. This is why I have debts. I worry for my life. And there is more. I have seen a strange man lurking around my club at night. He is always there, watching me. I watch him watching me.

Things cannot go on like this. You must come and play at my club again.”

The train suddenly crashed over a set of points. Leo danced and staggered a little but hung on.

“You should sit down,” I told him. “Now why are we on this train?” I asked. “I never even knew that this line existed. Where are we going?” The crashing and rumbling continued. The train pushed more and more to the left.

“Why are we always turning left?” I demanded. “Do you know why? Can you tell me that?” He did not answer.

“And why do you remain standing,” I asked. “It’s a rough ride.” The sound of a muffled explosion came from somewhere under the floor.

“I cannot hear you,” he shouted, dancing more as he frantically grasped the pole. “Can you speak up?” he insisted.

I got up and grabbed hold of a pole, facing him. Then I saw the conductor, far to the right, staggering back through the car, calling for tickets this time.

“Since when did a New York subway train have ticket collectors?” I demanded.

“This is not a train,” Leo replied. There was a trace of an amused smile on his face.

There was no possible reply to this entirely deranged comment, so I merely laughed scornfully, and held on to a railing yet more tightly as the train bucked and veered around its circular track.

Then we stopped again, with a grinding screech of brakes. To my amazement it was the very same station where we had recently got on the train, only a short while ago. I stared at Leo. He would not meet my eyes. I grabbed his shoulder.

“Leo, it’s all crazy. This train is going nowhere,” I shouted. He threw my hand off. Then turned away and muttered something.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“It is the Samsara,” he said wearily. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Forget the hippy bullshit,” I told him. “I’m losing my time here,” I added irritably.

“I know that,” he said. “Shall we play cards?” he suggested nonchalantly. I gaped at him in astonishment, but realised that there was apparently no alternative. The train had not moved since arriving at the station, and did not appear to be going any further.

He brought out a pack and we gambled. I won continuously.

“Shall I tell you what I think about you?” I demanded. He shrugged.

“But firstly, why are we even here?” I asked. “This train is going nowhere. Why do you accept that? We should get off. I should just leave you here. But look how much I am winning. 13 dollars in 5 minutes. You are very illogical, do you know that? Sometimes I even think you are delusional. But mainly you are just a victim. This train is going nowhere. Can’t you tell? It’s a loop. It’s just going round and round.” He shrugged again.

“So get off the train,” he suggested patiently.

“I will,” I warned. “But come with me, won’t you?” Some terrible emotion was rising in my heart. “I don’t want to leave you here,” I added, staring at him desperately. But he had closed his eyes.

The bells were clanging again. I raced for the doors. They began to close. I thought I could make it through but it was too late. As I grappled with them, they locked tight shut.

With death in my heart I shuffled back to face Leo and grabbed the pole one more time. For a moment his eyes remained closed, but as the train picked up speed they opened again. He smiled.

“Welcome back,” he said.

I woke up to see an alarm clock, a bedside table full of books and cassettes, my music keyboard on a stand on the floor, and along the wall, a shelf covered in clothes, cigarettes and spare change. I was in my basement bedroom, back home at the club.

So it had all been a dream. Except I did still own the club, a laundromat, and an enormous debt. And I knew that Leo would play the club soon, with his band.

I reached out and dialled his number.

“You woke me,” he croaked gruffly. But then listened intently as I described the dream. Finally I demanded to know what his mention of Samsara had meant.

“Did I really say that?” he asked delightedly.

“Good. The Samsara is very important. It is the endless loop,” he continued. “Life and death and then reincarnation. Knowledge from the east. The Hindus and Buddhists believe that. Listen, I have to sleep right now,” he barked. “But wait,” he added. “Last time I was at your club, I left two audio cassettes on the shelf behind the counter. I want you to listen to them. It is connected with what we have just been talking about.”

“OK,” I said, and hung up.

Then I laughed scornfully. It all sounded like a fairy story to me. Religion was not my bag. Right now I had to get moving, stay awake, or all hell would descend on me, and fast.

The basement furnace roared into life. I knew I had to get up, go upstairs, leave the club, walk a few blocks, find some place where I could breath and think. Somewhere with grass and trees, and a little sanity.

But first I checked the laundromat. There was nothing out of order. Just a tramp who refused to leave. There was no sign of any punk band, stage, tunnel or station. Feeling relieved I headed out for a stroll.

The sun was already high when I finally reached Tompkins Square park. I almost didn't get there because some crazy maniac shouted something about my coat being torn. I ignored him but then almost walked into the path of an oncoming taxi. Now it was necessary to stop and buy cigarettes and a soda just to calm down a little. But New York City was always this way. Either you loved or you hated it. Personally I enjoyed scenes and confrontations, but I didn't particularly like being shouted out just because my coat looked the way it did.

In a fairly foul mood I slumped down on a bench. A blonde in a tight miniskirt with tattoos all over her arms, legs and breasts asked for a cigarette, so I passed her one. But when I started to chat she simpered, rubbed my leg in thanks, then walked off into the trees, staggering a little.

It was 10.30. I needed to think. My head was going round and round. The debt had reached crisis point. Something had to break, and soon. I knew that within a month, if nothing changed, the hitman would arrive at the door, trash the club and land me in hospital if he could. They usually sent a chinese or a latino. For the past few weeks I had been purchasing guns, and was confident that I could hold my own in a fight, but still, the question on my mind was whether to head back to London again.

I took a savage pull on the cola bottle. My hands were trembling, and some brown liquid frothed and splashed down my clothes. I cursed and wiped them down. A few pigeons walked around close to my feet. There was the sound of loud electric music, some kind of punk band, drifting down on the breeze from the north side of the park. In front of me a whole cavalcade of weird characters were passing, kids on skates, a Chinese grandmother pushing a supermarket trolley stuffed with plastic bags, two soldiers in full military gear, and a tramp in oversized pants and red-rimmed eyes. He hustled me for change, but I told him to get lost.

My hold-all was about to fall off the bench, but I patted it back carefully. Inside was a cassette recorder and some legal contracts. On the previous week I had managed to get a band to sign an exclusive deal with me, giving them the right to play at my club all year. In exchange I had taken a giant slice of their song-writing royalties, for life. The singer of the band was called Big Joe. He played saxophone too. He was a tough guy, but stupid, and totally ignorant about the record business. I had made a killing with this contract.

Leaning back, blinking out the dazzling sunshine, I cracked open a crisp new pack of cigarettes to celebrate. Business was not so bad. With a deal like this, and hopefully a few more, there might be a chance to wipe out the crippling debt, and breath freely again.

A few squirrels gambolled through the grass and a blackbird hopped close to my shoes. For a moment I felt something like remorse regarding this latest contract. Big Joe had no class, no education. He had probably never even seen a contract before this one. But then I was not here to nursemaid anyone. The city was tough, it was just dog eat dog, always had been, always would be, I told myself. Either you scammed the next guy, or he would do you, it was as simple as that. Everybody knew this, it was no secret, and New York was the centre of it all. This was the town where you killed with a smile on your face. Big Joe knew this, or if he didn't, was that my fault?

I got up and started to walk, telling myself to harden up, and block it all out. I knew that running a music club, as I did, it was essential to sign as many bands as possible, and get the best cut for myself. The alternative was to earn nothing at all, get evicted, become homeless and end up as a desperate tramp, raving on the subway, or hustling blindly for quarters at intersections in the rain or snow.

No, anything but that, I told myself grimly.

THE SOUND OF DRUMS

The Russian family were getting ready to rehearse their musical repertoire at home. The apartment was piled with amplifiers, stacks of records, desks for organising the promotion, toys for the kids, plates and cups on little tables all over the place, with half-eaten sandwiches scattered around. The band had done so many gigs, so fast, that it was hard to stay tidy and logical.

Right now it was hot. The two girls, Irene on bass, and the smaller Kira, holding her trombone, were gathered around Serge, who perched at his massive drumkit. Only ten years old, it was hard to see his head amongst the forest of cymbals. Maya was testing her trumpet, as Leo warmed up his harmonica. The dog snuffled in his basket at the corner. Kira had her grey rabbit toy tucked into her shirt. She loved him, and guarded him jealously ever since one of his legs had been torn off by accident one day.

They were all in their stage clothes. Leo had insisted on that. He wanted to know the visual effect in advance. The girls looked like gypsy princesses in floral skirts and bodices, while Serge was wearing a pre-revolution Russian hussar's jacket which was blue with golden braid. Down below he sported breeches and tiny knee-high boots polished to a sparkling jet black. Irene was spectacular in an open-backed maxi dress of dandelion tulle. Around her neck was an Afghan tassel bib necklace with matching earrings, and her pig-tails had been braided and decked with ribbons of yellow and green. On her feet, roguishly, she boasted tightly laced work boots that looked tough. At her side, her mother, Maya, spun around experimentally in a loose, scarlet flounced skirt with angel sleeves, yet in marked contrast, Leo had donned a military

uniform from the imperial age, complete with hunting crop tucked into his ancient leather belt. The overall effect was almost as though the Russian army had been unexpectedly infiltrated by a triad of gypsy queens.

All in all it was an exotic, vibrant feast of colourful styles from the east.

At this moment there was an excited buzz of voices as they all compared themselves to each other, and Irene tuned her bass guitar.

Serge's eyes were bright with excitement. He loved this life of constant music, the gigs, the clothes, the ecstatic fans and even the rehearsals, and most of all his precious, shining drums. But he also loved New York city and all the colourful figures you would meet, especially on the subway, where they performed so often. His energy and zest were unstoppable. Leo had to work hard to keep him in check, and safe, most of all in the dangerous streets where they lived. The family would hear Serge's shrill, high voice crying out in excitement over some new discovery in a store, or on the sidewalk, but then followed instantly by a roar from the bear-like figure of his father, as Leo put him in his place. The women of the family were used to this constant in-fighting and loved little Serge all the more when he was shouted at too loudly, or dragged roughly by one ear into the corner of the apartment and commanded to stay there. At that moment those two big eyes of the proud, but vengeful son would be like pale moons, sullenly following the father's every move around the room until the punishment time was over.

But right now Serge had an idea. He picked up his sticks, concentrating carefully, and leaned forward to begin a rhythmic pattern. His steady bass drum figure was exactly like a beating heart, or even some great vehicle in motion.

"Yes," Leo shouted, "yes, it's like a train! Go on Serge, I like that."

His son continued the mantra-like groove while staring fixedly at the cymbals.

“Why is it like a train, Papa?” Irene asked. “Is that good?” But Leo was thinking of something else. He ignored her. Then he turned to face all the family together.

“Do you know why drums are so important?” he demanded.

“Because they hold the band together?” somebody answered.

“Yes, that’s one reason,” he answered. “But it goes much deeper than that. When I was in Russia, I went into the mountains one year, and met some people who taught me something about sound, and about the drums in particular. They are not only sound. The drums are also the door to another world.”

The children looked at him excitedly, and Serge stopped playing.

“What is this other world?” he asked.

“All of our normal world is just a theatre, a show,” Leo told him. “It is not the real thing, and it never has been.” Maya looked worried.

“I am not sure you should be saying this just yet. You may confuse the children. They are too young to understand,” Maya entreated. Leo scowled with frustration and took a deep breath.

“*Lyubeemaya* (darling), please calm down,” he warned. There was a tense pause.

“No, it is very important that I tell them,” he continued, in a controlled, reasonable voice. “Did you imagine that these were only sounds, the things we create when we play? I tell you right now, they are not. Please understand, it is much more than this. Think of it as a person. Some would use the word *spirit*, which is very similar. And this person, or spirit, liberates you. It allows you to leave this world, which is just a sham, and move into the next, which is something much better.

“I don’t believe it,” squeaked Serge. “I know I like playing the drums, but it’s just because it’s a cool sound.” His younger sister Kira opened her eyes in horror at such an obvious questioning of their father’s authority. However Leo was unaffected by this apparent mutiny in the ranks, and continued quite calmly.

“But Serge, did you know that you have been chosen by Shiva himself to play for him?” Leo asked. “It is the greatest of honours. Only a boy who plays drums the very best could ever reach this point. Do you remember when we visited that Indian couple who wanted to manage the band? They consulted an Indian priest and it was him who said this about you and your wonderful talent. Don’t you remember? It was hardly even one year ago.” The little girls looked at each other with a mixture of amazement and suspicion. Irene rubbed her cheek nervously. She did not understand everything that was happening. But Maya was becoming even more nervous.

“Please Leo, I think this is too much for them,” she complained, hoping that he would understand. He flashed her a glance before continuing to explain.

“Also I learned many lessons from some nomadic Hindus, back in Russia,” he insisted. “Through applying powerful disciplines, like food and sleep deprivation, they were capable to know something of the future. They taught this to me.

“I began to see a little of how things will be,” he continued, walking up and down between the various family members. “Everything will change, and will be replaced, and then repeat itself. It is as though we were all travelling on a train, but on a circular track. You can laugh if you like, but later you will find out that all of this is true.”

The children fidgeted impatiently. There was the sound of tiny Vladimir crying from the bedroom. But Leo had not finished.

“If there is just one thing you learn from me,” he concluded, “it should be this. Please discover how to look inside the sound?”

“Within the sound is everything we need. The sound is our food. Ordinary food is not our food. It may be one kind of food, but it is not the real food.

“The sound is our real food. Within the sound of our music, we make a kind of box. It is a protection. We live inside the box, in a new world. The box separates us from the ordinary world, which is going bad very fast, by the way.” The family looked at each other. They were used to their father’s strange speeches by now. They wanted to believe it all, but some were not sure how.

“That sounds frightening,” Irene said, looking at him with wide eyes.

“No, don’t worry,” he assured her with a kindly glance, and a gentle pat on her arm. “You will come to no harm. With this music, our music, and because of what I am teaching you, you will always be protected. Don’t be scared! You will always stay safe and be able to survive, and live a happy life, I promise you that. But I just want you to know what the sound means, and just how important it is.

“Never forget,” he told them very earnestly, “we are lucky to be here. This is the top of the world for music, New York, where we are now. It is our one chance. But we don’t have to make it. We have already made it, simply by being born. Plus, because of what I have taught you over the years, I am happy to tell you that we are already arriving in the second world that I talked about.”

Irene smiled a little as he finished his speech. Now she liked the idea that she was about to enter a new world. What on earth would she find there? She hoped there would be more nice people, interesting places, lots of concerts to play. Maybe more lovely clothes like the dress she was wearing?

How she loved her father when he talked like that. He had made her feel important. At the same time, Irene felt very protective about her father and also about her little brother. She had been playing music on the streets, and also in big concerts, long enough to know many secrets of life. She felt that both her father and her brother, who she loved so much, were already in some kind of danger. Finally she knew that she would have to be strong, and if necessary, protect them both, in case something bad happened.

Maya was feeling something of the same. She stroked Irene's head affectionately and then the music began.

Serge began to play, and at that, Leo started chanting, using foreign sounding words, which were in time with the music.

The girls waited for a while and then joined in. The music began to form itself into a regular figure. It was working. The family began to feel euphoric. They started to dance, and felt happy and strong. They knew the world was waiting for them, that New York was only the beginning. Also, they understood how powerful a force they might be. Leo's words had finally convinced them. They believed now that they were performing magic, something very strange and mysterious, and totally personal to them, something that nobody else would ever properly understand, but something that was inevitably doing their souls good, and allowing them to continue to survive and to fight against the multitude of strange forces and demons that inhabited this utterly unknown city into which they had arrived.

At this moment in the park I was passing a couple of long-haired freaks who were practising throwing knives into the trunk of a large tree and laughing about it. Then a pretty young girl on a bicycle whizzed past so fast that I felt a rush of air on my neck. It was only when she was gone

that I saw she was in a bikini. On the right a kid was singing a country song, a joint hanging lazily out of his mouth, unseen by two cops who strolled within four feet of him. Three Latinos sidled past me, coughing and laughing in Spanish.

It was too hot by now. I pulled a grey baseball cap out of my bag and put it on.

Then it was the moment to play one of Leo's tapes. I put on my headphones and pressed play. His dry voice reverberated in my ears.

Leo was always talking about Eastern religions. He had asked me to listen to these tapes, which he had made himself. I was doing this right now merely to humour him. There was no space in my life for any of that mystical stuff. As far as I was concerned it was a waste of time.

What I now heard was a jumble of his confused English, with occasional mentions of things I didn't particularly want to hear. He mentioned words like energy, power, *deja-vu*, even odd, obscure and foreign-sounding names which were probably of Indian gods or something similar. Then the word *shaman*. I had no idea what that was, and no interest in finding out. After a few more seconds I switched off the machine in disgust.

Leo was unbalanced. I now knew this for sure. Perhaps he was on drugs. Anyway, he had very delusional ideas about himself, and about life also, I decided. You could see it in those wild, staring eyes and that shock of long red hair. All this talk of magic and power sounded like nonsense to me. I knew of people who had taken drugs and ended up in hospital, some for life. It looked like he was on that path too.

But musically, he and his family band did make sense, and were even great. The newspapers had announced this fact. So it was a problem to know what to do with all this. A truly dynamic, musical powerhouse, but lead by a

manic, raving, mental case. As I walked, I wondered if I could separate the band somehow. Find a new front man?

They had arrived from Russia with a huge talent, and yet nobody here had really heard them yet, no one that mattered, like the major record companies, for example. And I knew that the majors would freak when they did hear the Russian band. Every inch of my experience told me that. But if I could swing a deal with a major for them, then how to cope with the crazy man who had put all this together? I wondered if I could have him committed to a psychiatric hospital? Yes, that would do the trick nicely. And these tape recordings in my bag would easily convince the judge. So I would have to find a way to provoke Leo, I now understood. I would make him crazy and violent. The rest would be easy. But how exactly to do it? How to set the trap? That was the big question.

As I put the tape machine away, a girl stuffed a leaflet into my hand and walked on. It was a warning about global warming with the title *SPREAD THE WORD, NOT THE OIL*.

Back in London I had been surrounded by family and friends who were political, and constantly demonstrating in the street. But I had no time for losers. Why bother with politics at all? The entire agenda looked suspect to me. Yoga was bizarre, and vegetarian food made me feel ill. I preferred the rough and tough of life over here, where men were real men, if such a thing was even still possible.

With a grunt of irritation I ripped it up and threw it in the bin.

When I arrived back at the club, Rosa, the daily help was there, sweeping up. She was fresh in from Mexico, and I had hired her the previous month. I liked her. Young and attractive, she had dark hair and beautiful big eyes, and never complained or asked for money too much.

A little later I was cleaning my firearm, a recently purchased Glock 19 handgun, scraping the bore-brush up and down the barrel, when Leo himself walked in.

“What a surprise,” I told him. This was unexpected. Instead of replying he gave me a long, hard stare as though he knew how I was plotting against him. Quietly I met his gaze without revealing an inch of my secret thoughts from earlier in the park.

By now I had put the gun away and was behind the counter, tidying up. Slowly, he positioned himself on a stool and unbuttoned his jacket. I took a second look at him.

We were evenly matched. His rugged face looked to be of viking ancestry, as I also happened to be, yet clearly he was well-read and knowledgeable too. There was a tension to his wiry frame which was a satisfying challenge to my own. I knew that Russians were hard people, but honest, and immediately saw the echo of old-world nobility in his bearing.

It struck me that both our families had come from Scandinavia originally, and yet his had then headed for Russia, and mine, to Britain. There was a curious symmetry here. I could see another version of me, the Russian variant, as I looked at him. Right now, all the mystery of hundreds of years of Russia was in this man, and this inspired a curiosity within me. Here in front of me was a potential kindred spirit, yet he was a stranger. I wondered why fate had put us together. It was easy to sense the power and determination of this figure, and I hoped that we would never be put up against each other.

The heat had subsided a little.

“Relax,” I told him. “Let’s sit outside.” We moved out and drew out chairs around a little table on the sidewalk at the front of the club. He pulled out a pack of cards.

“You old devil,” I said. “You want to gamble for money again? I warn you, you will probably lose, just like last time.” He ignored my plea.

As she served us with cups of tea Rosa gave him a big smile as she recognised him. Then she scurried for pen and paper.

“Please Senor?” she begged. “Your autograph? For my children? I know you successful now. We heard song on radio! It very fun!” Leo laughed and agreed, scribbling it out quickly, smoothing down his beard as he did so.

I felt a little put down by all this talk.

“I had plenty of success in London,” I pointed out. “We played some big gigs. It was great.” He shot me a shrewd look.

“So why are you here?” he enquired, in a cool tone.

“A bad divorce,” I muttered, scowling. “I can’t walk the streets of that city now.” He sympathised.

“Cards?” I suggested. “Poker or 21?”

“Your call,” he replied, rolling up his sleeves.

“OK, 21,” I said. “You know the rules, 21 pays double and takes the bank, split on equal cards, burn on 13 or 14?” Leo shrugged and murmured something in Russian. “OK, burn on both,” I confirmed and he nodded. We each cut the cards. I won with a black queen.

“I am the bank,” I said. He grinned mysteriously. As we played I asked him how long he had been in New York. He told me two years.

I looked him up and down as the game continued, wondering at his weathered camouflage pants, black tank top and beret.

“What’s with the getup?” I asked, pointing to his garments. “Are you in the soldier business? Does it pay the rent?” He chortled.

“It’s a hot day,” he said, adding that he had nothing against military clothes.

“But are you guys some kind of cult?” I persisted. “You look a bit that way. Careful, they might come and lock you up.” At this he looked a little irked, and turned away imperiously. I wondered if I might irritate him enough to push him off the edge this way. Then Rosa would be the witness. I could grab the band and do things my way.

“You are half gypsy, half mafia, half viking, pretty much like me,” I noted. “And I think you need a bath,” I said, inspecting his neck. “Here in New York we shower more than in Russia.”

“That makes three halves,” he replied gruffly, ignoring my obvious insult. I yawned.

“Well we have to be bigger than life-size,” I explained. “It’s a jungle here.” He nodded. Our eyes met.

I showed him my cards. I had 21. He paid me once more with a trace of irritation. At the front of the club I noticed that Rosa was letting in a service man in baggy dungarees. He was asking to check our furnace in the basement. I consulted my watch. It was getting late. Leo began to talk about his recording situation. Pretty soon I interrupted him.

“But you guys could have a proper record deal,” I insisted. “You’re all good enough for that. Just walk into a major label’s office with the kids and they cannot refuse. America loves a musical act with children.”

He muttered something about not wanting to use the kids like that. A dark skinned lady holding a baby pushed in from the street, through the glass door.

“Where did you say you lived?” I butted in.

“East New York. Liberty Avenue. It’s kind of rough there.”

“Do you have protection? A gun? A mace can? A knife?”

“All of them.”

“Don’t let those kids play in the street there,” I cautioned him. I had been a taxi driver earlier on, and remembered that drivers had come back from that part of town with blood on their face every so often.

“Not easy, where we are,” he admitted, lounging backwards in his chair. I thought for a second, fighting with myself. Should I help this guy or get him locked up? There was something about his viking style that I liked. He was similar to me in a way. Always living on the edge. Damn! And his whole family were just too cute also. Now I knew I would have to help this crazy Russian find his way in the jungle of NYC, or else him, his wife and his kids would be pretty much lost sooner or later. I could see clearly that he had won some ground in this music game, but I also knew there were sharks everywhere, especially when it came to signing contracts, which usually enslaved you for life by taking away your exclusivity. So I reckoned I would have to help this odd fish, show him how things worked over here.

Leo yawned loudly, then called Rosa for another refill.

“Do you know about paid audiences at showcase gigs?” I probed.

“Explain,” he commanded, eyes boring into me with relentless gusto as his fingers played with beard and mustache. I took a heavy breath inwards and started doodling with beer foam on the plastic table top.

“The LA trick is to pay guys to fake the applause at specially selected moments of the showcase, when record execs are watching, and judging your performance. It’s essential to do this. Also, it’s better to showcase at a private venue, a rehearsal studio or a loft for instance, for that exclusive feeling. Like you are hot and unexposed, something the world has not discovered yet.”

Leo was listening, pleased with the flow of secret information. But I was not finished yet.

“Hunt down the competition, and give them hell,” I continued in a clinical tone. “Do anything to knock them out. There are many ways. Some guys I know will create all kinds of distractions while the rival band is performing. We all do these things. Hey, business is business. Everyone wants a share of the pie, but only one act can win. That’s just the way things are. Sorry.”

He laughed in an evil way.

“So this is how the British do things?” he wanted to know. I coughed, slightly embarrassed now.

“No, actually I learned that from an American singer.” There was a silence while he chewed this over. Then I had a thought.

“Have you been jumped yet?” I asked.

“Jumped? How so?” Suddenly he was very interested.

“Attacked, in the street, or anywhere?”

“Yes I have,” he drawled “You?” He shot me a piercing stare.

“I was attacked every night when I lived in Flatbush, walking back from the subway to my apartment,” I told him.

“What happened?”

“I just paid them off. A few dollars, that was all.” He relaxed. A motorbike roared past, spewing smoke. I caught the flash of a blonde, clutching her mohican guy.

“How have you been fighting them off?” I asked him.

“I stand up to them,” he said. “It’s true I carry a knife, but I just tell them not to f*** with me. Occasionally it gets physical. However they have learned not to mess around,” he laughed.

Right now we could hear two guys arguing loudly at the corner. They were musicians. It appeared that their record deal had gone badly wrong. They were both goths, all in black with chains and tattoos.

I could only hear snatches of the fight.

“The label owns the publishing? The f*** they do. What does Chrissy think? You know yesterday sucked. The producer knows f*** all. I have been put way too low in the mix. Are you gonna be on my side tomorrow? F*** this shit. The vibe is all wrong. They have messed with my lyrics. I’m not gonna take any more of this...”

The other goth was trying to calm him down, offering drugs, trying to flatter him, but nothing was working. As they walked off Leo guffawed.

“It’s all about the publishing royalties,” I informed him. “He who writes the songs gets paid the most, in this music game.”

“Yes, I know that,” he said.

“Those guys are going through a rough time,” I said. “You write a song, and then that’s the kind of shit you get involved with,” I complained. He agreed.

“Gotta hang on to the publishing royalties,” I stressed. “That’s the giant slice of the cake.”

There was silence for a moment. I felt a tinge of regret for having taken quite a big chunk of the same when signing Big Joe. After all, he was younger than me. But then I quickly rationalised, remembering that there was no place for being soft in this city. Business was business, after all. And I knew that all the major record companies used nightmarish contracts when signing a new band. The corruption in this business was out of control, and always had been.

The sun was going down behind the tenement buildings. A few kids were playing football in the parking lot opposite. I scratched my nose, then stretched my arms and yawned.

“You know they are trying to evict me here?” I said. Leo looked concerned. But I laughed.

“They take me to court every so often. The monthly rent is sky high. I owe around four months back rent by

now. Last time I was summoned to court I hired a lawyer who charged a king's ransom. Within fifteen minutes he had proved something impossible."

"What?" asked Leo, eyebrows raised.

"He proved that the landlord did not own his own building." He shot me an incredulous look.

As he left I wondered what it would take to make Leo violent. He appeared to have a lot of nerve and self-control. It would be hard. Plus, I would need witnesses. I resolved to wait for my moment, then act.

A few days later I was leaving the club late at night when two men blocked my path. It was just after midnight, with one-one around, not even a car on the street. I saw that one of the men was Big Joe and the other a muscular bald man. They were smiling, but I did not like the look of their smiles at all. Instantly the bald man had me in a grip of iron. I was forced downwards until my face was on the sidewalk. It hurt like hell. I remained silent, knowing what this was about.

"Come on then," Joe said, spitting down on the sidewalk, and rearranging his long leather coat more tightly. "Shall we talk business?" The bald man stared at my club entrance door meaningfully, and gestured towards it.

"You want the contract back?" I gasped, dusting off my black jeans and short suede jacket. "OK, screw the deal," I yelled. "Look, I'm just a musician, only trying to help, don't you get it?"

"That's not what my lawyer said," Joe replied, in a bored tone of voice, spinning round his filthy green baseball cap so it faced backwards. "He said you were trying to f*** with me."

"Why don't you let me free, and we head inside, and then we rip up that thing, and leave it at that?" I pleaded.

“Sounds good,” Joe barked. “Let’s go.”

Five minutes later we were watching the thing go up in flames.

“Beer, coffee?” I suggested, trying to smooth things over.

“Nah,” Joe drawled. “I don’t feel good here. Remember - nobody f***s with me, OK?”

“Yes boss,” I said. They left without another word, glaring at me. The bald man scooped up a couple of pastries from behind the counter, before slamming the door closed.

For a week there was no more trouble. However I saw that a man was watching the club. Some nights he would not show up till late, but he would always pass by the entrance. One evening he stood and smoked carefully, right by the fire hydrant, watching as people passed or entered. I watched him back. No-one was ready to make any kind of move. None of my licenses were paid up, otherwise I would have called the police.

SHOWTIME

The name of the Russian family band was ‘Brother Karma.’ One afternoon I created an enormous sign and hung it in the front window of the club. As soon as people heard that they were from Russia, and that it was a family band, many were fascinated and promised that they would be there for the show.

When the big night arrived, the Russian kids took a long time to set up their instruments. Meanwhile all kinds of people were arriving, some who had just finished work for the day, but also hipsters who had no work at all. I made plenty of desperately needed cash from sales of sodas and chips. It was a sore relief, since the money problem was so bad.

As the band continued to tune up, I noticed the two goths were back. They were still arguing about the same music situation.

Eventually the band started up with a burning, smoking, heavy blues shuffle with plenty of attitude and style. The eldest kids, Irene and Serge, on bass and drums respectively, stared at the ceiling while Leo, at the front, raged and pranced like a devil, tearing a blistering array of notes out of his harmonica that ripped through the club. People were dancing right off the bat, some of them thrashing around in regular style, others inventing wild heathen movements of their own.

Irene held it all down with a regular, intuitive pocket like a pro, while Serge cradled this into a massive groove which could not be ignored. I found myself repeatedly tensing and relaxing, and then having feelings I had never known before. The whole club was saturated with sound, smoke, and a sense of discovery and heightened awareness. I tried to put a name to the style of

music they were playing, but failed. It was too new. I'd never seen anything like it in London or New York, ever before. There was something hypnotic, even addictive about it. I wanted more.

The kids looked impossibly confident. Maya, the mother, blew trumpet figures and embellishments, exotic riffs that swirled around the room, while the second daughter, Kira, sat by her side, blowing carefully into a long pipe-like instrument called a didgeridoo. It was almost bigger than the tiny girl who cradled it so lovingly in her hands.

I could feel this jam had intent and purpose in a way that I had not seen before with other groups. The music was rising steadily. People were getting excited. The band were singing a chorus chant that went round and round in a never ending cycle, and Leo was dancing in the same way that he had danced in my dream, holding his metal pole on the train.

This triggered the strangest feeling. Were we all on some kind of train like that, without knowing it? Was life just an infinite loop?

But now I snapped out of it, and cursed myself for all this whimsical hippy nonsense. The brute reality was that I had a ton of debts to pay. This was no time for getting soft, airy-fairy or poetic about things. Life was hard, fast and merciless, specially in this city.

Pouring myself a beer at the bar, I then headed back into the crowd to watch the band some more. A pregnant woman was dancing very close to the stage. The backline were playing some kind of down-home funk groove. The spotlight was on Kira, playing her long horn from a chair on the right. It was a low, mournful sound, and as she played I saw all the expressions change on the faces of all the people, both band and audience too. Every so often Kira would reach down to check her beloved rabbit, perched on the edge of her chair.

Within the spotlights the multicoloured gowns of the girls glowed brightly, and I wondered what they were made of, and where they had come from. It was a feast of exotic colours and styles, coming from a mysterious country that I knew nothing about.

And now it struck me how very different was this band from other groups around town. Ordinary musicians would usually be in jeans and leather jackets, growling and yelling semi-obscene lyrics in rough, throaty voices, ready to kick ass, trash the place, even kill someone, anything to make the headlines, or bring a crumb of food to eat, or a bare mattress to lie on.

Because compared to the eastern world, our scene was nothing but a bloody, steaming cauldron. A meat market. It was something primitive, a medieval monster from long ago. A festival of rage.

Welcome to the west, I told myself, kicking the wall grimly. I had always known that here, nobody is your friend. They might pretend it but they were not.

Savagely I lit up a cigarette and sucked in smoke with a cynical grin. But I could not stop. The hypocrisy was too much to bear. Now I was finally seeing the truth.

I knew that decadence was everywhere here in the west. Decadence, corruption, mindlessness and violence. Kids dropping out of school and picking up flick knives. Nothing of this made sense.

What to do about it all?

As I gazed into the calm eyes of my Russian friends, I saw that they were some kind of an answer. Their bodies and minds had not been polluted yet. They were pure and real, and I could feel that something about them sparkled and shone with hope, and that their characters were truthful and honest. Unlike all the rest of us here.

Suddenly as I stared at the family they appeared to turn into a huge, circling wheel, composed of many multi-

coloured dots, just like atoms and molecules dancing, forever dancing, on and on and on, into eternity.

Ragefully I told myself to get a grip, stay grounded, not to give up being rational, not to go mad. I told myself that I was British, and not so soft in the head, and that to imagine non-existent things was foolishness and would eventually lead to delusion and worse.

But I couldn't resist seeing this thing to the end.

Staring on, as they played, I became mesmerised. The audience were equally entranced, and the dancing had slowed as the show finished with a blinding flash of what appeared to be laughter, love and tears all combined. Serge ended the night with a shattering drum solo which rattled the windows and made a woman cry somewhere at the back of the club room. But as he stood up triumphantly, all the family hugged each other, and I caught Leo's eye and passed out drinks to all of them.

Because they had broken through. This was different. These people had done the impossible, to step off the train, and clamber outside the wheel, that great endless loop which I had dreamed about.

Now nothing would ever be the same again.

There was an excited buzz of conversation. The band having stepped offstage, I reached over to switch on the sound system, and then headed back to the bar to serve drinks and food. Making money was always on my mind. Right now the cash poured in as people demanded beers, cokes and pastries. It was a huge satisfaction to pocket so many banknotes so fast.

After the main crush was finally over, and I finally passed back into the club room once more, I noticed with some delight that little Serge was sitting in a corner, being steadily fawned over by a horde of female admirers of varied ages and generations. They were delicately picking at his Russian hussars jacket, and asking all kinds of

questions, personal inquiries as to his favourite foods, how school was going, what rock bands he liked, and how the family enjoyed playing so many real live gigs, and especially what it was like to gig on the subway. Little Serge was acting cheeky and adult, rolling his eyes and cackling with glee, and occasionally taking pulls from a handy cola can. One girl was fingering his expensive new watch, and another staring close into his face to see what colour eyes he had, which were dark, and then shrieking with delight when he kissed her suddenly on the lips. The adult women were taking turns to hug and then to mother him, simultaneously turning to whisper to each other how very shocked they were that a mere child should even be talking about playing real adult gigs, let alone doing them. The younger teen and pre-teen girls were begging to try on his jacket, and also to play on his drums, but each time he refused with a bright-eyed smile and no trace of guilt or conscience. They were professional drums and the tools of the trade, he was telling them, and thus never to be touched or even looked at. As I watched, fascinated, but never directly, but more from the corner of my eye, and as I walked around the crowded, smoky floor, I became aware that Serge was becoming more and more animated every second, clearly stimulated by the compliments from so many fans.

But now a disaster occurred. Serge had just stood up to demonstrate how to play a really complicated drum roll, waving his arms around imaginary drums in the air, when he suddenly cracked his head badly on the sharp edge of one of the metal PA columns. With a piercing wail of pain he crashed clumsily down to the floor, knocking two elderly women off their chairs in the process. Instantly the entire club was galvanised. Everybody rushed to his assistance, all shouting at once. Serge was crying loudly as three people fought to lift him to a sitting position, and we

were horrified to see a large bruise, and a smudge of blood right in the centre of his forehead.

Then everyone fought to be heard.

“Water, water!” shrieked a black lady with dreadlocks, and orange coloured glasses.

“Find some disinfectant,” suggested a teenage goth whose arm was in a sling. “He will be OK,” he drawled in a bored tone. But the females were mad with hysteria and grief, all nursing instincts aroused, so determined they were to help this magically hip, wonderful, talented child, who now was having seizures on his chair in front of them.

I ran to the bar and returned with half a bottle of brandy. Serge guzzled down half a shot, then choked and spluttered noisily.

“He’s just a child,” one red-haired woman raged at me. “How dare you give him alcohol? That’s hard spirits!”

“It won’t harm him,” I replied testily. “He needs it right now.” I knew that it was not only the forehead that was paining the boy. His pride had been badly hurt too. First a great drum solo, then this.

Gradually the club settled down. People lit cigarettes and discussed it all, both the performance, then the fall. It was decided that Russians were brave and curious people, and hardy too, and also great musicians. The whole affair triggered a great tide of new orders. As I served the drinks and cashed the bills I knew I might even make the rent money on time, a huge weight finally off my shoulders.

By this time Irene and Maya had settled Serge down into a makeshift bed tucked right behind the bar counter, and were fondling him and fussing over him, the way mothers and sisters do. Serge had stopped crying and was enjoying the new attention, shifting his gaze from one to the other, as he laughed and even bragged about this latest accident.

“It didn’t hurt that much,” he protested. “I’m not as cissy as you think!” Maya smiled knowingly, whispering in his ear that he was a precious *zaya* (rabbit), whilst tenderly covering his tiny form with a thick blanket, and then smoothing down his light brown curls.

By this time a tall, unknown, Indian man had appeared, and was moving from room to room restlessly. Finally he crept round and joined the family group, and then caught Serge’s attention. I noticed that this man wore a long, white robe and had three horizontal lines on the centre of his forehead.

“Who are you?” Serge demanded bluntly.

The Indian held his hands together as if in prayer and bowed before the boy.

“Please excuse me for intruding?” he entreated. “But I saw the way you performed with your marvelous family band,” he told Serge. “You are very talented. Rhythm and drumming is very important to me and my friends.

“It is at the centre of the wheel of light,” he added. “Perhaps my words sound strange to you?”

“No, I think we understand,” Irene offered, with a shy smile.

“I like you,” Serge said.

And now the Indian continued with talk that was even more curious. The family could not understand it all, but felt the sensation of something very warm and wonderful, and also hopeful.

Finally he predicted a great future for Serge, and addressed him directly.

“I want you to come to India one day,” he said in a serious tone. “By the way, my name is Ram.”

At this point I had gathered round to listen. Anticipating our unspoken questions, Ram told us that he was a priest. It appeared that he had something to do with the Hindu religion. In his mouth were several gold teeth

which glittered when he spoke, and his eyes, which were dark and deep, hardly ever left Serge's chubby face. We spoke a little more, and then, before leaving, he took Leo and I aside, outside on the sidewalk.

"The boy is very important," he said. "When he plays the drums, it is in accordance with certain patterns and disciplines associated with my religion. He is unique, and must be studied carefully. I believe you will better understand the implications of my words later on," he added, examining our reactions carefully.

"He is my son," Leo replied stoutly. "But thank you for this. It is good we have met. Yes, Serge is certainly very special. There is nobody like him. We have visited and jammed with many top session drummers here in New York city, and they all say the same thing. He is a natural."

At this Ram smiled, touched his hands together in prayer once more, and departed.

After this the evening became wild with energy. Having downed a few more drinks, the entire clubroom hit the dancefloor. Nobody dances like New Yorkers, especially if they have stumbled onto a new scene that excites them. With great satisfaction I watched the energy ratchet up notch by notch. Pretty soon I was dancing also, totally failing in my duties as barman and chef. The front room was abandoned except for various couples making out on the sofa.

I hardly knew what time it was when I finally staggered back out of the clubroom, and into the front bar once more. But what I saw now shocked me. For a second time Serge was stretched out, flat on his back, but this time in the middle of the room. Irene and Leo were crouching around him, slapping his cheeks gently, massaging his chest and attempting to roll him around.

"He's drunk," Leo said, incredulously.

"Drunk?" I raved. "He's only ten years old!"

“He’s drunk,” Irene echoed, with a sly giggle at the wall.

“But how?” I yelped.

“I am very sorry, but my son has been stealing your property.” Leo recited these words like a magistrate handing down a jail sentence. “Serge found that brandy bottle and finished it. He drank it all.”

“Damn,” I groaned, combing through my hair in confusion. My fingers came out dripping with sweat, and I wiped them on my jeans.

“We will pay,” droned Leo patiently.

“No, you don’t have to,” I told him. “You guys did a great gig. Look, I think Serge will be OK. But you’d better get him home to bed.”

“Maya will be here with the van in a few minutes,” Leo informed me, not meeting my eyes. But Irene and I were chuckling a little.

Then Ram reappeared unexpectedly.

“Please take care?” he begged. “Your son is very precious. To you, to us, to everyone.”

“We will take care of him, I promise,” Irene confirmed, blowing him a kiss, eyes wide with gratitude.

Later, when the band had gone, and the club was completely empty, I made a strong coffee and carried it up four flights of stairs and out onto the open roof of the building. It was a warm night with a slow, easy wind, and some light from the crescent moon which had crept above the Atlantic skyline.

I had not shaved for days, and right now I ran my fingers over the stubble experimentally.

It was apparent that I had toughened up a lot by now. This process had been happening for years. Already in London I had learned to brush shoulders with the mafia, even doing some drug dealing occasionally. Here in NYC it was all too easy to slot into that gunfighter profile. This

appeared to be the norm in this city, or at least in the scene I had discovered. But something troubled me. I knew that a gentler, kinder world existed, a place of trust and sincerity, where strangers wished you well, and where you would never go hungry. But that was not my world, at least not now, and not here. This city was all about living on the edge, and being proud of it. There was danger in every corner, every move. It didn't pay to soften up. You would be gone in a flash. I'd seen it happen too many times, guys stripped down to nothing, weighed down by debts, nowhere to turn, washed up and desperate.

Police sirens shrieked hysterically in the distance as a mantle of yellow clouds crept around the moon.

At this moment Irene was on my mind. I could picture her face in front of me right now, with that wistful, sad expression of hers, almond-shaped eyes and graceful bearing that could only be of a young Russian girl. For me she already symbolised everything that was innocent, pure and noble.

It was three in the morning by now, the right moment to think things over. I wandered moodily across the grey asphalt of the roof, surveying the twinkling lights of so many, majestic, high-rise buildings which were the hallmark of New York city, and which proudly advertised its imperial status to the world.

It was easy to dream big dreams in this place, so high up above the street. Visions of love, music, success, fashion and power, and everything in between. The dream was of empire, most of all.

Irene came to my mind again. Then some polar opposites, Russia and America, capitalism and communism, kids acting like adults, and now Indian religion too. It was all a mass of forces, attacking each other, fighting for supremacy, and in the middle of it was

Irene's sweet, questioning face, with that silent wide-eyed stare.

Could a Russian girl like her, dream American dreams? But there was so much corruption here. Many were opposed to that. So had she come all this way with her family to challenge it all? Leo surely had, I decided.

To me, Irene was truly mysterious. At only twelve years old, she came across as an adult, and none of us knew why. Had her childhood already been stolen? Was she being psychologically damaged by having to play all these gigs with the family band? Suddenly I felt very sorry for her.

How much I wanted to protect her. She was so young, beautiful and vulnerable. Like a little fairy, or an enchanted being. To me, she represented everything that was good, including the old world. All the sincerity and the sensitivity, and the worthiness of Russia, all of these wonderful things shone out of her. They were there strongly when she stood and smiled, in that gentle, sad way she had. Also she looked so very wise and understanding, in such an adult way.

And if she aimed her lovely smile directly at you, then this was a great gift, and you felt blessed and favoured. Her smile was then full of special significance and meaning, exactly as though she knew that she was the guardian of all the grace and joy in the world, but also that you could trust her, and that she and you were journeying together along a wonderful, golden path towards some fabulous goal in the future.

Damn! I took a swig of bitter, strong coffee, and cursed. Was I falling in love with a twelve year old? My mind reeled with confusion for a second and then I got a grip on myself.

No, I told myself. You are not one of those terrible men who thinks in such a way.

A gentle breeze rustled against my hair as I paced up and down.

Certainly, I wanted to kiss Irene, but not in any wrong way. And at this moment, my two baby daughters in London came into my thoughts. The argument with my ex-wife had been so very extreme that I had taken off on my travels for many years, and was still living far away from them, even today. But I still missed them so very much.

And now I understood the reason behind my obsession with Irene, and also for the entire Russian family. Irene was how my daughters would have been if I had brought them up. With a musician father like myself, it would have been natural for them to play music and travel, and perform. And all in a flash I now saw my true role with the Russian kids, which was simply to be a good friend, to watch out for them, perhaps to play music with them, and generally to advise and care for them, alongside Leo and Maya.

But what a shining star Irene had already become! Something inside of me was crying as I understood all that my daughters could have been if I had brought them up myself. Irene was so very musical, so daring, and with that unique and charming gypsy-Russian style inherited from her mother. She shone like a diamond as Leo paraded her up and down the bright lights of Manhattan every year. She was always the focus of attention, the centre of the scene, the one everyone talked about, the girl everybody came to see. Some admired her. Others desired her. Many worshipped her.

Much of the inner frustration I felt about my daughters was now finding vent in my passion for Irene. I was painting her as a queen. She had become a role model, a major actor in the theatre of my life, yet also a guinea pig in a giant sociological experiment.

All of these thoughts were in the many glances I flashed in her direction, when we were together, and I sensed that she understood at least part of it.

The honest fact was that every man around had fallen deeply in love with her, and some were even complaining to me on the phone about it. She had disrupted much of the music city in this way. These various loves were discussed endlessly around town and ranged from simple desire to adulation, to absolute desperation.

As a result Irene needed protection. Leo was well aware of this, and was capable of morphing in one second, from a tolerant, peaceful, sophisticated man, to a snarling, raging werewolf, who would instantly terrify and scare off even the most muscular suitors and hangers-on.

But on several occasions, Leo had informed me, the worst had almost happened.

One time father and daughter had travelled to a rough area of Brooklyn in order to look at some musical gear which was for sale. During the trip, Leo had stepped into a deli to pick up some soft drinks. At that exact moment a rust coloured station wagon had pulled up at the kerb. Leo had emerged and was horrified to see Irene being physically hustled inside the car. In a second he had knocked the man to the ground, and the two had escaped, shaken up, yet safe.

I shook my head in disbelief. It was obvious I would have to help watch out for these kids. They were far too pretty, and New York was one of the most dangerous places that they could have ended up in.

Right now, the situation looked tricky, seen from this perspective. Certainly the band had played a fabulous gig, and we had all made money together, but I felt uneasy about the future. The Russian family would have to learn fast. There were too many risks ahead, and I knew that you cannot win every time.

The kids were in danger. There was no doubt about that.

A FASHION SHOOT

The following morning the club was filthy and disorganised. Rosa arrived at 9am and immediately began tidying up, sweeping the floor, then scrubbing it thoroughly with hot water and detergent.

In the backyard were discarded beer cans, a mass of cigarette butts, and spilt food everywhere. She worked for two hours, sweeping out the basement too. Then I asked her to pick up some more things we needed from the club, beers and sodas from the convenience store, then vinegar and paper towels from the supermarket.

She was tired when she returned, and as she put the groceries down I saw her breathing heavily. Then she turned to me with a question.

“Senor?” she asked. “When money coming? I no paid for two weeks?”

“Money soon,” I told her, and went back to my paperwork. I knew I could not tell her the truth, that the wages were probably never coming any more.

Later she sidled up to me near the front window, and rubbed my neck affectionately, then put a sly arm round my waist.

“Senor?” she whispered. “That new band you have? Those Russians? They on radio this morning. I heard them. Them very good!”

“I know that,” I grunted, gently disentangling myself. Twice I had met her husband, a huge and ignorant man, and I knew not to mess with her, however wild she was.

The phone crackled into life. I picked it up. It was Leo.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. “We have to talk business.”

“So go ahead,” I said.

“I have been thinking about your dream,” he said. “It’s not casual that you dream such a thing. Something is being born. Get ready for some big changes.”

“OK, OK,” I said, irritably. It was too early in the morning to get mystical about life, I felt. But you could not change Leo, I realised by now. With him this stuff was burnt in. He had the staring eyes to pull it off, too. Still, I had to admit that the band had knocked me out.

“I could feel something of that when your band played last night,” I told him. Behind me Rosa was dancing around, showing off a generous strip of brown thigh, and humming a Mexican tune to herself.

“So what is this big change, anyway?” I asked him.

Right now Rosa had switched on the industrial vacuum cleaner which was making its usual loud roaring sound. Leo was talking, saying something about someone called Shiva, but it was all a confusion.

“I cannot hear you,” I shouted.

“We need to talk,” he said. “Can we meet?”

“Where?” I asked. Then I had an idea.

“Are you OK with heights?” I asked.

“Where are you going with this?” he demanded.

“There’s a high-rise at 34th street where they have a cafe at the top floor,” I explained. “I play a breakfast gig there twice a week,” I added.

Now there was a loud droning on the line too, so I raised my voice.

“We can talk in the interval between my sets,” I shouted.

“You didn’t tell me you had a breakfast gig?” he said.

“Yeah, the club and the laundromat don’t pay enough,” I complained. “I always need more. I have debts, I told you. So do we meet there?”

“It’s OK with me,” he said. “But when?”

“Tomorrow morning at 11am?”

“That’s fine. I’ll be there,” he agreed. As I put the phone down I saw to my horror that Big Joe had come inside the club. He looked angry.

We faced off. His face was filthy, and his eyes were half closed and bloodshot. I saw that he was wearing an old grey tracksuit that appeared to have burn marks on both shoulder and arms. An enormous chain and silver medallion swung around his chest as he threatened me with a series of ugly, rhythmic gestures.

Now he took a look at Rosa and licked his lips. She disappeared round the back. From behind the counter I quickly slipped a gun into my pocket.

“Listen, you smart-ass,” he began, “Give me a beer.” I rolled one across the counter.

“I’m gonna forget all your pussy-footing around,” he told me, crashing one paw-like fist down on the counter. I agreed hastily. He stood there dancing a little from one way to the other.

“We have to talk business,” he said.

“I’m ready,” I said. “Shoot.”

“We’re gonna play your club and we’re gonna do it tonight.”

“OK, Big Joe, for sure. Why not? But not tonight. Tuesday I have a slot. Look, I’ll do a special for you, OK?” He blinked and danced, and swayed a little more, then took a big pull on the can, leaving foam splashed around his sullen, huge mouth.

“But no contract crap this time?” he demanded.

“Sure thing,” I said. “Tuesday it is.”

“Right,” he said, and staggered off.

Outside I saw that Rosa’s husband had arrived to take her home. There was a grotesque moment where he and Big Joe appeared to greet each other like old friends, then Joe vanished.

Now Rosa's husband stuck his bull-like neck half way in the front door.

"Where's my woman? *Rosa!*" he roared. But she was nowhere to be seen.

"I want my wife," he shouted to me, threateningly.

"Sure, boss, I'll get her." I raced around looking for her. Finally I checked the basement. She was lying on my bed in her bra, reading a magazine, with a wicked smile on her face.

"Rosa, what the hell are you doing there?" I yelled. "Get on upstairs. Your husband is here."

"Oh shit. Tell him to go to hell," she grumbled. But gradually I was able to convince her to get dressed and head up to the club.

"Juan," she cooed sweetly, as we surfaced. "So early. Lovely to see you. Where is the car? I'm ready. Are we going out tonight?" He ignored her but gave me an evil stare.

I watched them walk out of sight and breathed a sigh of relief.

At 6am the next morning, the sun rose over the Atlantic, bathing the Manhattan skyscrapers in silver and gold. All across the tri-state area trains and buses grumbled along rails and roads. The freeways exploded into action, as thousands of grim-faced, newly shaved commuters hunched behind their wheels, gunning their cars into the maw of the metropolis.

Waves crashed against the shore at Coney island while enormous merchant ships belched their mournful foghorns across New York harbour.

Inside the College Point plant in Queens, thousands of newspapers were grinding out. All the latest stories were there, including that of an astonishing Russian family band who had escaped the USSR and were now making good in Manhattan, mesmerising club after club with their magical

gypsy rock style. The news was sweeping like wildfire through syndicated TV networks, dozens of magazines and prime-time radio specials.

Teams of PR executives were battling it out on the phone, planning a massive media blitzkrieg for the new Russian phenomenon. Major label CEOs had already convened for a power breakfast in Soho to discuss strategy, while graphic design honchos argued out the visual map with top dollar, exclusive videographers and fashion specialists.

Around the family home of the Russian band, in Liberty Avenue, Brooklyn, the onslaught had already begun. The phone rang continuously and the mailbox was jammed with offers. Several reporters had taken up permanent positions outside on the sidewalk, where they waited with a battery of cameras and audio recording equipment, trying to ignore the army of kids who were also camped out, watching them from ten feet away and occasionally yelling sarcastic comments.

By 8am Irene had checked into her fashion shoot on Broadway. It was on the 19th floor of a building overlooking Union Square. She was wearing a pleated, baby-doll dress, a plaid button-up shirt and emerald high heeled shoes by Zanotti. Her hair was piled high above her head, and she looked scornfully at the ceiling as the camera flashed in quick succession. Maya stood at the side, pleased with her daughter's success.

At 9am the streets were packed with bustling humanity, workers, tourists, musicians, hawkers and more. Subway trains muscled deep into the earth, criss-crossing the water, then bursting out overground into the sun, which was now higher in the sky.

Window cleaners straddled cages at the 80th floor of a high rise in the financial district. Seagulls swooped and banked, uttering fearsome screeches above watery spume and froth, hundreds of feet below. The Roosevelt Island

tram from East 59th street and 2nd Avenue cranked its way high above the East River. Ferries meandered to and from Staten Island. A fresh breeze tore across the bay and into Manhattan.

By 11am I was relaxing at the bar, hundreds of feet above the avenue, knocking back a coffee. The first set of tunes, a mix of blues, latin and soulful jazz piano pieces, had been received well, earning me the obligatory clap from a few sleepy executives who were munching sandwiches as they stared down into the glorious view of the city and New York bay.

However there was no sign of Leo. So I dialled.

A few crackles let me know he was there.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Sorry, I could not make it,” he apologised.

“Hey, it’s all happening for you,” I told him. “Have you seen the morning papers? How did you do it? Well done! This is the big time, for sure. It’s amazing. How are the family doing? What’s coming next?”

“It’s not the way you think,” he muttered. “I don’t like their style. They have been in my house just now, several overweight reporters. I let them in, but should have never done that. They are all con-men, fakers, working with cheap bullshit. They tried to sell me a deal that was completely corrupt. I told them no way, then ordered them out. These were clumsy, ignorant men. One knocked over my best guitar and it is even damaged slightly.”

“Forget all that,” I hustled. “You are in the big game now. Why all these negative details? This is the real action. You should be proud. You’re making it!”

There was a snort of defiance down the phone. I could feel that he was getting angry.

“I don’t need it,” he answered. “This country is killing my soul. Everything is for sale here. Even us. It was never meant to be that way.” I sat up with a start.

“What are you talking about?” I argued. “You have the thing in your hand. Don’t refuse it. Let’s make money together?”

At that he laughed scornfully. “Money? Who needs money?”

“You are a fool,” I shouted. A few customers looked around in alarm.

“You don’t know what the hell is going on,” I continued. “Do you want to be homeless?” I scowled at the ceiling..

“Perhaps,” he said. “Maybe I do. Well done, little Max. Now you have said the right thing. Actually that is my plan. I know we are successful today. But it is all evil. I prefer simplicity. I have decided to leave my family, exit the band, quit all of this.” Suddenly I became confused.

“But Leo!” I could not control myself. “What’s wrong? Are you ill? You have never talked like this before. Has somebody put you up to this? Did you take something? Have you been talking to someone?”

There was a pause. I could hear him breathing, considering things.

“Yes, actually I have,” he replied. “I have been talking to Shiva.”

“Who the hell is that?” I demanded. “Don’t come with bull**** now? I thought I knew you better than that,” I argued.

“You don’t know who Shiva is?” he replied. “You, with your fine education? That does not say much for the British.” He laughed uproariously.

“You see, my dear Max Fabian, you do not know very much. I never did mention to you about how some Indian priests have been following us to our gigs, and how when I talk to them, they tell me that I am actually talking through them to Shiva, who is their God.”

I smiled at this.

“Goddamn Indian bullshit. I knew it. I knew you were a lunatic. And a loser.” I covered my face with my hands, feeling sick to the stomach. There was a long silence. A few birds flew past the window. A waitress carried a platter of fried eggs and toast past our seats.

“So what does Shiva tell you to do then?” I asked bitterly.

“To forget the success,” he answered. “To leave the band. To leave the family. To be content with a modest life, even homelessness.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because all of this is only temporary. None of this will exist soon. That is what I meant by the big change. Just wait and see. It won’t be long. All the banks will crash. There will be chaos everywhere. That building you are in right now will not exist. We are coming to an end of everything. And very soon.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“Wait and see,” he repeated. There was a silence. I was raging with frustration.

“You bloody fool,” I snarled.

“Say what you like. I don’t care,” he replied, in an acid tone. “But for me it is all finished. Do you know that kids from the street stole stuff from my apartment while the reporters were wasting my time with their idiocy?”

“That’s bad,” I admitted. “But it’s not the main deal.”

“OK, I’ve heard enough,” Leo snapped. “Now I have much clearing up to do here. But I do not judge you harshly. Goodbye. We will talk later on this.”

I disconnected.

“Pull that dress up a little higher,” sang out the photographer. He was all in black, T shirt and pants, with a small gold ear-ring in one ear, long dark hair well oiled and tied behind in a pig-tail.

All this time he was dancing in dramatically wide circles all around Irene, who stood uncertainly in the bright, photographic lights wearing her tight, expensive new clothes.

“That’s it. Yes, one hand on your lips! That’s good, very good. And now, with your other hand I want you to pull your dress even higher still... perfect! Oh my god, that’s it. You are so there, right in the zone - absolutely perfect. Baby! Oh baby! You have totally got it! This will do it! Get us where we need to be! You’re gonna shock ‘em baby! You are so on the money! You’re gonna sell a million copies of their goddamn magazine. No, what am I talking about? Ten million! Fifty million! We’re there, baby! This will do the job. We’ve cracked it! I swear to god! Go, Irene, go! Don’t stop! Just keep on pouting and posing like that! I love it! yeah! You got it! Alright!”

The lights were hot and they dazzled her eyes. Irene began to feel more and more uncomfortable. Her mother, Maya frowned as she watched from the side. She did not trust this photographer. It consoled her to know that it would soon be time to go.

But twenty minutes later he was still snapping and gushing, and Irene was feeling even worse. He had made her pull her dress right up, and open her top too far. She had not expected it would be like this. She shuffled uncomfortably on the hard wooden floor.

A few minutes later, as the photographer was changing films in the other room, Irene saw her chance. She darted off into the elevator, and rode down to the ground floor. She had imagined that her mother was in the coffee bar there but there was no sign of her. So she ventured out into the crowded Broadway sidewalk to look for her. Still no Maya. She decided to explore a few blocks just to breath in some fresh summer air. It was a great relief to have escaped the fashion shoot, and this oily man who she did not trust an inch.

She walked and walked. Various passersby opened their eyes wider as they passed by such a very attractive, twelve year old girl, even without the baby-doll dress and make up which had just now been professionally applied.

On her left was an opening leading to what looked like some kind of religious place. Intrigued, she pushed inside where it was much more cool than the street. As her eyes gradually became accustomed to the candlelight she could see what were obviously priests. They were praying. Now she recognised that it was a beautiful Hindu temple.

She took a few steps further inside. One of the priests turned to her, making a prayer of his fingertips.

“Good morning, little lady. How can I help you?” he asked, peering at her with interest. She noticed that he had three horizontal lines on his forehead, and also there was a strange cord diagonally across his torso.

Irene wondered whether to say that she had lost her mother, but understood it was pointless.

“Is this an Indian temple?” she asked uncertainly. As she took in the ornate golden sculptures of elephants, snakes, monkeys and birds, she became more and more convinced that it was.

“That’s right,” the priest replied. “You are very welcome.”

But now he took a much better look at her.

“Aha,” he said. “You are Irene of the Russian family band, Brother Kharma. We know all about you. We have seen you perform many times on the subway, and in clubs also. Many congratulations for what you are doing. We like it very much. It is the music of the great transformation. So, it is not casual that you are here. We are honoured. I must give you a special blessing.” He motioned to her to follow him across the temple.

Only now did Irene come to her senses.

“But you are Ram!” she cried. “Of course! I remember you now!” She hugged him and they laughed together. Gently he disentangled her.

“But what kind of God do you pray to?” she asked, as they walked. “My father has talked about your religion.”

“You have a very wise father,” the priest beamed. “And our gods have many names.” At this moment many voices began to chant ahead of them, in another section of the temple.

“Can I know some of their names please?”

“Krishnan, Ganesh, Parvati for example. And then of course, Shiva.”

At this last name Irene felt a kind of shiver run through her.

“What is he like?” she wanted to know.

“He creates worlds,” the priest replied. “Then he destroys them. He is, if you like, the father of our gods.”

“Will our world be destroyed?” she asked, rather stricken by this idea.

“Yes, one day it must happen,” he answered. But hopefully with this special blessing you receive today, you will feel no pain when the end of the world comes.”

“OK,” she agreed.

Now he called to some other priests and they all talked excitedly together in Hindi. Then they escorted Irene further into the temple, where she was made to sit on a golden throne covered with sculpted figurines. At this moment the priests all kneeled in front of her and began to chant. Another priest at the side sprinkled various powders into a flaming bowl so that many clouds of sweetly smelling incense smoke drifted gently on the air. Finally a priest reached over and touched her forehead with one finger and held it there for a moment. Again she felt a shudder, like fire and ice, just for a second. Then it passed.

The priest smiled and threw more incense into the fire.

“Thank you,” Irene said. “But I had better be leaving now,” she added.

“So where are you going? And what are you doing?” one priest asked with a concerned expression. “You are rather young to be alone on the streets of New York, young lady?”

“I am a fashion model. It is the break in between shooting.”

“Ah,” the priest sighed. “The world of pretty colours. It will pass.”

“I don’t want it to pass. We need the money,” she pointed out.

“Yes of course,” the priest said, bowing his head. But then he looked at her very carefully.

“Little Serge?” he asked. “What about him?” Irene was shocked that he was aware of her brother’s name.

“What do you want to know about him?” she demanded.

“There is a saying we have. *Shiva is with him*. Please return soon and bring Serge with you?”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because he is very special. You must take care of him. He will be embarking on a great journey.” Irene laughed ruefully.

“I think we all will be,” she agreed.

“But Serge in particular,” the priest said. She nodded and at that they shook hands, and Irene retreated delicately, out to the street. Hurrying back to her fashion shoot she soon found Maya holding her arms wide and her face pale with worry.

“Irene! Is that the way to do things? Where were you? And why?”

“It’s OK, Mama,” Irene soothed. “I have been in a temple, talking with a Hindu priest, that’s all. But listen - he knows Papa! And they have seen us play several times!”

Maya was confused for a moment. And then she remembered that she had seen something like that on a couple of occasions.

“Well come back upstairs anyway. There is a little more to do. What more did he say?”

“He says the world is going to end,” she said.

From now on, whenever I phoned Leo, there would be plenty of news. The article in the newspaper had done its job. Very quickly things slotted into place regarding future prospects. Almost immediately, the band found a manager, a record company and an agent, and shifted from playing the New York subway, where they had been performing for more than a year, to playing prestige venues up and down Manhattan. Leo had come to see reason and continued to work with the band, although it was obvious that something deep within him rankled. The subject came to a head one time when I visited him at the family apartment at Liberty Avenue.

I arrived with Big Joe one Tuesday evening in the middle of a thunderstorm. Big Joe and I had got over our previous quarrel, and now were friends again. It was strange how I could now be close with this same person, and yet it had happened, inch by inch.

His gig at my club had gone well. After the performance we had sat and talked. Gradually we had seen things more eye to eye, talking about music, New York, women, life and all the rest. He knew all about the blues and the roots of the blues, and the history of the slaves and their suffering, and their music too. It turned out that he had worked in the fields, picking cotton too, and had been beaten up by whites many times in Alabama in years gone by. Then he knew all about the secret world of *John de Conqueroo* and gypsy women, and magic charms, all the jig-saw puzzle of the blues world. I had listened with open

ears, since I had known about these things too, and sung about them also, since my childhood days.

Pretty soon I had discovered that he played blues saxophone really well. Plus he was a huge black man, packed with muscle and I knew all about how tough his part of East New York was from my first days in this city when I'd been driving a brown cab. So I saw him like a bodyguard these days, and it felt good to ride the subway together right now.

It took a while. The train was packed with people who were soaking wet from the storm. I had no seat and clung to a steel pole next to a gang of hip-hop rappers who were practicing their vocal routines. The train swerved around on its tracks, thundering into one station after another.

"I reckon you gonna talk business with them Russians," Big Joe suddenly roared up at me from where he was sitting between two stone-faced men.

"Forget it," I said. "Leo won't play my club any more. They are on a bigger circuit now. I cannot afford their prices."

"Tarnation," Big Joe complained. "I'll knock some sense into him if you just give me the go ahead."

"No, relax, he's my friend," I hustled. "Yeah, maybe we will talk some other kind of business actually." The train driver suddenly slammed on his brakes, and the rappers were shot along down the car. A woman screamed. Then the train picked up speed again. The roaring sounds started once more.

"I can't hear you. It's too noisy," I shouted.

"What did you say?" he shouted back. Now the train appeared to be vibrating in a truly strange manner. I danced around next to my pole.

"Let's go. This is our stop," I shouted. We exited.

Upstairs, out in the open, the rain was pouring down. The beggars and hustlers were out there anyway, all

with outstretched hands, begging for change. Big Joe took care of them pretty fast. I looked at him with admiration.

“Smokes,” he said. “Gotta pick some up.” We stopped for cigarettes. Then it was back to the street. The clouds were dark and heavy on the horizon.

Soon we were knocking at Leo’s door. He opened up a few inches with a wry smile, then seemed confused when he saw Big Joe.

“Have you guys made it up?” he wanted to know. “No fighting in my house,” he cautioned. I wondered if he would throw us in the street.

“It’s true Joe and I did have a disagreement one time,” I said. “But the British believe you cannot be friends until after you’ve fought”. Both Leo and Big Joe had a huge chortle over this notion.

“Come on in. Welcome,” said Leo finally, opening the massive door a little wider. Big Joe pushed on through impatiently.

Inside was bedlam, but a joyful one. Kids were everywhere, running and screaming with excitement. Irene was practicing her bass in the corner. Amplifiers, music gear and video equipment stacked up almost to the ceiling. Toys had scattered themselves, mixing with everything else. I saw little babies crawling around the floor, and Maya cooking quietly in the kitchen.

“Home sweet home,” said Big Joe.

I noticed the wall clock beside the door had stopped. Irene caught my eye.

“It goes backwards sometimes,” she said with a suppressed snigger.

“I tried to fix it,” piped up Serge, trying to grab me in an arm-lock playfully.

“That’s why it goes backwards,” snorted Leo, indicating chairs for us to take. Big Joe threw up his hands in despair.

We pulled off our wet coats, and sat down. Pretty soon Leo was filling us in on the situation. Ever since the main article in the paper, things had got better and better, he explained. Now they could pick and chose contracts. They even had too much work. There had been radio and TV performances also, and talk of their own show on TV too. There were so many reasons to celebrate. Then suddenly his face changed.

“But it’s all fake. None of this means anything,” he added finally. “America is going bad very fast. How can I accept success in a system that is rotten to the core? You tell me that?” His face was rageful.

At this Big Joe leapt in.

“Rotten?” he exclaimed. “Tell me about it. A country that was born out of slavery? How can it ever be any different? And then he launched into a list of the countries that America had invaded, the banks which were corrupt, the politicians who were phony, and so on.”

“You guys learned it from us,” I shouted. They turned and faced me, confused for a second.

“Well of course,” I told them, calming down. “The British empire started it all. America just continued the process.” This tickled Big Joe and he laughed out loud. Leo winked at me.

Then there was more. An enormous list of America’s crimes poured out.

After another half an hour, Big Joe, well satisfied, said he had to be getting back. I agreed I would return also. We made a run for the subway. It was late, and there was already trouble on the street. A few guys looked us up and down, hard, as we sped past the corner in the moonlight. Then we ducked down into the relative shelter of the subway.

CARLA

Some nights I would walk along Bleecker street, in the West Village, checking out the new bands. Every kind of high-octane music would be there, blues, rock, country, electronica, reggae, hip-hop, and the list would go on and on. The doormen would know you were a musician, and would let you hang out just inside the door, while you mentally memorised all the new tricks and licks, all the styles, the arrangements, the new fashions, and so on.

I would often sit in at jam sessions, sometimes past midnight. Occasionally I would move from jam to jam, with another hot player or two in tow. Nobody ever wanted to stop. The feeling was just too good. Jazz, blues, rock, samba, or all of them, and then more. There was no limit. People had come from all over the world to play music in New York city, and we knew we were the best.

This evening I was in a mood to check out Carla who ran a club above her basement at the north end of the drag, next to a 24/7 convenience store. She was a motherly, black, ex-hooker, with a curvy profile, long, multi-coloured dreadlocks, and also a pleasingly sarcastic smile, plus a way to call you *darling*, or *honey child* or *lover boy* all the time. She knew how to relax me with her tarot cards, her incense and her pills, if ever I was totally out of energy. Ironically she also preached health food, yoga, and various obscure teachings from Armenia and Iran.

Tonight she greeted me with a yell of pleasure, fondling my three day stubble with a child-like curiosity and lighting up two new sticks of patchouli incense to celebrate my arrival. Then she squeaked.

“What *are* you wearing?” she murmured in horror.

“My black beret? What’s wrong with that?” I demanded. I hated that she discussed my clothes.

“No this.” She fingered my short brown leather jacket distastefully.

“Don’t touch that! ’Nam issue, 1967, totally genuine!” I was wounded by her analysis.

“It’s rather more *naf* than *nam* darling?” Ignoring my protests she ran a rebellious hand down my thigh.

“Denims and trainers are *so* last year’s fashion, honky chile. You’re out of date. And hey, I’m out of weed! Be a darling, and pick some up from the 24/7?” she moaned in a seductive whisper. “Oh of course I know it’s illegal. Just ask for Carla’s usual. It’s under the counter. He will understand?”

Then she inched closer, and picked at my shirt buttons.

“Are you too hot?” she enquired. On her breath I caught a faint whiff of spice. “Take something off and lie down when you come back,” she added, chuckling delightfully.

I laughed back, knowing her little ways by now.

“Naughty girl,” I lectured. “Very, very naughty! How sweet you are, Clara.”

Kissing a couple of dreadlocks, I backed off.

“OK, I’ll get you the weed,” I told her. “But now listen.”

“No, you listen.” she crowed excitedly. “I know you did a house record. Well I’ve found a *New Jack Swing* producer for you. You know, it’s the latest big sound? He has a totally chilled, loft studio on Houston. I’ve told him about you already.”

And so we were off, talking ten to the dozen, talking fashion, talking music, talking New York, how we were gonna make it, when we were gonna make it, how she had a new website, how she was gonna conquer the world. And all this time, many strange people, oddball punks and rastas, and then glam-rock dudes, were crawling in and out through hidden entrances, and from behind screens, and

now fiddling with things, in a half-concealed, dimly lit area where idling Tibetan curtains brushed against Chinese wall paintings.

I picked up the weed for her, and soon we were down on the large red cushions in the corner, and while she smoked her stash, I grilled her on all the other club owners of Bleecker Street, which bands they were signing, who was being busted, who had licenses and who didn't, and where the music scene was going generally. Because if you had a club, as I did, then you were admitted into the higher echelons of the New York music world, and could get access to secret information. She knew I had almost no licenses, but was selling alcohol anyway, not that she cared. Naturally she paid her licenses, being here in Bleecker Street. But my club was a far cry from that. Where I was, in Ludlow Street, on the Lower East side, we had homeless everywhere, a needle exchange right opposite, where addicts would come to change needles, and then the dreaded Chinese Tong mafia were only inches away. The regular NYC cops hardly ever even showed up.

Mainly, these club owners we discussed were well in with the press, which was obviously useful, specially if you were also a working musician who wrote songs and recorded them, and released records like I did occasionally.

"It's massage time, honey child," she cooed in my ear.

"Not today, Carla," I growled. "Not you, this time. I'm going next door for that."

"You don't love me any more?" she moaned.

"Yes I do," I soothed. "But I want the deep tissue massage tonight, not your kind. My back is aching everywhere." I groaned and rubbed it, to cement the point.

"OK, get out," she spat. "I ain't talking to you. Now go, scallywag!" I laughed and picked up my bag, knowing she didn't mean it. As I exited she blew me a kiss and

giggled, then rolled around ecstatically on her cushion, riding her red, satin dress all the way up her thighs.

On the way out a large roach scuttled across the dimly-lit carpet. I smashed my heel down hard on it, then headed off.

Outside in the street I lit up a cigarette and pulled hard on the butt. The illuminated club lights were crazing my eyes. I knew I needed a smoke, a stress-pack and an espresso, before hitting the massage parlour.

After a quick stop at the convenience store, I swallowed the pills one by one, ginseng, ashwagandha, calcium, vitamins, fish oil, minerals etc. Then I picked up a take-away espresso, and drained that fast. Crossing the street there was a busker who looked Latino, and who had a grey cat snuggled around his neck as he performed his Irish folk ballad.

And if I could I'd build a wall around old Donegal...

I tossed a bill in his guitar case, and headed for the sushi bar. Twenty minutes later I was bundling down the steps into the massage parlour.

“Is Charlotte here, my favourite girl?” I asked at the desk.

“No,” the Chinese clerk replied, staring at me disinterestedly. “Irma is on tonight instead.”

My heart sank. Charlotte was the greatest. But I needed the job to be done. My body was wrecked with carrying stuff around the club all day.

When I entered the interior room I was ready to quit. But I had paid already. There was no going back.

A strange face peered back at me from the red-lit gloom of a basement. Irma turned out to be a no-nonsense, mature, German red-head, who barked orders and paraded her muscular build around the room.

“Lie down, and strip down to underpants,” she commanded, flashing her eyes imperiously.

Then she began to pummel my torso vigorously. My whole frame was jerking around, and the room was so hot that sweat was running into my eyes.

However this workover was exactly what I needed, and soon I began to relax and breath more deeply as she attacked my shoulder muscles. Later, when she offered extras, I smiled and rolled over with a roguish wink, holding out my arms.

“Give us a kiss, darling,” I jived. “Do you have a beer for me?”

“I’ll slap your butt,” she threatened. “I’ve not time for jokes or fooling around. You want it or not?”

“Not tonight,” I grunted, and lay back on my front. But this little fracas had irritated her, and now she subjected me to a storm of punishing twists and turns, pounding and kneading my bruised flesh until I began to moan in pain.

“This is not a party,” she crowed, very satisfied to inflict still further punishment.

When I finally hit the sidewalk again, it was raining slightly, but a crescent moon was visible somewhere over Staten Island. I groaned and muttered, fingering my sore sides and back while trampling over a bunch of old magazines and newspapers that had been scattered by the wind.

It was much later than I thought, well past midnight, yet there was the usual activity everywhere.

Up and down Bleecker street, cabs and bicycles interwove, passing drunks and derelicts, and then one bored cop, leaning against a lamppost. Suddenly five guys ahead of me roared with laughter as they hugged each other, all at the same time. I had seen this kind of thing before, but wasn’t sure what to make of it. On reaching the 24/7 entrance, a soft, slinky New Orleans backbeat was audible from inside. Then, from a diner four doors further down, a

cranked up, mathematical, Cuban clave seduced the night air. It was the kind that lodges in your brain for no reason, and then won't leave, but it also put a spring in my stride.

“Go away you naughty boy, I've got company now, and don't need you,” screeched Carla, shaking her long dreadlocks in a threatening manner at my return. I groaned again.

Big Joe was slumped on that huge velvet cushion, fondling her arm. The two were smoking something, and Big Joe wore a look of immense satisfaction, like he had finally pinned down a rogue parrot in the forest. He had his battered saxophone case right beside him.

“What are you doing here, kid?” he cautioned. “Get lost. Can't you see I'm busy?” But I stood my ground.

“Try to make me,” I said. Carla giggled and rolled around, revealing massive, half-naked breasts, tattoos and then burn marks on her arms.

“I want my cards read,” I said.

“OK, if you must insist,” she grumbled, sighing. “But I got a whole lot of black man here, all for me, tee hee hee,” she giggled.

“Later, honey?” she entreated to him. He muttered something bad, then leaned back, elbows behind his head.

“I ain't goin' anywhere,” he said.

Carla walked over to a corner and picked something up.

“No cards without my snake,” she muttered.

When she returned there was a small snake writhing gently around her neck. Big Joe muscled himself away along the long pile of floor pillows, wincing a little as he did so.

“Come on now, dearie, tell me all about it?” Carla asked. We were cross legged on the floor, facing each other by now.

“Look deep in my eyes,” Carla whispered. Tell me what you see?”

“I see a woman,” I said. Her eyes were deep and black like the night. I felt myself slipping off into a place I did not quite understand.

She began to lay cards out on the floor in front of her.

“I know all about your Russian band,” she said.

“Big Joe told you?”

“Yes he did.” She smiled.

“You are going to change,” she said. “Do you know that, honey? You won’t be really you anymore, and you won’t be here any longer, either.”

“Look into my eyes,” she commanded, after a pause.

And then the most unexpected conversation began.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“I see a woman,” I repeated.

“I was a man before, but now I am a woman,” she informed me, with a delicate chuckle. “You do know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

There was a snort of disbelief from Big Joe in the corner.

“Goddamit,” he moaned, wretchedly. Then he shut up.

Now the talk passed through every possible topic. We talked love, music, New York, money and sex. Then we talked about people. Next we talked about ourselves, and what I wanted, and what she wanted. All this time she was cooing, and entreating and whispering, and sometimes using those secret swamp life, hoodoo words. She fondled me sometimes as we talked. And gradually I was relaxing, and feeling kind of numb, but enjoying myself, and feeling stronger and stronger, and actually quite intense.

Then she spoke about the Russian band, and Leo, and she was full of admiration, saying he was very courageous, and that he was leading us on a wonderful, but crazy path to an unknown destination, and maybe I would not understand it all, but I would learn a lot, and that I would be changed beyond recognition.

And finally she leaned over, and there were tears in her eyes as she kissed me on the lips, hard, and bade me farewell.

“You are going to leave. Oh, I know you are,” she sobbed. “And I like you, Max. I do like you. Because you were the different one. Oh, please don’t go!”

“Well, I do have to leave now,” I told her, gently disengaging. “I’m going home, that’s all, Don’t worry, Clara, I’ll be back. You’ll see.”

I was very touched by all this, and feeling proud but strangely confused, all at the same time. Big Joe had disappeared, and when I finally hugged her and strode out, it was into another world. The night was buzzing with electricity, a forest of pink and blue illuminated signs, and neon lamps, and the air was fresh, and I felt reborn and excited about something totally new. I didn’t really understand all that was happening, but I felt changed. Clara had done something big. This was different.

Big Joe was at the intersection, talking to a tiny Asian hooker in her low cut bra and tiny leather miniskirt. Her face was plastered with makeup, bright red lips and lots of mascara. She pouted as he faced me squarely in the sepia half darkness, interrogating me briskly.

“Where you headin’ now?”

“Home,” I said. “I’m done.”

“She told you your future?”

“Kind of.”

“So what is it?”

“She talked about travelling.”

“You gonna do that? Where you gonna go?”

“How do I know? It’s just what she said.”

“You wanna leave New York?” He was in disbelief.

“No, of course not.” There was a silence.

A limo with smoked glass windows cruised slowly past. The hooker got inside. The moon had almost disappeared behind the tallest high-rise.

Big Joe had obviously been ruminating on something. He licked his lips, and looked up and down the street uneasily.

“That Leo, he’s got a bit of a swagger,” he said. “I would take him down a few notches, if I had my way. Talkin’ big and walkin’ big, like he owns this land. But he don’t! He’s a Russian, goddamit, the guys we are supposed to be at war with.” He rolled his eyes at this idea.

“Not any more,” I pointed out. “Plus, he’s a good musician, and a great manager for their band. Do you know they are in a magazine that sold 200,000 copies in Russia this year?”

“Haw haw, you can’t fool me,” said Big Joe. “You won’t pull the wool over my eyes. Manager? All I see him do is slap those kids around. And the music they play makes no sense to me either.”

“It’s free jazz,” I said.

“That thing ain’t free and it ain’t jazz. Don’t talk to me of no free. I know what free is and what it isn’t. Hey, I heard better stuff in the breakers yard. Where is them blue notes, anyways? They don’t preach n wail, never. Gimme a break!”

I rallied in defense of Leo.

“They had it hard under Russian communism,” I said.

“I bet they did. Imagine living under 100 million copies of that Leo! It would drive me to madness. Either

that or my grave. Anyway, I'm headin' back to Clara. You been messin' with her tonight?"

"No," I said.

"You plannin' on messin with her?" His eyes bored into me.

"None of your business, but probably not."

"You went for a massage, I heard?" he probed.

"Yes I did."

"You messed with that massage lady then, there at that massage place?"

"No, I did not."

"What's wrong with you, boy? Aint you ready to boogie woogie?"

"Not tonight," I told him.

"Well Big Joe is, and he's headin' back to Clara right now," he chortled, brushing past me.

I wondered whether to shout that she was a man, but thought to shut up and head home instead.

By now the rain stopped, and as it was a warm night I decided to walk back to my club. At this moment my mind was a flurry of racing thoughts. As I crossed block after block I thought about America and New York, and what I was really doing here, and what was this big change coming?

After three more blocks another hooker caressed my neck, but I politely said no with a smile. Her face was reproachful as she minced back into the shadows.

And then I walked on, through the columns of steam rising from the street vents, down from the West Village, all around the Bowery and finally to Houston and Ludlow Street. All this time my mind was teeming with melodies and songs, and also arrangements and chants, and I wondered if this was how composers would write their symphonies.

The music surged on and on, becoming stronger and stronger every second.

But by now I was exhausted. I slumped down in the booth of an all-night diner, and tried to think. Carla had convinced me that something was about to change in a big way, maybe everything. She had told me that she had seen a vision of a big wheel, and Serge sitting high on a mountain. And then something about a train. It all fitted together.

Plus, I trusted Carla. I knew how much she had suffered, and how wise she was today as a result. It was obvious that she had the thing that people called the third eye. If Carla said everything was going to change, then maybe it might.

At this moment I felt proud to be who I was, and felt I was going somewhere, even within the chaos and the madness of this city, with its danger and mafia and all.

The waitress brought coffee, and then I smoked, and finally walked on.

When I finally arrived back at my club, it was 6am and the traffic was exploding in the dawn. I unlocked the place, then crashed down on the bed. As I ripped off my jeans a sliver of paper fell out of my back pocket. I opened it and read every word.

You gonna get out of this place. Don't know how or when or why. But I know you gonna do it. Carla knows. You gonna follow the horizon. The wheel is turning. Carla sees it. You gonna find that mountain, at the end of the frozen road. Peace and love be with you, honky chile.

In that final embrace she had smuggled her little goodbye note into my back pocket, and I never knew. This had been her way to say farewell.

I put down the paper, and as my head hit the bed pillow, everything went black.

THE GHOST STATION

Irene and Serge were riding the subway. Their parents imagined that they were safely at school. But Irene knew she had to bring Serge to the temple, and had arranged the plan secretly.

“It’s just something I feel very strongly,” she explained to him as she clung on to the silver pole, while the train danced and clattered its way towards Union Square. “Plus, he said you are very important. I know we shouldn’t have sneaked out of school, but in a funny way, I think Dad would approve of all this,” she announced.

“Well, I don’t understand any of it,” complained her younger brother.

“There’s lots of things that we don’t understand, little bro,” said Irene, reaching round to smooth and tidy his hair a little. “I think the priest wants to give you a special blessing,” she continued. “Like they gave me, remember? He says you are on a big journey. Something important.”

“Yeah, like sneaking out of school,” he laughed. She slapped him in frustration.

“Ow,” he shouted. “You can’t do that, You’re just a girl!”

“But I’m bigger,” she boasted.

“Cut it out,” rapped an old black man with a business case, sitting opposite. “You kids should be in school,” he growled. They shut up.

Later, as they walked the last few yards to the temple, Irene filled him in with what she knew.

“It’s connected with our music,” she said. “We play music that other people don’t play. Dad told me that. He said it’s all about life and death, and that it always goes round and round. Like our music. And you play the drums. These priests think you are the sacred drummer that they

have been waiting for. Something to do with Shiva. And that you will be drumming still when the world ends.”

“I don’t like that,” he wailed.

“You have to like it,” she told him. “It’s a big honour. That’s what the priests think anyway. This is why they want to bless you. And listen, it’s not so bad. You will be drumming when the next world begins too!”

“There’s gonna be a next world?” he asked, blinking through tears.

“Of course! Dad told me that many times.”

Once arriving at the temple it was just as she had said. The blessing went very well, exactly as Irene had predicted. The priests were satisfied.

“I’m proud of you,” his sister told him, as they exited into the sunshine. “I think this is gonna help our band get successful. Dad thinks so, anyway.”

They walked on a few yards.

“Now, are you gonna go back to school?” she probed, suddenly suspicious.

“I don’t know,” he replied uncertainly. “No, I think I’m gonna just hang out here, then go home for supper.”

“I think you should go back to school,” she said. “Come with me. Let’s go back together.”

“No,” he yelled, and raced off to instantly disappear in the crowds. Irene felt sick in her stomach. After staring at Union Square for a few minutes she reluctantly dragged herself down the steps and got back on the train. She knew all about the danger of the streets. And he was only ten.

But that afternoon he reappeared back at the house at five, and no-one except her knew that anything had been amiss that day.

Later that evening two men in hoods walked up to me just as I exited the subway.

“Do you know who we are?” one asked, with a sinister smile on his face.

“I get it. You want the rent,” I stammered. “Come inside the club. I’ll get it for you right away.” We crossed the main road and turned into Ludlow Street. Once we were inside the club I raced for the safe and slapped a large pile of bills on the counter.

“You owe a lot more than that, Mister,” he snarled.

There was no possible reply. They beat me about the face, then threw me down and kicked me around. I had my gun but knew that if I started firing they would shoot to kill.

An hour later, long after they had gone, I was finally able to move. After managing somehow to lock up the place, and nursing my wounds, I crawled painfully downstairs to bed.

There was chaos in the Russian apartment. Everyone was screaming and shouting. The kids had been bad. After that Leo had been slapping them all. This had triggered an argument about money between Maya and him. Also the pressure of continuous TV, radio and live shows had reached a climax. Something had to break.

“I don’t want to play music any more,” sobbed Serge, racing for the street door. Maya rushed to stop him.

“Now everybody calm!” roared Leo. “Sit down and shut up.”

Irene and Kira immediately complied.

“Everything is fine,” Leo announced. “I know it looks tough. But this is normal New York life. Do not worry, I am not angry. We are musicians, working on top level now, and that means stress. But it will pass. I am proud of you. Please don’t make any more trouble? This is America, and if things go bad, they go really bad.”

Now baby Vladimir started to scream, and Irene rapidly picked him up to soothe him.

At that exact moment I was outside, knocking on the door. Leo let me in. He swiftly calmed the family

further, and made me sit down. I saw that his face was lined and weary. However he managed a vague smile of greeting.

For some reason we now began to discuss politics. This triggered an immediate outburst from him.

“Everything is hell here,” he raved. “Americans are absolutely nuts. This is not a life. Why am I here? Is there any reason to stay?” I groaned to hear the same old story. What was wrong with him? Could he not see that he was breaking through to success immensely fast?

“Hey, you are doing pretty well,” I pointed out. “I would give a lot to have the continual success you have. How can you complain?”

Kira, at the back of the room, now knocked down a tottering pile of books, and he glowered at her. She flinched.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Max, that we are earning dirty money? It is a lowdown life here. Everybody is cheating. There is no honour in business in this place. Did you know that I had to pull Irene out of the modelling business this week? They were trying to turn her into a sex-doll. At twelve years old! She wanted to leave anyway, so I phoned and cancelled the agent.”

“Did you hear I got beaten up?” I asked him. Now he calmed a little.

“Do you want tea?” he asked. “Special Russian tea? I am sorry you got beaten up. Why and when did this happen?”

“I had not paid the rent,” I said. “Listen, we need to talk business,” I continued.

“Business,” he raved. “I have had enough of business! I do not need any of this. Do you know that we were in a shelter the first few nights in New York? I should have stayed there. I had no problems at that place.”

“Oh give me a break,” I said. “We all need money. I have just been beaten up exactly because I had no money. Do you want to be beaten up?”

“Nobody beats me up,” he said, growling a little.
“I will beat you up, if you talk more like that,” I said.

“Nobody beats my Pa up,” shouted Serge, walking back from the door, followed by Maya. We all laughed. The room relaxed.

Later, as I rode the subway car home, and scanned the weary faces of the passengers, Leo’s angry shouts came back to me.

It is a lowdown life here. All at once I was seeing these Americans through the eyes of my Russian friend. Were they really so bad?

But then it occurred to me that his words were also helping me gain perspective, helping me to know and remember who I was, namely a British man, a Londoner. So there was an uncanny symmetry here. Certainly, nobody was higher or lower, between British and American, I felt. The New York style could be great. There was a zest for life here, more than back home, plus plenty of courage and a way to laugh at things. But these New Yorkers could not be allowed to put something over on me. Yes, a man from the past, that’s who I was, in a sense, and they laughed at that. But I drew the line at mockery, especially at our way to think deeply about things. *Who were these Americans to trade all for action, power and triumph? And who were they to trade the past for the future?* And also, where was their sensitivity, their spirituality, and the intellectual life?

The train crashed on, roaring past station after station. The car was packed full. A Chinese woman and an angry looking Latino were crushed against each other, both hanging on to the same pole. I yawned and scratched my two-day stubble.

Something did not make sense. Leo was right, I decided. They had gone too far over here, in this wild frontier town. They had crossed the line. The city was at

least half psychotic. I had seen enough madmen gamboling around dumpsters, babbling, or parading across Astor Place, mouths full of nonsense, to know this for sure.

What had brought this town to be so very wild and crazy? A giant laugh was bubbling up inside me by now. And yet, at the same time I loved this place. At this moment mysterious forces were fighting for supremacy right inside me. How long before something cracked? I resolved to watch and listen to Leo more carefully in future. The old Viking clearly knew how to deal with the dark spirits who attacked from nowhere, without warning, consigning half of this city to the madhouse.

The following morning Rosa brought me coffee in bed. She was excited.

“The station, Senor, the ghost station! The one right by Brooklyn Bridge and City Hall! There are people living down there. Look at this article. It’s a big story!”

She handed me the newspaper and I scanned it.

It was true. I read on to discover that there had been many confrontations with police trying to evict the desperate people who were there. I put the paper down, wondering at this new coincidence.

However when Leo heard the news on the phone he took the story very seriously.

“Yes, I saw construction workers entering an underground site just at that spot,” he told me. “There is a rough system of boards and locks at the entrance, but their security looks to be not very good. I think we should try to go down there.

“Like I told you before, this is very important,” he continued. “You dreamed the deserted, ghost station and the Samsara, and now it is all re-appearing before our eyes. I will come and inspect the station with you tonight, OK? You told me you had a gun? So bring it. Better safe than sorry.”

I agreed and we made a plan to meet at the laundromat at midnight.

When zero hour arrived it was raining slightly. We met at the laundromat and then walked a few yards along the street to where the construction site was. It then proved fairly easy to break through the wooden barricade.

Then there was a dark opening. I could see a tunnel leading downwards into darkness. We switched on flashlights.

It didn't take long to get down there.

After a few minutes of following the tunnel we entered what was obviously the ancient station. But for a moment I could not make sense of the curious combination of metal and wood that stood before us.

"Surely that cannot be a train?" I gasped. But it was. We were looking at a very old, dusty, subway car. Its doors were wide open and there was a mound of trash scattered around inside.

For a moment we were transfixed by this discovery but then, down the platform, I heard a voice. Someone was coming towards us, holding the stub of a burning candle.

He wore a hood, and at that I smelled danger fast.

"What is this, some kind of a horror film?" I hissed at Leo, backing off fast.

"Hold on," he replied, bracing himself for trouble.

A strange face peered out from behind the hood.

The man's forehead was covered with a maze of lines, and he had several gold teeth. He was holding his hands in a praying position. His eyes were half-closed. Gradually he began to speak, in a very deep voice.

"If you are from the electric company, I can tell you that nothing is working down here," he said with a sly grin.

I relaxed. This was the most ludicrous greeting that I could have imagined. Leo snorted with laughter.

Then the man's roguish expression was replaced by something more earnest and sincere.

“So you found my little home,” he quavered.
“Welcome.”

I didn't know what to make of this. But he did not look very dangerous any more.

“Do you sleep down here?” I asked. He replied that he did.

“Could you spare a dollar? I hardly have any food left?” he begged. At this I looked at Leo whose face visibly softened.

“Sure,” I said, and handed over five dollars. He jostled around with excitement.

“Thanks, chief,” he said. “I am so grateful. Times are rough, these days.”

“Take it easy,” Leo said, and motioned to me that it was time to leave. The man took the hint immediately.

“God bless you sirs,” he entreated. “Thank you so very much.”

“We have to go,” I said. But the man had more to say.

“You know this place doesn't make any sense,” he jabbered excitedly. “Do you realise how old this train is? And why is it here at all? For me, I just sleep down here when I'm desperate.”

By now he was hustling along next to us, back to the tunnel entrance, talking faster and faster.

“Just look at what they scrawled on the wall here,” he squeaked. I shone my flashlight to the left and peered at the wall which was dark and damp.

“Can you read that?” the man demanded. “Babe Ruth! That sure puts a date on it, doesn't it?” he gushed ecstatically.

“He played baseball for the Yankees seventy years ago!” he added in a hushed voice.

“So why they never took the train away, when this station was closed down?” Leo asked.

“Nobody knows,” the man said. “Maybe it was recession time and there was no money for anything, so it was easier just to leave it here?”

“You could be right,” I agreed.

“You know I don’t always sleep down here,” the man exclaimed, shooting us a worried look. “But then again sometimes I have to. Life is tough, and getting tougher.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“You look after yourself,” Leo told him.

We waved goodbye, and headed for the exit tunnel, happy to escape such a place. In a few minutes we were out of there. Only then it finally occurred to me.

“Wait,” I said. We stopped.

“Did you notice something familiar about that man?” I asked Leo.

He fixed me with a long stare.

“It was Ram,” I said. We walked on in silence as I tried to deal with it all. Why should Ram be down there, homeless, in that state? It didn’t add up. Leo shrugged.

“Sometimes things make no sense,” he said.

“But there has to be some kind of a clue?” I argued.

It was time to go. I was walking away from Leo when he called me back.

“One more point,” he said.

“So your original dream was a prediction,” Leo continued. “More is coming, for sure,” he added.

“Something is waking up,” he whispered, and then walked off quickly into the night, brushing rain off his jacket.

“I don’t doubt it,” I replied, but he was out of earshot already.

“So you are an avatar of Shiva?” Raj questioned, scanning Serge curiously from an adjacent desk.

They were at school, in the crowded maths class. It was raining outside. The two Russian kids had known Raj,

the Indian boy, for some weeks. He was chubby and intelligent, and was known to eat too many doughnuts if he could find them. They liked Raj. He always wanted to hear about their latest musical escapades.

In the last few days, Irene had called him for a special talk. She had pinned him down outside the school gates at 4pm one windy Tuesday afternoon, and told him all about her meeting with the Hindu priests, and all they had said about Serge.

Right now the teacher had left the room to find more paper. But as soon as a few kids had overheard these strange whisperings of Raj, the class instantly went silent.

“What’s an avatar, you freak?” Pablo the cynical Spanish kid jibed from his desk near the window. “I bet it’s a man with a monkey’s head!” The class roared with laughter. “You guys are weirdos,” Pablo shouted.

“Zombie, zombie,” he chanted and some of the class joined in. Raj ignored them all. Serge felt scared and embarrassed. When the fuss had died down, Irene nudged Raj’s arm.

“Yes, what is an avatar?” she hustled. “But I do know who Shiva is,” she added proudly.

A missile suddenly landed behind Serge’s ear, wetting him dramatically. It was a paper tissue soaked in cola. In a second he had raced over and was grappling with Sung-ho, the cruel Korean kid with the cleft palate. In a second they were on the floor, smashing into desks, while a few kids kicked them, telling them to cut it out, or the whole class would be kept behind for detention.

A low-flying 737 roared past the open window. Outside the school gates two cats were fighting in the gutter, making screeching noises.

“No,” Irene screamed, desperately trying to separate the boys. By now all the kids had gathered around in two loose groups, one shouting for Serge and one raging for

Sung-ho. Irene was horrified to see that Serge had a thin trickle of blood coming out of his nose.

Without any warning Mr Goldberg, the maths teacher, crashed into the room and made a headlong dive into the kids with a roar of vengeance. His face was scarlet and sweaty, and his tie all crooked as he dragged the two culprits to their feet.

Now he stood in front of them, visibly shaking and trembling with emotion.

“How dare you?” he roared. “Is that the respect I get? How dare you? You should all be flogged. OK, you have so crossed the line, all of you. Why the hell did nobody stop this fight? Dominic, you should have called me. Why didn’t you? I have half a mind to keep you all in. OK, you can forget about football tomorrow.” A few black kids at the back groaned out loud.

“Serge, dude, are you hurt?” the teacher asked, softening dramatically as he saw the blood trickling down the young boy’s face.

“I’m OK,” said Serge bravely, staggering a little.

“Right, who started this?” the teacher snapped.

Nobody moved.

“So that’s the way you want to play it? Well I can play hardball too,” he spluttered, shaking a fist at them.

“Get your asses into the head’s office right now. You Sung-ho, and you too, Serge. They will get your nose fixed up, don’t worry. You’re not fainting are you?”

“I don’t think so,” Serge said, wilting a little, and trying hard not to sob.

“No crying now,” Mr Goldberg rapped, watching the boy carefully. “You’re an American. Be a man, Serge. OK, off to see the head, both of you. Explain to him who started it.”

“Can I come too?” Irene begged. “He’s my brother and he’s hurt.” The teacher spun on one heel to face her.

“Did you see who started it?” the man demanded.

“Yes sir, I did,” Irene said.

“So go tell the head honcho then,” he replied.

Instantly he fixed her with an evil stare so that she shrank.

“And no lying or there will be hell to pay. Got it?”

Inside the headmaster’s office it was soon established by Mr Greenford, a shrunken balding man in a tweed jacket, that Song-ho was the obvious culprit. He glared at the poor Korean boy.

“You must all go home immediately,” the head said with sinister precision. His medical eyes bored into Song-yo without mercy.

“The three of you can leave right now. Song-ho, this little game of yours will go on your record. I am not impressed. You have let me down. It is outrageous to behave like that. You should be ashamed. Any more of that and you will be immediately suspended for the remainder of the school term. OK?”

“I am so sorry,” spluttered the Korean.

“I don’t believe any of it,” the head continued. “I think you are just a trouble-maker. You’d better shape up, and fast, or all hell will descend on your head.”

Song-yo blubbered silently in front of them all. Irene’s heart went out to him and she stroked his hair.

“Cut that out, you malicious young trollop,” Mr Greenford roared.

“Can we go now?” Irene asked in a robotic voice.

“Take Serge to the medical room,” the head snapped, “and have him lie down until the bleeding has stopped. Then take the day off, all of you.”

“I understand, Sir,” Irene said. At that they exited as fast as they could. Outside Irene gave Song-yo a hug.

“I don’t mind what you did,” she told him, giving him a radiant smile.

Song-yo’s heart missed a beat. How could he thank this strange, beautiful Russian girl? At that moment he felt he loved her.

BENEATH THE LINES

The following day the kids grabbed the chance to talk to Raj in a corner of the locker-room. There was no one else in sight. Raj surveyed Serge and Irene with some curiosity.

“But how is the band going?” he wanted to know. “You guys are getting famous. That must feel great? Does it? And I’ve seen you on TV, too. You’re really good. How can you have got this far so quick? Plus, the rumour is that your family was in a shelter and homeless only a year ago. Is that possible?”

“We were,” Irene said, giggling. “It’s all true. I don’t know how we did it. I really don’t. It’s something to do with my Dad. And maybe Shiva. So I have more questions about him.” She scanned his face anxiously.

“Shoot away,” said Raj, spreading his arms wide and giving them a welcoming look.

“So what exactly is an avatar of Shiva?” Irene asked. “That’s what we have to know.”

“Yes, what?” Serge hustled. “What am I?”
Everything went quiet suddenly.

“He is, or you are, one form of Shiva,” Raj told him. “If what the priest said is true. He really said that, did he?”

“Shiva is our God who created the world, and presently, according to the writings, he will destroy it also,” he continued. “That is what we Hindus believe. I know it is very different from what the Christians here in the west think.” There was a pause while they digested this.

Irene suddenly hugged Serge. There was a big, protective smile on her face.

“That’s fantastic,” she whispered. “I just want what’s best for you, little brother, whoever or whatever you are.”

“Thanks,” Serge replied, from somewhere inside the embrace. “Even though I don’t really understand what is happening to me right now?”

“You may never fully understand it,” murmured Raj thoughtfully. “But it looks like it’s happening to you anyway.” There was another pause. Kids were shrieking distantly somewhere down the end of the corridor, and the sound reverberated through the warm, dry air. They looked at each other in some bewilderment about where all of this was going. Then Raj cleared his throat, and looked up and down the corridor urgently. There was nobody there. Finally he drew them close to him and began to whisper.

“If Serge is truly an avatar, that means he is very strong, very powerful, and it will not be easy to be near him, or with him, later on. It is very important that you take care of him. He has strange, wonderful powers which are so strong that even he himself may be in danger, simply because he has been entrusted to carry such a heavy weight. He has been chosen because he is worthy.”

“How do you know all this?” Serge asked, fairly shaken to hear the information.

“Yes, how do you know that it is really true?” echoed Irene.

“It is my religion,” Raj said. “These things have existed for thousands of years. In India we do not question them. Yes, I do know that here in the west people laugh at such things as a God who is a man with an elephant’s head. But all religions have miracles. How did Jesus walk on water, or come back from the dead, for example? Tell me that?”

“I see what you mean,” Serge said. “But I don’t know if I really want to be a follower of this Shiva. It sounds scary.”

“If what the priest said is correct, then you are not a follower of Shiva, you are an aspect of Shiva himself,” Raj replied. “Celebrate! You are very lucky! I would feel very important if I had been chosen.”

“But isn’t Shiva the one with six arms?” Irene asked curiously.

“Yes, he is often depicted with many arms, more commonly four arms,” Raj replied.

“It’s good Serge plays the drums then,” Irene laughed. “All the better to play drums if you have four arms!” She chuckled at this idea, shaking Serge around in the process.

“I don’t want four arms,” moaned poor Serge.

“Yes I am sure you do very well with two,” Raj soothed. “Once again, how is the fabulous band going? Are you making a new record now? How come you still go to school? I thought you were doing only music by now?”

“It’s against the law not to go to school,” Irene told him. “Plus, I quite like it here. When we’re not fighting, that is. Do you know we still play the subway sometimes?” Now Raj looked shocked.

“What, begging for change on the subway? That’s ridiculous,” he snorted.

“That shows you don’t understand my Dad or anything he thinks,” said Irene. “Dad says we are not here in America to make it, or even to make money. He says America is full of people with no brains making money out of stupid music that doesn’t mean anything. He says it only means something if you suffer to do it, and if you are closest to the poorest of the poor people. He also says that the sounds of the subway have secrets in them, that the sound of the train is something from another world, and that when we play, we make a kind of magic, and that we must stay pure, partly because we are Russian and we brought something special inside us to help America.” She nodded to emphasise these points.

“Sounds like your Dad doesn’t like America,” Raj said. “Why doesn’t he just pack up and leave town and head back home again?”

“Yes, that’s the thing I don’t quite understand,” Irene agreed, looking confused.

“Dad loves America,” Serge chanted. “I’ve seen him look down a big avenue in Manhattan, and there’s that particular gleam in his eye, and he walks with a kind of a bounce, and, well I just know, he loves America deep down.” And he punched the air excitedly.

“Can you love and hate at the same time?” Irene asked.

“Of course,” Raj laughed. “Just as Shiva created the world only to destroy it.”

“That’s me, Shiva! That’s who I am,” chanted Serge in a sudden ecstasy. “I created the world! And I will destroy it all soon! I will be the greatest drummer in the world. Just watch! I will show everybody. Look out! Me, me, me! I am the one! I will smash it all! Wait for me to get on my drums, ’cos I’m gonna do it! I’ll show you all!” He leapt out of his big sister’s embrace and danced up and down and all around, patting and drumming on the wall joyfully and continuing to moan and babble.

At this Raj swiftly took Irene by the arm and lead her away a few yards. His face had darkened.

“It is just as I feared,” he whispered urgently in her ear. “This thing may already be too strong for him. Promise me, Irene, will you look after your brother? Can you see what it is doing to him already?”

Irene looked at her beautiful young brother who was dancing around, continuing to beat on the wall with his hands, and chanting *Shiva, Shiva, Shiva* as a mantra, and a tear trickled down her face. She wiped it away hastily and then gently but firmly took Serge by the arm so that she could lead him back into the classroom.

From that moment on, the drumming never ever stopped for Serge. He would practice constantly, for longer and longer hours, until his little body was weak and exhausted. Then he would sneak into Manhattan to stare at bright new drum kits in the windows of the big music stores, longing for the day he could afford to buy one.

At night he would hear rhythms playing at the edge of his mind as he drifted off to sleep in bed. In the daytime, the sound of people's talk, their very words would sound like rhythms to his newly tuned ear, rhythms which were often in strange and unusual time signatures, played on unknown drums. The train, the bus, the car would sound out musical patterns and motifs for the little boy. Even his own feverish heartbeat had become the unifying pulse of an entire world of music which was enveloping him day by day.

There was no looking back at this point. He had become Shiva. The family were aware that something had changed within Serge, but only Irene and Leo suspected what was actually happening.

For a while I saw nothing of the Russians now. But lately we had made many mutual friends, and through the grape-vine the news travelled fast. One morning I was told that they had done a tour of Georgia, to ecstatic audiences, and then they had arrived back suntanned and proud. Everything had worked out well except for the fact that their Alsatian dog had run off at one point and never returned. Now, once back in the city, a whole stream of situations followed, a mixture of good and not so good. More radio interviews and special showcase gigs. Although they already had a record company, another label, Epic records, attempted to buy out their contract but Leo intervened and refused the deal, when it was discovered that the new label planned to bring in musicians he did not want. Meanwhile the kids were causing a sensation

wherever they went, with fashion designers flocking around them.

When I began visiting Liberty Avenue again I found the apartment packed with the latest video equipment, cameras, lenses, tripods, computers and so on, and Leo was briefing teams of camera operators as to the details of the latest ongoing video shoot. I quickly understood that what I knew about media from England did not apply here. In America there was more chance to grow a project organically, since there existed far more independent media. The result was that Leo himself could be in charge of the all-important video productions, and then the results could be channelled into more expansive media outlets for post production and airing.

Both Leo and I constantly discussed technical details of audio and video. We knew how crucial it was to be on top of the technology, rather than letting the technology confuse and overpower you, such that you would drown in complex details.

Yet during these visits to Liberty Avenue I became more and more troubled by what this hectic, stressful existence was doing to the kids. They were only children, after all. The schedules were intense. Any rebellion would be greeted with a quick, painful smack. This was discipline, Russian style. Leo defended himself many times by telling me that if they rebelled, the gigs would not be played, and then the family would starve and even go homeless. I would shudder at this, and remember that this idea was no idle threat. It was a genuine fear, and you could see it only inches outside the window panes of the apartment, merely by turning your head. A few homeless people were always visible out there. In all of this city it was the same thing. The moment you went wrong in any way, or off the path, you were dead, or worse, a living dead. There was none of that European, kindly tolerance that I had been used to in my London days.

Drugs were constantly around. I'd been through them, seen their bad side and was now wary of them.

Jake Handelburger crashed into his office, skidded to the dark blue phone and dialled.

"Milo? This is Jake from Majestic Promotions, in LA. Have you seen the figures? This Russian family band is charting nationwide! Organise a conference call for right now. Get the song-pluggers wired, hyped and active round the clock. Sony want this record to move, and fast. It will be hyped in syndicate even though the sound doesn't even need any of that. We just want to make sure."

Now the green phone crackled into life.

"Chicago? Is that Chicago? Danny? What? have you heard? Yes I know. Have you talked to New Orleans or New York this morning? They say the same? Good. Keep talking. It's crazy. I've never seen anything that moves like this."

Finally the jet-black phone rang. An international call was coming through. Jake was now holding all three, and his big plastic brown glasses began to slither down his face.

"Who is that? Who are you? Who? Yes, this is Jake. What? I said Jake from Majestic in LA. This line is lousy. I can't hear you! Who the hell are you? Majestic in Estonia? So what's happening? It's a hit you say? That's what we need." Then Jake's face darkened.

"Banned, you say? Censored?" he roared. "Where, for f***'s sake? Bulgaria? Why? OK, leave 'em to me. I'll deal with it. Banned in Lithuania also? I see. Why banned though? The lyrics? They can't take what? Too many Americanisms? But these guys are Russians! You can't be serious?"

"What are they doing now? The band? Yes, where are they? We can't find them! Nobody can find them!"

It was 11am. Leo had slept badly. There had been the sounds of gunfire in the street as drug gangs wrestled for ownership of the local turf. But right now it was finally quiet. The children were at school. He paced to the window and looked at the desolation outside.

A couple of cars had been torched by the gangs. There was litter everywhere. An overturned trash can had rolled into the middle of the street. Two kids were plotting at the side of the road, sitting on the kerb. One was gesticulating wildly. A single flower was peeping through a crack in the sidewalk.

Why am I here? he wondered. And now his mind drifted back to earlier days.

The first few months in America had been terrible. From the shelter, to the street, to the squat, and then back again. Hardly anything to eat. Memories of harsh stone walls, sleepless nights, cold iron bedsteads, children crying, anxious looks from Maya. Rats and cockroaches. Grim, dangerous faces, parading past their room. Human beings who had seen too much, who smelled, who would smile grimly as they pilfered from you. Days spent in seedy cafes or chilly parking lots, or crowded, yet lonely cafes, as yet another possible place to live was researched on the phone.

Yet at that time the new world had still amazed him with its boundless possibilities. Here one only had to work hard, build things up logically, and there were rich veins of gold to mine. He noticed how his children tensed and brightened up as they faced and attacked the crazy, high octane rhythm of life here, how they walked and talked more confidently, even in the battle-torn streets of East New York, Brooklyn.

He had come to this country for the music, and it was everywhere, gushing out of the supermarket walls, the stores, the restaurants and cafes, even from buskers in the street. And yet he could not possess it yet. He wanted to play this music and make it his own, but the time was not

yet right. He was too deep in the pit of namelessness, the chasm of not-knowing and non-being. For the family had become non-people here in a way that had been impossible in Russia. Back there there was always a certain trace of human dignity, some understanding glance, perhaps one kind soul who would reach across the abyss of suffering to offer a little solace and friendly warmth, a few helpful words, something to hold on to, a glimpse, a hope, a dream for a better life.

But here in America you could become lost forever. You could end up even lower than a rat or a fly. Perhaps worse because these helpless, pathetic beings around him also had no future, and thus would not or could not help. In this terrible way, the family were now beginning to falter, to question themselves, to actually forget who they were, or why they had come here. Right now they hardly even remembered that they had originally been good people.

What tormented Leo was how they, his children were beginning to laugh sarcastically, and then to make bitter little comments every so often. This had almost broken his heart. There were snide little expressions and vengeful, caustic remarks against each other. Leo knew that none of these spiteful things would ever have been said at home back in Russia.

When finally, by a miracle, they did rent a loft at a rock bottom price, the kids set it alight one day when he and Maya had been out. All was lost, including their precious musical instruments and even their passports. At this point there was no easy way home to Russia. They were here in America for the long haul.

By now I had rented an office in Soho. It was important that I invest enough to start seeing some payback. Downstairs from the office was a large, very exclusive cafe.

One day I was just entering the lobby of the building when I heard the sound of a live band playing. The cafe was packed. I halted, just long enough to recognise that it was my Russian friends.

I could see that filming was going on also. There were a lot of very smartly dressed people lounging at the bar, or sitting at tables.

The band had reached a crescendo, but then they settled down into a long slow groove.

Leo was talking to the audience. I was too far away to make out the exact words, but I understood that he was talking about the drumming of Serge, and making some connection with India. And now an Indian priest had entered the stage area, and he was saying something to the people also.

The small crowd appeared to be very interested, and suddenly they all clapped and cheered. The Indian priest talked some more, and held up many kinds of hand drums as if to explain something.

Then the audience laughed, and applauded once more. Finally the priest lead Serge and Irene, who both wore portable hand drums, all the way off the stage, and into the street, and some of the audience followed them. The rest of the band were quiet. Very curious, I muscled through the crowd and made it to the stage where Leo was wiping the sweat off his face with a towel. He gave me a long satisfied look as he recognised me.

“So what’s the game now?” I asked. “What the hell is going on? Where have they gone? Are they coming back?”

“To the temple,” he said. “It was Irene’s doing, believe it or not. She has made friends with one of the Hindu priests there. Probably it was his idea,” he barked, taking a swig from a small bottle of mineral water.

“It looks pretty crazy to me,” I said.

“I don’t expect many people will understand it,” he admitted. “But personally I am not in the least surprised. In fact I predicted this before it ever happened.”

“So what is coming next?” I asked.

“I suggest you return to your world of straight lines and little boxes,” he said in a weary manner. “I have tried to make you aware, Max. But I think you are too much the British gentleman to really get it. Go back to your toy empire. Everything is just fine. Let Serge and Irene be the way they want, OK?”

“The way they want, or the way those goddamn priests want?” I asked indignantly, placing one hand on my hip defiantly.

“Nobody is forcing them to do anything against their will,” Leo announced wearily. “Let them be free, OK? And now excuse me, but we are starting our next set.”

As I looked up I saw Irene and Serge arriving back into the stage area. Each were wearing a necklace made of flowers. I stepped down and the band began.

Fairly confused, I headed upstairs to my office to get on with some paperwork.

One time I returned to the club after visiting the Russians to find Rosa sweeping up. As I took off my coat I saw tears on her cheeks.

“What’s wrong, love?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, and continued her work. But there was tragedy written all over her face. Eventually I entreated her to talk.

“Big Joe was here,” she mumbled... “and he... and he almost raped me.”

“What?” I shouted. “Where? How? Oh no! Are you OK?”

“Yes,” she coughed, but I could see that she was not.

“Stop working,” I said. “Lie down. I’m phoning the police.”

“No, Senor?” she begged. “No, please... he will kill me. I know he will. And do not tell my husband? They will kill each other! Do not tell? Please?” And she wept more.

But my face blackened with rage. Big Joe had become my friend, and I had trusted him. And now I was ready to kill him.

“Rosa, go home and rest,” I told her. “He won’t get away with this.” She thanked me tearfully and slipped out.

I felt sickened, disgusted and full of hatred. But I knew I would get even with him.

A few days passed and then one day Big Joe walked back inside the club. I could not believe he had the nerve to do that. As he asked for a drink, I quietly phoned the police and asked them to come and get him. By now I understood I was dealing with a child, but a dangerous one.

He blubbered like a baby as they were putting the handcuffs on him.

“I didn’t mean nothing,” he gasped. “What are you doing? It was just a bit of fun? She lead me on! It’s not what you think!”

“Tell that to your attorney,” the smaller of the two cops said. “And he’d better be a good one. It’s ten years for sexual assault in this city.”

I was completely altered by this experience. I didn’t just blame Big Joe. The thing began to spread. I started to blame all of America too. It was obvious that I had arrived into a nightmare of a town, violent, corrupt and without any soul. It wasn’t just about Big Joe any more. He was just one of millions, I reckoned. At this point I began to harden up. How could anyone trust America?

And now, for the first time, I even bore a grudge against capitalism itself. The stress was creating food

allergies, and many times the skin of my arms and legs broke out with red, dry areas that kept me from sleeping properly.

I learned to walk blocks with a snarl, or with the classic, New York *fish mouth*. The stress and madness had built up too far. And at this stage I was seeing this city as it truly was, a town where everything was for sale, where the immigrant was perpetually trodden down under giant wheels of steel, and where all are lying when they talk.

One morning I'd had enough and headed out to get some air. I made my way north along Ludlow Street, then west along Houston. Something was broken inside me. It was time to think, and hard. I reminded myself that I came here to this city for the music. But now that Rosa had been almost raped, everything looked rotten.

"Bastards," I raved, kicking a mound of trash into the wall. And with this my mind opened up into a new angle. Up till today I had stayed out of politics, but my rage had beaten down new doors.

The Americans were the trouble-makers of the world, not the Arabs, I was now learning. Various professors had been heard to talk this way, but I had never accepted this till today. Right now I had to get to the library and find out a few facts for myself.

Once there, I noticed a tired looking man wearing a Levi jacket, leafing through books at a table. His slightly long brown hair was dishevelled, and he had a small child beside him. The child was waving a toy dog around and talking loudly, too loud for a library. When I saw that the book he was reading was about various illegal invasions the US had made, I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned swiftly with a grimace.

"It's OK," I said. "But I have a question about what you're reading." I was about to explain when the library attendant came up, scowling, and faced him aggressively.

“Mister, you have to leave. The child is disturbing the other members of the public,” she said. With a suppressed curse, he leapt to his feet, dragging his daughter off. I followed.

Once outside on the sidewalk everyone relaxed. We got to talking, and he soon understood I was looking for information on the subject of how America was treating other countries. He laughed grimly at this.

“Yes, the whole world is waking up to that just now,” he muttered. “Funny when you think how long it’s been going on for.”

We ended up in a diner. I ordered soup and toast. He took a deep breath.

“You must be the hundredth person I’ve talked to about this situation so far this week,” he commented. “It’s because a certain limit has been reached. We’re at breaking point now. Something is about to crack very soon.” There was a pause. I looked at him expectantly.

“So you want a brief rundown on what’s been going on?” he asked.

“Yes I do,” I said. “By the way, my name’s Max,” I told him.

“I’m Gray Walker,” he replied. “And my daughter’s name is Bunny.”

She was yelling out of the window, and now he shouted at her to quiet down. She looked scared, and so he ruffled her hair affectionately.

“It’s quite a story,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“I guess so,” I said.

“The earth is heating up,” he began. “We are destroying the planet by burning too much carbon fuel, gasoline and so on. There’s not much time left. I’ve been protesting about it this week, stopping cars in the street. We have a group that is active everywhere.” I digested this for a moment.

“That’s just the start of it,” he continued, with a wry grin. “Then there is the political side and the problem of exploitation. Capitalism is now out of control. My country, this home that I love, where you and me sit right now, my America, is the sick man of the world today.” He slapped his hand down on the table in frustration. “We are the number one offender,” he spat, shooting me a nervous, angry look.

A few customers turned their heads, then resumed eating and reading newspapers.

“Is it OK to talk in a cafe about this?” I questioned. “I’m not worried so much about police. More about getting dirty looks, that’s all.”

“No, that’s the crazy thing,” he muttered. “It’s the one, truly great thing about this place. Our laws make it such that we can say what we like. But that doesn’t help any of the millions of people we maim and kill in the many wars we create.

“You want the details? OK, here goes. I’ll do my best.” And he launched into a blistering critique of his country.

Over the years I had heard bits and pieces about the countries that the US had invaded. But I had not prepared myself enough for the shock I now received. It appeared that the US had invaded countless countries, perhaps as many as seventy-five since World War Two, and also they had attempted to change seventy-two regimes, routinely hiring terror gangs to do this.

Fascinated and disturbed, I continued to listen, learning new facts, getting to the root of it all. Gray described all the details of how, in history, America had originally been the site of one giant sugar growing operation, using slave labour. Then they had fought an entire war to protect their right to use slaves, but lost. And how that around this time indigenous races were being routinely decimated.

“But I think we’re nice people, Daddy?” Bunny blurted suddenly, playing with her toy puppy neurotically as she climbed on his lap.

He quickly consoled her, stroking her cheek and assuring her that most Americans were quite alright.

But I leaned back, stunned by the entire scenario. And it was not even over, Gray told me. There were many more details of further invasions, more regime changes. And finally I comprehended that there existed a master plan for America to take over the entire world. A ring of US military bases had already begun to encircle Russia and China.

And then I asked him why so little of this featured in our regular media. Where were the newspaper articles to protest it all? Where were the films and documentaries? What was wrong with our editors and journalists? Who were they truly serving? Not the general public, that was for sure.

“Well that’s the big question,” Gray answered. “You are right to ask that. Wasn’t this supposed to be the land of the free?” He laughed savagely. “Yet no-one really wants to know,” he said. “They are lost in a world of delusion,” he continued sadly. “Poor Americans. Poor us. Most people here have no idea what is going on outside our country.

“This menace is slowly but surely sweeping around the planet,” he added. “All in the name of freedom. But what is that? Freedom to invade? Freedom to kill?”

I was brought to my senses by a voice booming in my ear.

“Who do we have here? Not Gray Walker? And with a new buddy?” The voice was patronising. I turned round to see a sunburned cowboy on my left. He smashed down a black leather jacket onto a seat, then crashed his body into our booth, uninvited.

“Jeez, I’m spent,” he moaned. “What are you guys up to?” He stared at me closely, then sneered. “Is he indoctrinating you with his bull****?” he asked me.

“Give me a break,” Zak,” barked Gray.

“No I won’t,” Virgil Zak thundered. “You hate America. Why are you here? You’re just one more bleeding heart lefty. If you think I’m impressed by those articles you write, or that so-called TV station you imagine you run, well I’m not, OK? It’s just more libertarian garbage - everyone knows it.” He scanned our faces for a reaction, seething with indignation.

“Hey, you need guys like me to put you straight,” he shouted. “Give me a break? You give me a break. You’re lucky I’m even here sitting and talking with you. Where’s the waitress? Wait, I’m not through yet.”

He had seen me shifting uncomfortably in my seat, preparing my exit. Catching my eye he slammed one fist down on the table.

“Now here’s the real picture. Forget about what this idiot said,” he told me.

“The commies are out to get us. It all started when...”

“My pills, please?” Big Joe asked. The pharmacy girl disappeared into the back of the store to look for them. Big Joe sighed and crashed down on to a convenient bench near the wall.

He had checked out of jail the previous morning. His brother, who lived in Brooklyn, near the elevated subway tracks, had offered him a sofa to sleep on, just until Big Joe could find a way to put his life together. Jail had been rough. He had been attacked not once but twice, and the second time his knee had been hurt quite badly. The doctor in jail had put him on anti-depressants finally, after an orderly had reported seeing Big Joe standing with his face to the wall, not moving, for hours and hours.

Today, the sun was shining, but none of that sun could brighten this man's world. He knew he had no future any more. He understood now that he had tried a stupid thing with that girl, Rosa. All he had done was to take her in her arms and kiss her breasts. But then all hell had broken out.

“Sir, your pills?” Big Joe was too much in a dream to hear.

“Sir, your pills?”

SERGE ON THE STREET

“You love America, don’t you,” I sneered. Leo turned and stared, unable to reply.

“Bull****,” he replied, making a lunge at me.

“Only joking,” I yelped, dodging backwards. We laughed and relaxed.

It was the following week. We had met up in Brooklyn and were standing on the sidewalk under the elevated section of the subway.

He became serious.

“Looks like I may be homeless for a while,” he said softly, eyes fixed on some distant point. I was a little shocked by this unexpected reply.

“But I thought that was what you wanted,” I countered. “You have told me so many times that you longed to be living on the street.” And then I laughed savagely, feeling I had won a point. He made no reply, but merely turned away.

I stared down the avenue, into the distance, searching for some kind of poetry to soften this pain and confusion. Contrary to Leo, I wanted to believe in America right now.

It was an ordinary Brooklyn avenue, with plenty of cars snarling across our intersection. Then kids were crossing at the stop light when they should not. All around us, hundreds of shops were selling all kinds of things, fruit, albums, hardware, then discount places, dollar stores, hairdressers, the butchers, the Chinese take-away, and so many more.

The subway tracks were over our heads. I craned my neck upwards to stare at the rusty, iron immensity of it all. There was nothing like this in England that I could remember. But something about this overhead subway line

satisfied my soul. However I could not define exactly what. It was so childish, perhaps, that was it. Just like a child's construction kit. Also there was a satisfying sense of getting the job done.

These huge rusty metal girders were exciting my imagination. I closed my eyes and now I was suddenly swept a hundred years back in time, viewing a team of men who were creating that very first railway, working nonstop, building the city, and I felt the power and the glory of that moment.

But soon I was rudely knocked out of the reverie. Leo had become rageful.

“This is not a country! They are clowns here,” he swore, and then began to dance and stagger around the sidewalk, complaining about America, kicking at the dust, bitching and cursing, so intent was he to get the message through to me that he did not need any of this place. It was all a mad theatre, nothing but facade, he raved, just some cheap advertising ploy, some feeble effort to construct reality or sanity in a new world where such things could never begin to exist, he added with a sneer, because everything reasonable, sane or ethical had already been sold down the river hundreds of years before.

But without knowing why, at this moment I felt fresh and rejuvenated, even pleased. The sun flashed and tickled my face, strobing down through the elevated tracks as a new train hurtled across and above our heads, roaring its gospel message for the thousandth time.

Now I screwed up my eyes, searching out the distance to the horizon, that point where sky met earth. But it was just a purple and grey haze, a little unreal, much like the distant countries that he and I had come from, these places that seemed like dreams now, and perhaps no longer even existed for us.

Leo was confusing me. I muttered something about how the world was hard today, and offered him a cigarette.

One thing I knew for sure was that if Leo, a guy who worked so hard, was going down, then it would probably be my turn next. This unsettled me, and my entire dream of the new world also.

Being a new immigrant, I was searching for a particular America to recognise as mine, to view as my home, and right now the distant skyline represented something important in this way. All of the lines of perspective, linking avenue, train and horizon, were talking to me, telling me that there were no limits for people like myself who arrived here in this city, and that these lines pointed to the roads that would lead me on forever across America, and that I must surely walk them as soon as I was ready.

If there was anything sacred in this nation, it was that we should all keep moving onwards, I perceived. If you ever stopped, you were dead.

As I stared further my vision blurred slightly, and the distant figures and cars became like something on an artist's experimental canvas. I resolved to keep moving, head for that horizon, where I felt sure something great was waiting.

The New York city skyline was saying something legendary and heroic. I drank it all in.

Most of all I knew that the horizon talked to me of something to do with music. But it meant something else too, namely the act of making peace with myself, and escaping the mundane, pitiful rat-race I had become such a victim of. Perhaps I would soon be travelling, I argued, maybe meeting someone very important, in a distant place.

Then I wondered how long it would take me to get there.

And now my eyes trailed over the immensity of the avenue, logging and recording every detail, the pickup trucks, the bored cops ganging together in clusters at the

stoplights, the jabbering house-wives bargaining for mangos, all in colourful headscarves and flounced skirts.

The cumulus clouds danced and curtseyed in the sky above the elevated train, which had paused mysteriously above our heads, passengers clustered like monkeys, squeezed tight into car after car.

Leo and I had stopped talking for a moment, content to stand and smoke in the cool breeze. We were too fascinated by all the little goings-on around us, the junction of road and rail, sky and land, rich and poor, sane and mad, the tapestry of a vacant Brooklyn afternoon, although I did not know if he was seeing what I was seeing within the rubric of activity stretching out before our eyes.

A slight wind had begun, chasing the twin aromas of curry and vanilla coffee from tenement to parking lot.

At this moment everything was timeless. This Brooklyn avenue had become a theatre. A multitude of tiny figures were moving in and out of my view, crossing block upon block, all the way into the distance. The activity was satisfying.

Who could tell whether Leo and I would ever be accepted by America, since I knew we were outsiders, and even proud to be as such? For me, it was obvious that I had been this way all my life, continually scorning anything regular or average.

All this while, random walkers were passing with vacant, casual faces. First, a young Japanese girl on headphones, wearing a silver tracksuit and eating an apple. Next, an ancient black man toting his walking stick, yammering to himself in plaintive tones, making a string of complaints to nobody in particular.

And then the dust. Who knew where it came from? But for a few confusing seconds it rose on that cool afternoon wind, and strangely, we saw feathers in it. Then it was gone.

The shimmering horizon beckoned. There was a long, brooding silence.

Later, as we strolled north along the avenue, I glanced to my right, and immediately noticed something I did not want to see.

“Oh no,” I groaned. “It’s Zak’s pizza place. We don’t need this. Don’t look inside as we pass?” But as we attempted to move on fast, with heads down, Zak happened to be outside, and he roared a huge sarcastic greeting.

“Hi guys! Long time no see! It’s Max!” At that I knew I was trapped. Reluctantly I slowed down and faked a smile of surprise.

Virgil Zak was slouched at an ancient wooden table outside in the sun. He was sweating and his red bulldog cheeks were almost scarlet.

“I knew you would visit me,” he shouted triumphantly. “Hungry? Grab a pizza! First slice is on me. Compliments of the owner. So have a chair. You look exhausted.” Hardly knowing what else to do we sat down. He brought out pizza slices just as two police cars roared past, sirens screaming.

And then he began to talk.

“I’m telling you, the commies are out to get us,” he shouted. “I know you have been listening to that fool Gray Walker, haven’t you? Well don’t! Trust me, I know what I’m talking about.” I smiled in a sickly way, burying my face in the pizza which was too dry.

Now Zak was on fire, and could not be switched off.

“The immigrants are killing this country,” he raved. “The Chinese are the worst,” he warned. “I don’t trust them an inch.”

“Plus, I don’t want any lousy blacks hanging around my pizza place,” he threatened. “They will rob you just as

look at you,” he growled as Leo and I chewed on, trying not to hear.

Suddenly another figure appeared. I could not believe my eyes. It was Big Joe, limping slowly towards us. For a second we were paralysed.

Then Zak broke the silence.

“OK Joe,” Zak snarled. “Didn’t I tell you to stay away? You’re not eating here. Go some place else or I call the cops. We all know what you did and where you’ve been.”

But Big Joe just stood there, swaying gently on his feet.

“I’m hungry and there’s nothing wrong with me,” he said. “I want to buy a slice of pizza. Can I do that? Then I’ll be gone, OK?”

Zak froze.

“I mean it,” the owner continued in a low, deadly tone. “D’you think I’m playing around? Get out while you can. I’m warning you. You’re a convicted criminal. I ain’t having no n***** rapists here.” But Big Joe didn’t move an inch.

“I was convicted of sexual assault, not rape,” he said evenly. “I’ve done my time, and said sorry. But I don’t see why I have to stand here right now and take no s*** from you, asshole. Give me my slice and hurry up, then I’ll be on my way.”

Now everything happened very fast. Before I knew it Zak had lashed out at Big Joe, who stepped back in alarm. A fraction of a second later Leo had reached down and all in one movement ripped off a leg of the ancient wooden table, and then had slammed it down one side of Zak’s head with a sickening thud.

“Get out of here, for christ’s sake,” I shouted to Big Joe. But he was loping off already. I grabbed Leo’s arm and hustled him away fast. Zak was lying cold under what was left of the table. A few passersby gaped, some in

horror, others in amused fascination. Leo and I began to run, and never stopped till we'd run seven or eight blocks. Then we ducked into a side street, and soon shook off anyone who might be following.

“What the hell did you do that for?” I demanded, as we sat down on a low wall, totally spent.

“He had it coming,” Leo said resignedly. “He should not have talked to a black man like that. I watched him lash out and then I saw red. Zak called him a lousy n*****. You heard that, right?” He smashed his fist down on the wall.

“Yeah, I heard it,” I agreed. “But you really surprised me with that little show,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “Hey, Big Joe almost raped my daily help, you know?”

“He did his time,” Leo repeated, in an even tone. “He said he was sorry. What more do you want me to say? I did what I had to do.”

Not knowing how to reply, I sat and smoked, deep in thought.

After that I stayed well clear of Zak and his pizza house. Meanwhile my club began to prosper, but the laundromat was overcome with problems. Many of the machines no longer worked, and there were a few rats living in a hole in the wall. I was losing customers fast. My debts were becoming enormous.

At a certain point I was amazed to see a few punk musicians jamming in there, but only with guitars, no amplifiers. So part of my dream had come true.

Meanwhile Leo had disappeared totally. Nobody had seen him at all for months.

Rosa finally stopped working for me after yet another man assaulted her. But this time her husband found out, and gave him such a beating he was never seen again. I pleaded with Rosa to stay but she had had enough.

It was 5pm. A storm was raging over New York city. Commuters huddled up under raincoats and umbrellas at bus stops and train station entrances. Many flights had been cancelled as on-duty pilots grimly taxied out onto their runways. An enormous crane roared into action on a mid-town site in Manhattan. The operator in his cab, hundreds of feet above the ground, was being relentlessly buffeted by high winds. Waves pounded the docks at the Seaport as navvies leapt into action, loading and unloading giant containers from the massive ships, berthed uneasily a few metres away.

Rain battered the sidewalks of the Lower East Side as a hunched figure crashed through the door of my club. It was Gray Walker, drunk once again, and yet thirsty for more. Reluctantly I served him at the bar. He grimaced at me expectantly. I knew he was about to launch into a political assault.

“I’m glad your daughter doesn’t have to see her father in this state,” I complained.

He was too gone to pay attention. Then, getting more irritated by the second, I stared harder at the miserable figure hunched in front of me.

“I have Russians obsessing about Shiva all year, in my club,” I began. “Now I have you, raging about politics. What am I to do? Your complaints are getting hard to take. I have other things to worry about. Did you know they beat me up? It’s one thing after another. Mainly the bloody rent is way too high here,” I grumbled.

At this Gray sprang onto this point with a cry of delight.

“Rent, rent,” he chanted. “You see what I mean? It’s all about money and debt, isn’t it?”

“I don’t need yet another person telling me that,” I complained. “We know it all by now. The point is to survive. I agree that life costs money.”

But now there was no stopping him. He rambled on, giving me the entire history of it all. He could not take any more invasions, he repeated. He felt hated merely to be an American, it appeared.

“You are certainly boring,” I announced. “But I don’t dislike you, not yet at least.” There was a malignant pause.

“Have another beer?” I offered, wearily.

But at this stage he was out of control. His hatred of America was pouring out. Passersby gave cold looks, and quickly moved out of sight. Eventually with a drunken goodbye that sounded more like a curse, Gray stumbled off into the night. It was a giant relief to see him go.

I knew I had to head out, and find some bright lights. I felt beaten up, and nauseous from Gray’s ravings. Quickly locking up the club I headed for the subway and got on a train in the direction of 42nd street.

Just at that moment Leo was arriving at Times Square, on the way to an appointment. The rain had stopped and the storm calmed. As he strolled he stared in amazement at the disjointed combination of enormous videos which continually exploded into colour, high on the walls above the crowds, the ticker tape news, then, higher and higher, the full magnitude of those ominous dark skyscrapers, so close to the clouds scudding under the moon, and then, down below again, the cavalcade of Americans and tourists, all in different styles and fashions, a cowboy here, a priest there, a tour group of Chinese, some bikers cruising slowly to the stoplight, an old lady with a supermarket trolley piled high with cans and bottles, then all the gleaming cars inching and growling their way through town, average sedans, rugged SUVs, luxury limousines and more.

He walked on, rubbing elbows with lunatics, cops and VIPs, delicately navigating past high class, geriatric

divas in sequined gowns stepping delicately from stop light to stop light, then African and Arab families in their embossed oriental robes, mingling with construction workers, and here and there a straggle of gesticulating, drunken college boys playing games randomly on the sidewalk, ignoring the stony-faced doormen clad in their scarlet livery who frowned from forecourts of expensive hotels on every side.

Bright lights exploded into his eyes, creating a symphony of dazzle and nonsense.

Part of him was longing to swim in this Broadway fantasy world, to be totally immersed forever, and even become one of these strange beings, a magician who can play tricks with reality the way many Americans do, all smoke and mirrors, double-talk and triple-think. And yet another part, the wise-old-fox part, deep inside him, knew that something was desperately wrong, that all this was nothing but deception, a cheap fake, an assault on the senses, created by strange, ungodly men in high, distant towers, cold soulless creatures who spent their entire lifetime calculating how to hoodwink the masses and thus extract yet more precious dollars from them, before leaving their victims feeling cheated yet begging for more.

Leo's soul was being tortured by all this, and he wondered if it would be torn in two. He obsessed about Serge, and all his recent problems. How would Serge grow up within such an ocean of treachery, he wondered? Would he become a smooth, fast talking American, capable of returning to Russia wealthy and confident, the complete success, a talented drummer at the top of his game? Or would his son simply drown in the river of manipulation that existed here? And what about Irene and Kira and the rest?

He knew that his children had originally been innocent and pure in the natural way that Russians are. But America was a casino, a poker game, and now he had to

face the fact that he had gambled with their souls. He wondered if they would thank him for this, many years in the future, or not?

When I finally clambered up the steps into Times Square I felt anything but OK. There were too many problems on my mind.

My debts were getting out of control. The laundromat had become a sick joke, with many machines now out of action.

On top of this I was waking up about politics fast.

The meeting with the drunken Gray Walker had pushed me to the edge. While listening to his tirade all about the latest American invasions I had ended up as drunk as him, and equally rageful also.

But right now, due to the combination of alcohol and tiredness I was starting to see things which were not there. Lights flashed in front of my eyes. The many advertisements and video screens looked like giant electronic toys, high up in the sky, rotating and vibrating, crazing the focus, yet belching out every colour of the rainbow.

When I inadvertently stumbled into a cop he roared at me and pushed my chest violently sideways. Instantly losing all attempt to balance I crashed downwards, and before I knew it my head hit the ground. Groggily I clambered to my feet and now more hallucinations were triggered. Rubbing my eyes I stumbled off down the street.

And then I saw Leo. This was the last thing I expected. The odds against meeting a friend by chance in all of New York are microscopically small. And yet it was him, outside a theatre, talking to another guy.

We laughed at the sight of each other. Instantly I could tell something had changed with him. He had gone

through some hard times, it appeared. Now he punched my fist delightedly.

“It is the British madman,” he roared.

“Thank you,” I replied. “You’ve changed.” He looked older, and gave the impression to be fighting off the entire world. His clothes were very worn.

Then I saw a hint of gold teeth, and recognised the dark face of the man standing next to him. Leo noticed my surprise.

“That’s right, he grinned. “This is Ram. I rescued him. He’s one of us now.”

And immediately I knew it was true, and I told Ram I felt bad that I had not recognised him in the deserted subway station on that day. Ram spluttered mischievously, and his face lit up with a huge smile.

“What happened?” I asked him.

“Many things changed,” Ram said. “I followed the wrong path, and it took me to a place of darkness. All of that I now regret. But Leo here saved me.” His face lit up with pleasure and gratitude as he tapped Leo’s arm approvingly.

“Please know that I am still a priest, by the way?” he assured me.

Another smile and flash of gold.

“But you don’t look Indian?” I commented.

“No, I am not,” he replied. “I am American, born right here,” Ram admitted. “Like you two, I rebelled. I saw how everything was becoming too materialistic. It was obvious to me that it would all crash very soon,” he added grimly.

“Well done,” I said. “But it must have been terrible when you were homeless, and living at that deserted station?”

“Yes and no,” Ram said. “It was a suffering, and certainly I was wrong in my actions at that time, but I want you to know something important.”

Now he lowered his head, and fixed me with a stare from those deepset, dark eyes.

“The streets are where all the love is,” he hissed dramatically. “There is very little of that kind of love left in the world today. We have to search in the streets to find it.” Here Leo nodded emphatically.

“And eventually of course I found Leo, and he gave me shelter,” he added. “Because even I tire of the street sometimes.” He laughed in an apologetic way.

“I invited Ram into our band,” Leo said, putting an arm around him affectionately. “He plays guitar. The gigs are going better than ever. No shortage of work. We’re doing a live concert on TV next week.” For a second I was confused.

“But where are you living?” I asked.

“We crash here and there. It’s no big deal,” Leo said.

With an enormous laugh he gazed up at the sky triumphantly, then kicked a beer can into the gutter.

“What about you, Max?” he demanded. This sudden question unnerved me. Leo always had that tough, Viking style, with the fierce look and the glaring eyes. I looked down miserably.

“I have debts,” I mumbled. “And some of my washing machines are on their last legs. The usual problems.”

Leo stared, uncomprehending.

“Have I heard this once before?” he queried.

“I have debts,” I repeated. “Bad ones. And that man is still watching my front door at night. You should come and play the club again. Why not? How are the family, by the way? Are they OK?”

At this moment the subway train beneath our feet gave vent to an enormous roar which shook the entire street. Steam poured from the vents right in front of us. Something about these two men had unsettled me. Then the

dream flashed back into my mind, the endless loop, the train to nowhere, and it began to trigger a paranoid flashback.

I began to tell Leo about my money problems, describing how many of my washing machines were broken, but he soon turned away, and talked to Ram, totally impassive to my situation.

The sound of agonised metal brakes shrieked up through metal and concrete. The steam had partially enveloped us. I could hardly see them any more.

Then they were waving goodbye.

“Please bring your band to play my club?” I shouted. “I have debts!” But they had vanished into the steam. I turned and walked back the way I had come.

THE AMUSEMENT PARK

Time moved on. I started to hear disturbing news about the Russian family. But every time I talked to someone who knew them, each story contradicted the previous one. Leo had moved out of the apartment, one man had heard. Then another friend thought that Maya had moved out, with the kids. By this time I knew something bad had happened to the family. Plus, it was obvious that none of this was good for the music. A band was like a business, it needed stability. I knew this for sure. Some would even have claimed that a band is like an army, totally reliant on stability and also discipline.

Then in the end I heard that Maya had moved to Philadelphia with the kids, and that Serge had fallen in with bad company, missing school and starting to take drugs, and occasionally they were the harder kind. It was all very worrying.

Yet the music always continued, in some shape or form.

Those outside the music business rarely understand that a band can be fighting with poverty, yet breaking through to success in music, all at the same time, and that this fact was particularly true in America, where many things are often concealed. Right now the Russian family were being stretched in all directions, with the pressure constantly rising.

Later on I heard that they had all returned to New York city, and also that Serge was now living on the street.

Soon after this Big Joe wandered into my club one evening. It was hot, so we sat outside on the sidewalk. Rosa was back, and when she came out she took one look at him, and urgently made signs that she wanted to talk privately.

“I’m not serving him, after what he did to me,” she whispered hoarsely. “You can get your own drinks.” I understood. I wasn’t keen on Big Joe either by now. Even still, I brought out a beer for him, figuring that it was as Leo had said, that he’d served his time, and was sorry.

Then Serge arrived and sat down close by. I was amazed to see him after such a long time. He gave me a long, hard, sad look. His clothes were dirty and dishevelled.

“We’ve been really worried about you,” I said. “Are you still sleeping rough?”

“Sometimes,” he said. He was sucking on a cigarette as he spoke. Big Joe took a look at his arm.

“Why you have to do all that?” he declared dramatically, pointing at needle marks. “If you could have been up against some of those junkie maniacs, like I was, in jail, you’d think twice about becoming one.”

“I do think twice,” Serge said. “I think thousands of times.”

“Stop thinking,” I said. “Stop everything. And what’s this talk of Shiva and some crazy wheel of light I’ve heard about?” He grinned cleverly.

“So you’ve been hearing stuff too?” He lounged back in his chair luxuriously.

“Everyone’s talking about you,” I pointed out. “How can I not hear it?”

“I don’t know what it is exactly,” said Serge. “But it gives me strength to go on. You gotta have something, don’t you think? Or someone? Otherwise the city eats you alive. Well I have Shiva. That’s my thing.”

Big Joe goggled at him, then put hands over his eyes in despair. I was chewing over on Serge’s ideas, not sure if I liked the sound of them.

“Wherever I go I hear rhythms,” he continued. “The train sounds like thunder. It’s like the gods. Maybe Shiva. And I need that. I always want more. Give me more!” He made a joke out of it, banging the table with his fist.

“What is with this oddball Shiva stuff?” barked Big Joe, eyes wide with disbelief. “Get a grip, kid. Don’t you understand you’re drowning?”

But Serge began to talk, in a voice that sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away. It was all stuff about the Indian priests and their gods. But he didn’t get far with his story before he was interrupted.

“Goddamnit,” broke in Big Joe with a roar of wrath. “That don’t give you the right to shoot yourself up like that, boy! Supposing Shiva is the creator and destroyer of worlds? That don’t mean you have to do it too! Think, boy! Your life depends on this!” Now he was really upset, huge face sweating as he bucked and thrashed in his seat. And he hadn’t even finished.

“I’m black,” he shouted. “Look at me! D’you think I don’t know about *mojo* and *hoochie koochie*, and *black cat bones* and all that stuff? What about the slaves and all their gods? Am I gonna drink myself to death because of all that? No I won’t! And my people were downtrodden. So I reckon I got reason to be depressed. I got reason to be homeless too. I got the allowance to do that. But I don’t!”

But then Serge began to answer his onslaught, and he talked more of gods and energy, and those sounds like thunder, and as I searched his face it seemed to me that he truly believed in everything that he was saying. And I could not tell if the face I was looking into was just the face of a lost young boy, or if there was something more, some uncanny light shining in his eyes, some belief that the world had gone wrong and was being destroyed, and that only he could save it with his music.

And then suddenly I felt very fatherly towards Serge, and cast my mind back to that terrible day in London, many decades before, when I had packed my bags and called a taxi, and walked out forever from my ex-wife and two baby daughters, never to see them again, or not for ten years at least. And how I had done that because I knew

that music and only music was the path that I must follow. It had been heartbreaking, and the shock had almost killed me.

Right now it occurred to me that Serge was going through something very similar by breaking with his family, but I suspected that for him it was far worse. What to do?

Serge was still talking away, with Big Joe complaining every so often, and Rosa glancing out scornfully through the glass, while big trucks passed us by on the tarmac. Suddenly it all became too much. I knew I had to try to help Serge, at least a bit.

“Where are you crashing tonight?” I asked him.

“Nowhere,” he said. “I mean, everywhere. There’s no problem. I’ve got the whole city to choose from. Don’t worry about me.” He smiled bravely and shrugged.

“Please stay here?” I offered. “Just for one night? No drugs though. House rules. We can play music. And there’s food in the fridge?”

“OK,” he said. “Thanks, Max. But no lectures, OK? I’m a free bird, and happy that way. By the way,” he added, “I never ever steal, however strung out I get. I just want you to know that?” I nodded.

“No lectures,” I agreed. Big Joe started to say something, then shut up.

In the morning when I woke, Serge had disappeared. I was left with an empty, anxious feeling. Not liking his new style of life, I wished I could have done more. Late the previous night he had told me quite seriously that he was following his dream, and that he enjoyed living on the street, and that yes, he was suffering, but it was what he needed. He had also told me that he was a wanderer on the path of Shiva, and that he was doing this for the animals, and that the earth was now doomed because of factory farming.

Finally he had said that he knew that I could not agree with any of this, but that he loved me as a friend anyway, and that I should not look for him after he had gone, and also that I would understand more later on.

Boom, boom, boom. The rhythms were getting stronger every second.

Serge knew he had to seek shelter somewhere. The street was full of confusion, with cars raging on their klaxons and a guy shouting loudly a few yards away. Seeing the entrance to an alleyway he ducked round the corner, then squatted, leaning against the brick wall, breathing heavily.

He had been hearing these powerful rhythms in his head for a very long time now, but at last he knew what they meant.

Something was being born.

At this moment Serge began to chant a special Indian mantra. And then the rhythms started to talk to him. He closed his eyes with relief and tilted his head back.

The rhythms were turning into voices which were explaining things. They were telling him to be calm, to relax, and that he was safe. Also they were supportive, making him feel proud of himself. Much of his sense of self-worth had been destroyed by living on the streets. But now the rhythms were telling him that he had value, that he had a job to do and that it was a big one.

He was also being told that he was somebody very important. He was going to be truly famous, they said, and that he must never question the path he was on, however extreme the suffering became.

The following day he found another alley to meditate in, this time near the train lines.

And as more days passed, this lifestyle became a habit.

He loved to squat down in that favourite alley of his near the railway lines, and listen to the pounding and crashing of the trains, and then rap along with his eyes closed, dreaming of strange and wonderful visions of the future.

And as the booming thunder of the train wheels echoed and reverberated across the alleyway and through his mind, the sound was precious and magical, and it brought the family back to his heart, the family band, and the memories of all the gigs they had ever played, and all the fame and glory of it.

And now he believed that this non-stop drumming sound was the only thing left of his family, the final link with them, and that he must never stop playing ever, never stop loving the precious sound which had become his life, and the sole remaining reason for his existence.

At night it was easy to find a sheltered place in the alley, where he could escape the rain which pounded its ceaseless rhythms, and from there he would hear actual words within the roar of the raindrops, and then even songs, and voices which were constantly whispering his name, loving, gentle voices, talking and singing in perfect time and tune, and even in perfect harmony too.

Other nights he slept on the subway train itself. The crashing of the wheels lulled him to sleep. He slept in little bursts, five minutes here, ten minutes there. The friendly voices were always there. He was never alone.

He knew he was the one to do something big in music. His father had told him that, and the priests had believed it too. And why not?

One morning he visited the temple where the priests had blessed him, long before. But they soon became very severe with him after viewing his lanky frame and ragged clothes. One priest in particular took him aside and gave him a very serious talk.

“This is not the way of Shiva,” he said in a worried tone. “You must be more kind to yourself. Your body is a temple.

“Where are you living?” he demanded. “Where are your parents? Why are you in this condition?”

At that Serge told him everything, about the drugs, the homelessness and the continuing arguments with his family.

“You must stop with the drugs right now,” the priest said, gently but firmly. “You must go back to your parents and apologise. This is not the way of Shiva,” he repeated. “It may be true that we did bless you and tell you that you were carrying Shiva with you, but this is not the way things were supposed to happen. You must have a clean mind, body and soul.

“I will bless you again,” he said, more gently now. “And I wish you all the best, and I will pray for you. But you must change, immediately, right now. It may be your last chance. You are in great danger. Please understand this and follow what I say?”

And then he blessed him with incense and more prayers.

After that Serge returned to his wanderings. But it was not easy to change habits, or make this big transformation that the priest had demanded. Fairly soon he was drawn back into his bad old ways. Some kind of wild magic had seized his spirit and now he could believe anything, even things that were not possible.

Leo and Maya were arguing about Serge, standing in the kitchen of Maya’s apartment as she washed up sadly. It was early afternoon under a troubled sky.

“Why oh why?” she was sobbing. “I tried so hard to stop him. But you cannot get through to him any more. He does not listen. It’s just more talk of Hindu gods. But that

doesn't help. I only want my son back - that's all." She turned tearfully towards Leo.

"Do you understand how brave Serge is?" Leo asked.

"I know that," she replied. A little sparrow alighted on the window for a second, and then flew on.

"He is free," he continued. "He's found his path of suffering. Who are we to question that? Please don't blame yourself, or me, or the band, or the Hindus. He is doing this because deep down he knows that this is his path. I believe that his way is a sacred way, part of a long tradition of holy men from India. It merely looks different because we are in America."

At that she gazed at him with a mixture of pity and wonder. For the first time in her life, she realised that she would never ever fully understand him.

"I just want him home," she wept, and continued drying the dishes carefully.

"Listen, I have to go," Leo said.

"When will I see you again?" she asked. "Where will you be?"

"Don't worry," he told her. "I can look after myself."

Almost fully grown and adult by now, Serge knew that his time had arrived. It appeared to him that he actually ruled the world now. He sensed that he could control reality. He only had to look up at the clouds and command them to move, and then move they would, for sure. It was the same with the birds. He could make them fly where he wanted, and make them sing too. He understood that as he woke in the morning, in his alley, that the birds were singing just for him.

Serge had also learned that he could make people do what he wanted. He had become a high priest of magic. It was easy for him to create money on the sidewalk, or

make food appear from nothing at all. All he had to do was to stand there rapping and dancing. Sometimes he would give little talks to a small circle of admirers, all sitting on the grass in a circle around him, at Astor Place or somewhere similar.

Nearly all of his suffering had gone, too. He had been on the street for so long now that it had become second nature. He knew the ways of the city. He understood where to get things, like cigarettes, money, food and drugs, and occasional shelter for the night.

At one point he teamed up with a group of anti-capitalist demonstrators and walked the streets with them for hours. They caused chaos in the roads, and were finally hit by water cannons from the police, but escaped and ended up in a pub, all soaked, shouting and laughing, and drinking themselves senseless.

Some evenings he would jam music on the sidewalk and hold out the jar for money. A few friends would join him with hand-drums and a guitar, or they would walk the streets through the night, talking, laughing, drugging, smoking, drinking, but always talking about music, poking their nose round the door of some particular nightclub where the hippest band was playing, staying in the zone, feeling the pulse and the beating heart of this music city.

But occasionally it was not so easy. Sometimes things would suddenly turn bad, really bad, and he would go and beg at the door of one of the family one more time, but they would not let him in, because now he was too far gone, and they could see this in his eyes, and they knew what would happen if they did let him in, and so eventually they would shut the door. And if it was Maya's turn to do this, she would be weeping as she locked the door against him, but if it was Leo he would not actually cry, but his soul would be torn in two.

Serge had become a true wild child of the streets by now. Whenever this kind of rebuff occurred he would head

for the liquor store, and get smashed on vodka or gin, and then jam all night with his friends.

Many months passed in this way, and yet nothing changed. The family were agonised and paralysed by grief.

And now one bright morning there was a girl in front of him. He could not understand where she had come from. She was tall, pale and silent, and had long blonde hair, and Serge immediately knew that she was absolutely innocent and pure. He became fascinated by her.

They spent many afternoons talking in gentle voices, or walking or just lying on the grass together. Gradually she began to trust him. Eventually they spent a night together. In the morning, before he left her apartment, she pressed a hundred dollar note into his hand.

“Look after yourself,” she whispered. “Oh, look after yourself.”

Serge went back and wandered the streets for days. He was seeing ecstatic visions by now, diamonds and crucifixes, and all kinds of enchanted beings from fairy stories, right in front of his eyes. The city was awash with celebrities too. He believed he was meeting all kinds of famous pop stars, and great artists also. And wherever he went the streets were bright with colours, and electric with potential. It was a festival of unknown, strange and wonderful things, as a wild cavalcade of extraordinary, eccentric artists trailed after him, and danced him to sleep at night. Serge had become a poet, a rapper, a young prophet of homelessness, the voice of the streets.

And in this way, somehow, by a miracle, one morning Serge woke up changed and healed. He made his way quietly to Maya’s apartment. She answered the door and saw his shy smile, and modest, hopeful eyes and her heart suddenly warmed to him. He looked like an angel to her at that moment.

As they drank tea happily in the kitchen, he promised to stay clean and she offered him the chance to

stay. Over the next few days she watched him carefully, and she was amazed and delighted that he kept his word. Something or somebody had saved him. Nobody knew how or why it had happened exactly. But why should she look for reasons, she asked herself? Serge was back. That was the only thing that mattered.

For several weeks life was a dream. Serge would shower each morning and vacuum the carpet. He and his mother would tenderly prepare breakfast together. She called him her *solnyshkun* (sunshine) as they shared secret smiles over every detail of the cereal, toast and coffee. Then in motherly fashion she would have him do the laundry, and then brush his shoes, and perhaps after this they would shop for food close by, and make plans together, and maybe finally go for coffee in their favourite diner not far from the apartment.

Each passing day Serge relaxed more, and his eyes began to gleam again with that boyish sparkle she loved so much.

One morning Serge was practising the drums at my club. I had given him permission after witnessing his great talent for music. After his half hour session was over, Leo arrived, to pick him up, and bring him back to Maya's apartment.

I was just washing some dishes when I was astonished to hear the sound of a chanted mantra coming from the back room. I poked my head round the door. It was Leo and Serge, both sitting cross-legged on the floor, with eyes closed.

“What's all this now?” I demanded.

“Just something Serge learned from the priests,” Leo said nonchalantly.

“What kind of a thing?” I insisted.

“Looks like you and your chillun done gone crazy,” Big Joe muttered, shaking his head in despair. He had stopped by for a casual visit.

“Maybe not crazy,” I countered. “And anyway, who are you to judge? You want them worshipping at the *church of Hoochie Coo*, or *Rabbit paw mountain*?”

“I just want the kid to keep his head screwed on,” Big Joe mumbled, rolling his eyes and stumbling off again.

Very soon the family all learned that Serge was off the streets, and living with his mother. They began to visit regularly, and it was inevitable that fairly soon the band would be practising once more.

At this point Maya phoned the previous manager and he was instantly alert.

“You’re back on the road again?” he yapped. “The bad kid is back? Is he gonna be good now? All he has to do is hit those drums and shut up.”

She promised he was, and he would. The manager was in prime form, and was feeling proud of himself today.

“So I have something you guys are gonna love,” he gushed. “How would you all like to have your own amusement park?”

Maya hardly knew what to think. She tottered slightly.

“What do you mean?” she stammered.

“This is no lie. I have the contract right here,” he bragged. “There is a new amusement park being built in Yonkers. They look for a band and a theme also. I could swing the deal in your direction, if you want. It pays a whole bunch of cash. What do you say?”

Maya said she was ready.

“So be at my office at 9am tomorrow and we will thrash the details out,” he said, and put the phone down.

Several months later the gates opened. Leo and the family arrived in their tour van, parked, then walked inside. What Leo now saw made his jaw drop in amazement. Serge had been in charge of designing the theme and all the arrangements. And he had picked on Hinduism.

In amazement Leo scanned around the halls, cabins, rides and stalls of the funfair. They all had titles connected with the idea of being reborn.

The Big Wheel of Reincarnation. This one towered in the center. Then, after this, a mysterious opening entitled *the Crazy Pathway of the Soul.* Next, a tent beside it marked *Enlightenment Palace.*

Beyond that was a waterslide called *Eternal Bliss.* And then finally a rotor described as the *Pressure of Hell.*

“Serge?” roared Leo. “Was this you? Where are you, anyway?” Serge jumped down from one of the rides and walked up to him.

“It’s me,” he replied boldly. “I created all this. They asked me to design it, so I did. What do you think?” he asked delightedly.

“I don’t believe it,” Leo said. “You’re lying. This is too big. No child could have created this.”

“Well I helped anyway,” Serge argued. “There was a team, and I came up with quite a few suggestions.”

“I don’t like it,” Leo rapped. “But I will stay quiet for now. You are selling out! Do you understand? Foolish boy!” Serge stared at him, unable to understand.

But then Leo took a step back, with weariness written all over his long, Viking-like face.

“But don’t listen to me,” he said, more quietly now. “You are back from your eternal wanderings and that’s all I care about. Do your worst! I am going for a strong coffee.” But someone caught his arm and drew him up short.

“No you don’t,” said the manager with a cruel grin. “We have work, remember? You have a radio program to

do. The studio is right here, but it airs to the southern states. We're on in thirty minutes time."

The family looked at Leo in a worried way.

"Yes, of course, I understand," he said. "Let's go."

As they walked, the band were recognised by many of the vendors who walked up and down.

"Hey guys, it's Leo," shouted a beaming man from behind his stall. "*Reality Crackers* for sale! Have some free, sir? We love your music!" At this the kids jumped to get some packs. Next they heard shouts from other vendors.

"Nirvana hot dogs! Happy Guru onion rings! Dharma pretzels! Third Eye fries! Miracle burgers!"

There was the sound of Leo swearing under his breath in Russian as he marched along.

They drove along the freeway for twenty minutes, then pulled into the parking lot of a tall brown building. As they entered the lobby they were mobbed by reporters.

"Guys, guys, smile please?" a journalist yelled, amidst a storm of light bulbs popping wildly.

Then a chorus of excited reporters.

"I am Krishnan Singh from the Delhi Times. How is the new fairground going, please? Are all Hindu religions represented there?"

"Sir, Sir? Is it true that your son is off drugs and back touring with the band again?"

Now Maya and Irene were being surrounded by yet more journalists and pressmen.

"We love the new record," one voice shouted. "Are you still modelling, Irene? What do you think of the riot that has broken out in India regarding your new fairground? And now that the Shiva way is finally sweeping across America, is it true that you guys started all that?"

Then the manager broke in.

“Cool down guys, take it easy, let us through, will you? We are here to do our radio interview. The press conference is afterwards. OK? Fair is fair?”

Reluctantly they let the family into the elevator.

THE CONSPIRACY PROGRAM

At this moment dawn was breaking in India. From shore to shore the land was waking up. A saffron glow radiated across the sub-continent. Millions of farmers were tending their land, working with all kinds of ancient, artisan techniques. In the cities, women prepared simple platters of roti, dips and chutney, together with spiced potatoes or occasionally a paratha.

Animals were being lead to market. Millions of people were bathing themselves silently, or praying, or finding their way to work, by train, bus, car or even on foot.

In Bangalore, highly-strung software gurus were checking schedules, and setting up meetings in the major IT corporations. All over the vast nation tourists and hippies wove their way around a delicate yet remote spider's web of hotels, hostels and spiritual retreats.

In Varanasi, ancient holy sadhus smiled, blinked and prayed as they sat cross-legged watching the sun make its way over the horizon.

At the waterside a reverent crowd had gathered to watch the ritual burning of an important man, who had passed away a few days before. His body had then been transported many hundreds of miles to be cremated in great ceremony.

Outside the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, two young Brahmin priests were washing clothes in the river.

"Have you heard more from our brothers in the temple in New York?" Gopal asked Fariq.

"They are watching after the young American child, the one who is with Shiva," Fariq replied.

"Shall we pray for him? America is very hard for children," he added.

Gopal agreed and the two priests closed their eyes and chanted softly for a minute. Then they resumed their washing.

The elevator rose silently up to the sixtieth floor. Then the family entered a reception area. The lady behind the desk was delighted to see them.

“Ah, you are the Russian family band. Why, welcome!” she enthused. “It won’t be long,” she continued. “Bill is just finishing up. I believe he is coming into a commercial break just at this moment. What lovely kids! How cute! And I love your new record!”

She handed out sweets to all. They settled back into expensive armchairs. A man in brothel-creepers, drape jacket and a greasy black quiff introduced himself proudly.

“Hi there,” he drawled. “I am yours truly Elvis junior,” he told them. “An Elvis impersonator, in case you hadn’t guessed? They tell me I’ll be on air right after you guys. Guess I arrived a bit too early? Well I don’t care if I get to meet celebrities like you. Love your outfits! I’ve heard a lot about you. I know you played Max Fabian’s club a few times down in Loho. Me too, I did that also. Jeepers! We’re buddies, see? Neck and neck! Just trying to make an honest living, huh?”

He cracked open a soda and waltzed around, so impressed with his own *spiel*, and was just about to start with another dose of it when the door brisked open, and Bill Fogelman appeared.

“What’s up, dudes? Ready for your spot?” he gushed. “You got just ten funky minutes, and then some douche-bag is comin’ on air so better buck up?” Then suddenly he caught sight of Junior Elvis scowling and instantly regretted his words.

“OK. So you’re here early, Elvis. My oh my, you damn caught me with my pants down this time! I guess I should say sorry. We love you boy, you know that? You

just sit yourself down and wait, and I'll be done with these Russians in a jiffy."

The family walked in, a little phased by this mis-hit they had just witnessed. Everyone gathered round a table with headphones on as the theme music played out.

Then Bill Fogelman attacked his microphone, explaining to the southern audience exactly who the Russian family were. Many in Louisiana already knew, since the band had toured in Georgia, and the record had sold out everywhere. They had also heard how Hindu priests were often at the gigs. But there were many curious fans, and Bill was aware that the best way to satisfy their seething curiosity would be to allow the fans to phone in.

Already a young girl was introducing herself to Serge on the line.

"I so love your drumming," she cried. "What's your favourite colour, Serge?"

"I would say dark blue," he replied. "Or maybe gold," he said and laughed. Bill winked.

"I'll go along with that," the host guffawed. The girl asked more questions and then a young boy had a request for Kira.

"Kira, what do you think of America?" he asked. Kira replied that it was mainly all she had ever known. And that she liked it.

"It feels free here, and they love our music," she squeaked, hugging her cherished grey rabbit to her chest, which brought a smile from the host.

Then an Indian girl asked Serge about the new theme-park.

"What is all that supposed to mean?" she wanted to know. "Are you doing that for money?" Then she added that she was not sure that she liked it.

Serge began to answer, and soon poured out much of his life story. He told her that there had been good and bad times, that he had been through drugs and

homelessness, and had quit them, and won through, always with the help of Shiva, and then how he had finally made it back to stay at his mother's house, and was now working with the family band once more. She was impressed.

"I respect that," she said. "I see you are a boy with a good heart."

In all of this Leo remained very quiet. He had been told by the manager not to talk. He crossed his legs and looked out of the window, but there was a smouldering rage in his eyes.

The interview finished well. Afterwards the press subjected them to a harrowing interview in the lobby. It was getting late when they finally arrived home in the tour bus, tired but satisfied.

During the next few days, Maya began to be disturbed by the way Serge was acting. The success of the amusement park had gone to his head. He started having a few casual drinks with a friend every so often, and she heard him bragging about his recent successes. Finally there was one terrible night when he did not come back till morning. When she looked at his face something in her died. He looked haggard and worn as he nervously cradled a cigarette. Also there were burn marks on his fingers.

"Are you OK, Serge?" she asked, hoping desperately that he was not slipping back into his old ways.

"Don't worry, Ma," he whined. "It's nothing. I gotta have a good time every so often."

Another week passed, and things only got worse. Then he stopped talking to her altogether. He would not even meet her gaze any more. And then one rainy day he was gone, and she knew in her heart that this time he was gone for good. The pain was almost impossible to bear.

Serge had found his old life calling him with a power that was impossible to fight. He could hardly

recognise himself any more. Yet it was all so familiar, the buying of the drink and drugs, the wandering through the streets, the jamming and rapping for all these strangers. He hardly knew why he was doing any of it, though. He could not know that the rhythm of the streets had called him back. While the drugs did their work he felt strong, more than that, he felt invincible. But soon they stopped working. Things now became desperate. He knew he had to run and hide. Where to go? Then suddenly he saw his familiar alleyway. He ran for it and smashed himself down on the ground, back to the wall. The need for heroin in his veins was killing him.

He threw back his head and howled.

Majestic records were meeting with their song publishing department. Maya had been invited to attend. She understood that they were excited about something.

Brandy Fairweather, a tall red-head lady from Chicago, was in charge of publishing.

“You’ve done well,” she gushed, as Maya entered the office. “Fabulous cheques coming in from your songwriting. How on earth do you do it? Please keep it up!”

Maya blushed.

“It’s not me. It’s Leo,” she said.

“Oh no!” Brandy replied. “I have heard the shocking news,” she moaned. “He has refused to stay home? Don’t tell me that he has the romantic dream to live on the street? Some Indian religion, I heard. Very dangerous! And frightening, also.”

“That’s pretty much it,” said Maya. “I don’t really understand it either.”

“And yet his songwriting has produced this!” shouted a shaven headed, Chinese man, who now waved a paper wildly in the air as he raced into the room like a greyhound on steroids.

“It’s all happening!” Charlie Sheng raved. “Just look at this sales report!” Then he calmed himself with great difficulty, breathing heavily. “Everybody sit down,” he shouted. “Are you ready for a shock?” he demanded.

“Tell us,” Brandy said, grinning diabolically, and wringing her hands in expectation.

“This band’s songwriting is making more money than every other band on the label combined! Can you believe that?” he roared.

“Maya,” he shouted, all gentleman suddenly. “Welcome, girl! Have a seat. What can I bring you? Coffee? Champagne? Whisky? How about bacon and eggs?”

“It’s alright,” she said. She was very embarrassed by now. “I am OK. A glass of water maybe?” The boss moved closer, eyeing her like she was a fascinating, yet mysterious golden insect.

“If you don’t mind me saying this?” Charlie whispered confidentially as he poured her a glass, “but your husband is a nutcase to deliberately chose to be homeless. And probably an asshole too. You don’t mind? My honest opinion? I always say it’s best to be honest. Clears the air.”

“I know what you mean,” Maya said diplomatically.

At that moment the phone rang. Brandy picked it up. Her face was a poem as she listened and spoke.

“Yes,” she said. “No, no, of course not. OK, yes, Leo.” Then she covered the phone and gaped, eyes wide.

“It’s Leo,” she said. Charlie’s face froze. Then every possible contradictory emotion in the world writhed over his astounded features.

“Gimme that phone,” he said.

“Leo,” he said, in a delicate, almost medical tone, as if talking to a mental patient. Then there was a pause.

“Yes I understand,” he answered obediently. “Yes, I do understand,” he repeated. Then he put the phone down.

Now he faced the others.

“He’s still homeless,” he announced. “But he’s still songwriting. How about that!” And he did a little dance of triumph.

“Your husband really takes the cake,” he said. “Absolutely wacko. But he’s a total genius. Let him be homeless, I say, if that’s what brings this talent out? Let him be homeless. Ha ha!” Then he suddenly scowled.

“By the way he just told me that he wants double the previous advance if we are to pick up the contract for the second term,” he yelled. “The dirty, stinking little scoundrel!”

Serge had found an ancient black and white TV, and it was now set up in his alleyway. He’d made friends with a nearby vegetable store owner, and had been allowed to set up a long electric cable from the shop to provide power. Right now he was lying on an old mattress next to a bunch of huge cardboard boxes which had provided some kind of shelter and warmth in the night.

The screen was fuzzy and plagued by weird interference patterns, but he could just make out what was happening.

It was 3pm, on a Tuesday afternoon. A mongrel howled, just down the alleyway. A few schoolkids jostled close by in the street, laughing excitedly.

Dimly, on the ancient TV screen, a new title now panned into centre view and expanded, as a theme tune swelled and then faded out. *THE CONSPIRACY PROGRAM.*

Immediately an elderly man with a beard and beret was visible, talking on camera. He was in an obvious state of excitement.

“All across America, the homeless are on the move,” he rapped. “This is new, and it’s unbelievable and without precedent,” he stressed. “City after city has given way to these streaming hordes. They travel any way they

can, in wagons and cars, motorbike, bicycle or on foot, carrying all their personal possessions on their backs.”

Serge knocked back the last of his beer, lit up a cigarette, leaned forward and turned up the volume, suddenly paying attention.

“Something is broken in America,” the host continued. “The pressure has been rising for a long time, far too long. It’s all about rent money.

“But today these same landlords can no longer rent their apartments. Prices have exploded beyond all reason. They are no longer payable, not by anybody.” He laughed suddenly with a mixture of nervousness and triumph. “It hardly seems possible,” he continued in an incredulous tone, “but many of our sources are reporting that almost half of America now appears to be on the move.”

“I’ll hand you over to Marysia, in California now, for an in depth report,” the bearded man concluded.

Now a dark haired lady appeared.

“Thank you Derek, and good morning,” she said. “Some kind of astonishing transformation has begun over here. It is clearly a national phenomenon.

“Global warming has finally created disasters everywhere. Water shortages, forest fires, crop failures. In many states we see an exodus of desperate people leaving their homes, hitting the road, heading for anywhere that might give them relief.

“The sky-high rents and property prices merely amplify the problem. The average American does not know which way to turn. Some are suffering from anxiety or depression. Is it any wonder that they search out a new way, an entirely new vision of life?

“It appears that many have focussed on yoga, meditation, and the philosophies and religions centred around India and Hinduism. Some are saying that this transformation was always expected to happen, given that

such a combination of urban conflicts, pollution and predatory capitalism has flared up recently.”

On the wall behind her Serge now saw an accompanying video of what appeared to be a gang of thugs attacking several hundred police outside a huge mall entrance. Then the lady continued.

“From coast to coast many people appear to be obsessed with this new, so-called Shiva movement. From what our sources reveal, we can report that it has saturated the country, and is changing many things almost faster than we can report them. Apparently this new phenomenon has many diverse aspects. Much of it is not even understood yet.”

A tiny girl covered in tattoos, wearing shorts and a ripped T shirt, stumbled into the alley and crashed down beside Serge, snuggling up to him with a sleepy little kiss. He kissed her back, then motioned her to watch as the news anchor lady spoke again.

“However we do comprehend that what clearly started as a religion has now branched out into a multitude of different forms. The first example is that we are receiving nationwide reports, every hour, of Shiva priests tending to the needy in this latest homeless catastrophe.

“But there is more, much more,” she added. “One Shiva-friendly political party, named *the Wheel*, has, astonishingly, taken the country by storm, and now appears to be forming an alternative government. The Wheel clearly has enormous support from US citizens from every walk of life.”

Now she fumbled with her package of notes.

“Oh dear, sorry to keep you waiting,” she apologised. “Yes, this is breaking news - it’s all happening so fast.” Then she listened intently to her earpiece.

“I have just been informed that community shelters have sprung up far and wide,” she continued. “Soup

kitchens are serving free, desperately needed meals in many areas. Now I hand you back to Derek,” she smiled.

The scene changed again, and here Serge saw Derek back in his east coast studio once more.

“It is quite extraordinary,” he said. “As I understand it, our US constitution has apparently been amended, or perhaps even dispensed with altogether.

“A panel of holy men, Brahmins, Sadhus and Swamis have, at this moment, been elected into a board of special advisors to the new president, a certain *Krishnan Patel* from Delaware,” he added, in a stunned voice.

Now it was his turn to shuffle his notes around.

“What else? Ah, here it is. Wall street is teetering on the edge of collapse.

“In the financial sector, oil barons and property developers are desperately attempting to retrieve a fraction of their wealth, as it is gradually confiscated by government officials.

“The worst of the multinational banks have been demolished entirely, as have the pharmaceutical corporations which involve genetic modification technology. The entire area has been made illegal and a serious criminal offence.

“The armament factories have been cut down to one fifth of their previous size, and the nuclear industry entirely abolished,” he continued. “As has been fracking, genetic modification, fast food, and much of the plastics industry,” he added.

“We will keep you informed. Stay tuned,” he advised, as the final theme music began to play out, then faded to silence.

Leo had finally given in to pressure from Maya, the family and the record company, and reluctantly found a way to share a place to live with a friend in the East Village.

One morning he received a wonderful phone call. It was Serge.

“Dad?”

“Yes? Hello?”

“It’s me, Serge.”

“Hello,” Leo said.

“Listen. I got a good thing happening with a guitarist. We’re playing every day, on the sidewalk, on Broadway at 7th street. And we’re making money.”

“That’s good,” Leo said.

“And we want you to come down. Can you come and play?”

Leo stopped and thought. He was on a much higher level now. Yet this was his son. Maybe this was the thing Serge needed to put his life together.

“I’m on my way,” he said.

“Thanks, Dad!” Serge said. Leo packed a few harmonicas and set out.

Pretty soon he was standing beside them.

They jammed for an hour and it was just like the old days. Everyone smiled and the band was grooving, and people passed, and even danced a little as they walked by. The mood was infectious and it spread on the wind, and as they glanced up and down Broadway it was almost as if the whole world was dancing and smiling. New York city is the best place in the world to be at times like this.

When it was over Serge wiped the sweat from his brow a little sadly, but Leo hugged him in delight, and they all packed up the instruments, and went to a friend’s apartment, and for a while all of Serge’s problems were forgotten and irrelevant.

Very late at night they said goodbye, and Leo went home full of noble, sad thoughts. The music had brought them together again. It had been a precious, unexpected gift.

The following morning Leo awoke at 6am, that magical moment where a few shafts of the rose and violet dawn light slide through the shutters. He sat up for a second, remembering the previous day, and enjoying the closeness with his son. It was awful that Serge was still homeless. For a few moments he meditated on this, but then felt sleepy once more, and soon felt his consciousness slipping gradually away once more.

And now he began to dream.

THE CASINO

The strangest things had started to happen. He was with his family and friends, but they had all been transformed into animals. He was now a bear, Irene a leopard, Maya a gazelle and Max was a chimpanzee. Serge was human, but in a wonderfully mysterious way. It appeared that he could fly occasionally.

They were all walking through a deep forest together, but fairly soon they saw a glimpse of light between the trees, and now could make out a kind of university campus in front of them. There were many colleges, annexes and outbuildings, and they were all ancient and slightly dishevelled.

As they passed the first one, a wiry old baboon in a black workman's cap was sweeping leaves up near the entrance. On the door was written *The Academy of Pain*.

Serge groaned at the sight of such a place.

"Is that where I have to go, Papa?" he moaned.

"No, we have something different for you," Leo replied.

They walked on further. The leopard Irene was tuning her bass as she walked.

"I thought that we were playing music here," she announced defensively.

"All in time. You will find all you want here," he answered in his classic, enigmatic style.

Little Kira had taken the form of an owl, and she strutted along, looking important, occasionally wiping her beak on a few blades of grass.

Now they passed more buildings. The titles were very confusing.

Serge suddenly stopped and read out what was written on a vast door made of solid oak.

“*Department of Irritation, then Council of Suspicion, and now Uncertainty theory?*” He sounded sarcastic, but then Irene sniggered behind her hand.

“Don’t ask,” she said.

Maya, the gazelle, was leaping about in some distress.

“The children are tired, Leo,” she said. “Can we stop for a sandwich?”

“I do not believe the food is very nourishing here,” he replied. “Come on. We don’t have much time.” They dragged along behind him. Max, the chimpanzee, was above their heads, scuttling from tree to tree. Every so often he would scribble something into a notebook that he carried, and then put it away hurriedly, looking very satisfied.

Now Irene had stopped to read a paper on a notice board which was on the wall beside an enormous iron door. She read it all out to the family who had halted also.

“It says they offer degrees in all these subjects,” she marvelled. “Can you believe it? What a funny thing.”

“What are they?” Maya asked.

“It claims here that we can get a Bachelor’s degree in *Despair, Alienation, or Pomposity*,” she muttered, frowning. “Why, Papa, I don’t understand? There’s also a Doctorate in *Arrogance, Apathy or Sarcasm*.” At this she turned to Leo the bear with a distressed face.

“People have curious ways,” he growled and lumbered forwards on his great claws.

Eventually the massive Russian bear lead them into what looked like a schoolroom. They were amazed to see a large, bedraggled old parrot in a cloak and mortar board perched on a table at the front of the class, reviewing them with a cynical expression.

“Take your places,” he croaked. “Swiftly now! No jostling or fighting over pens or paper, or there will be

trouble,” he rasped. “Sit yourselves down, and please be quiet. Now listen to me. I will not say this again. I repeat. You are all here to learn.”

“I am your philosophy teacher,” he continued. “You may not think that you need to learn philosophy but I can assure you that you do. I am here to teach you that. Now sit down.”

They saw now that every individual desk bore one of their names. After searching for a few seconds they found their rightful place, and each took their position.

The parrot began.

“Nothing of the world is real,” he said. “It is all imaginary. You think that table is real? It is not. You are all dreaming. That is what life is. It is just a dream, a mere illusion. Now, why am I here? Well I can tell you. You may not believe it but I will say it anyway. I am here to teach you how to wake up. It’s not an easy thing to do. We have to learn it. Do you understand? It is very important that you stop fidgeting and follow what I say. Now are you ready?”

There was total silence from the class.

“*Now wake!*” he croaked, flapping his wings with such ferociousness that the table on which he was perching broke up into a million tiny pieces.

And at that, Leo woke up, rather disturbed, but then understood that it had been nothing but an absurd dream, at which point he cancelled the alarm on the clock, and smiled himself to sleep once more.

A desperate call from the record company one afternoon brought the band into their office.

After the family had filed in silently, and taken their places, Stig Petersen, the head of A&R, glared at them from behind his massive desk.

“I think you know what’s coming,” he started out. His fetching young secretary in a tight light-blue dress

nodded cleverly in agreement as she sucked on her pen dispassionately.

“I don’t understand?” Maya interjected.

“You’re breaking through with major album sales,” he continued. “The last tour went well. All the fans love the look of you. Great charisma, good image. It all works. There’s a big TV series lined up too, a family music show. But there’s one thing about this whole racket that I don’t understand.”

“Tell us?” Maya said quietly.

“Something just doesn’t make sense,” Stig yelled, scratching his neck desperately. He lit up a cigar.

“Look I’ll be straight with you now,” he crooned gently, eyes fixed on the wall. “Your son, Serge, one of the big stars of the band, is homeless again. We have all the details. This cannot continue.”

“But we can’t help that,” Maya replied evenly. “I have tried everything. It is a tragedy, but we can gig without him. I am suffering a lot, but what can I say?”

“And now they tell me that your partner Leo has ended up on the streets with him too. He is the leader of the band,” Stig growled. He was fast losing patience with these oddballs.

“I cannot help that either.”

“It’s not Mama’s fault,” piped up Irene, jumping up with eyes blazing.

“Relax, Irene. Please sit down,” Stig soothed.

“And now this Shiva thing?” Stig probed.

“What about it?”

“Well just look at this,” Stig said triumphantly. He switched on a TV and the family saw tens of thousands of people all wearing Shiva colours and carrying banners.

“You’ve goddamn started a revolution,” roared Stig. “Do you know where this live video is coming from?”

“Where?” asked Kira, licking her ice cream cone.

“The Capitol Building of the United States!” raved Stig. “And do you know who they followed, to get there?” he continued, more calmly.

“Who?” asked Maya innocently.

“Leo!” said Stig. “He has lead half a million homeless people to the Capitol Building, playing the harmonica all the way, and is there with them right now. And they show no signs of leaving. We have all of this on video.”

“So what am I supposed to say?” asked Maya.

“You don’t have to say anything,” answered Stig. “But you do have to do something.”

“Such as?”

“You have to go down, right now, and play a concert for peace, just there, at the Capitol,” Stig commanded. “And also you have to tell these guys to keep cool, OK? We need you. I’ve had a call from the government just now. You have to do this. It’s not an option - it’s a matter of national security. Don’t think to escape, hey? Are you rehearsed and well tight?”

“I think so,” Maya agreed.

“So let’s go,” Stig said.

A few hours later Maya entered my club. Swiftly she explained the situation, and requested that I join them for this concert. I understood that I could not refuse such a request.

“But I’ll bring my acoustic guitar,” I told her. “It has a pickup to amplify it. My keyboard is being repaired.” She agreed, and quickly I packed a bag, loaded everything into the van, then climbed into the vehicle, joining Irene and Kira.

Maya was at the wheel and soon we were speeding down the freeway. It was a long drive.

After many hours we finally drew in alongside an enormous crowd of homeless people. There were many

police in evidence, and I could see the occasional skirmish breaking out.

When we reached the stage there were several Hindu priests up there. They were holding microphones, and talking to the angry crowd, calming things down.

Without disturbing things we began to ready our instruments behind them. There was an enormous sound system already set up.

“Where are Leo and Serge?” I asked the stage manager. He pointed to a big tent.

“They are inside, talking with representatives of the homeless, and also with many senators,” he told me, with a curious smile.

Very soon after that the two appeared on stage. They both hugged Maya. Then we were on.

I never remembered much of that gig. I do know that we played a wild bunch of heavy, driving blues numbers. I saw the crowd go crazy, and also a few fights breaking out at the edges where the police were trying to keep things under control.

Then it was over. As I walked down from the stage and began to pack my guitar, I felt something in my head go wrong. Then I collapsed.

They told me later it had been a total physical breakdown due to excessive stress, worry, but also bad living and unhealthy food.

However, after blacking out completely, I had then woken up into the strangest place I had ever known. There had been nothing but total silence, and everything was pitch black.

I could not understand where I was, or even who I was. There was nothing there. And yet I knew that I still existed, and was not insane or dead. Panicking, I tried to shout but could not.

And then, very faintly, I began to hear a long, low sound. There was something about this sound that felt very wonderful, for some reason. This sound was more than simply sound. It was actually sustaining me in some way. It even felt like some kind of food to me. I felt hungry for more. Plus, it was getting louder, all the time. Now I began to rejoice. I played with the sound, even swam in it. I felt strong, like the greatest man in the world. Had I been reborn?

And at this point I awoke into another world. I was still dreaming, and part of me even knew this fact. Everything was dry, and dusty, and all of the Russian family were there, looking tired and forlorn.

We were standing beside a road, and various cars were passing, but they were obviously just cardboard cut outs being moved by invisible machinery, or maybe by a clever person concealed somewhere.

“Let’s go,” said Leo.

“Where?” asked Irene.

“This way,” he exclaimed, pointing to the right, straight along the road, which lead into some trees.

“OK,” I answered.

“Max, I think he means we should walk into the village,” Maya informed me, with a little wink.

“Which village?” Kira moaned. “Mama,” she continued, “I’m tired. What is this funny place? It’s not normal, and I don’t like it.”

“Now how about this village?” I suggested hurriedly.

At that the whole family turned and stared down the road. A few seconds later a tiny figure scurried out of the bushes just long enough to hold out a sign saying *GO BACK*.

“Why?” shouted Irene imperiously as she strode forwards. Then, very quickly, he held up another sign which read *ROAD CLOSED*.

“But we know there is a village, and we’re coming anyway!” shouted Serge bravely.

At that, the elf, for that is what he was, nipped out again with another sign, which declared *YOU ARE TRESPASSING*.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Irene said. “But I suppose we’d better continue anyway.”

At that moment an old pickup truck arrived. An ancient Indian man with long brown hair was at the wheel. He had all kinds of beads and ornaments around his neck.

“Hop in,” he said, “I will take you to the village.”

As I leapt up on the back of the vehicle, I had the distinct impression that many more arms were helping me though I could not quite tell who was doing this.

Then I saw the women were still outside, muttering something about how they did not want to go.

“Come on,” said Leo. “There’s no use staying here. What are you afraid of? Will you trust me, please?”

At that the family scrambled into the back of the truck.

A dust cloud of sand flew in the wind as we drove through the parched, dry landscape. There were occasional snakes by the side of the road. And then we arrived.

Scanning the village I saw endless rows of terraced houses. Then concrete precincts, and finally a row of council offices. A few men were walking rather stiffly up and down the streets. I had the strong feeling I had been here before.

Nothing was out of place, down to the last detail. Everyone’s tie was straight. Each man had the same kind of repressed, wooden style. Nobody talked to anyone, or if they did, it was ‘just good morning,’ or ‘sorry,’ or ‘thank you,’ in a tight clipped voice.

There were no homeless anywhere. However there was a laundromat on every block. And this fact triggered the unpleasant memory of how much in debt I was.

And all at once I knew I was doomed. My stomach felt sick. I began to believe that I would be marooned in this tiny, faceless village for life. There was no hope whatsoever. I had become a small, irrelevant person, in an absolutely meaningless landscape. My very being was full of disgust and resentment, but mainly I had become numb, like a zombie. I could not even cry.

However I continued to look around, though I hardly cared how far these miserable little people had fallen. There was not much to see in this place.

By this time we had all wandered off in different directions. I soon found a pub on the corner, and entered, and then strolled towards the bar. The pub was half full.

To my amazement I noticed that occasionally a random person in this room might casually start to sing a song, in a rather out-of-tune voice. These songs generally appeared to be all about some boring or irrelevant topic such as the latest financial news, or waiting for the bus, or the price of cheese.

I soon departed from that pub and explored the village anew. By now I had lost my sense of time. There was the feeling that many days were passing, but it never once became dusk or night.

I continued to wander the streets, occasionally observing the habits of various people I passed. From overhearing many conversations I formed the opinion that people here were obsessed with cars and property. Those were the only things anyone ever discussed.

And there was more. Everyone wore grey, even the women, and the clock hands hardly ever moved. I knew without being told that it was always the same day of the week. Every day was Tuesday, including today.

At a certain moment, when I had finally given up, and was sitting on the kerb of the road, Zak appeared in a pickup truck. He gestured for me to get in.

“Which way do you want to go?” he asked, pointing out a choice of two directions. “The US embassy is this way, the Russian that way.”

However much I disliked Zak, I now understood that this was a chance to leave this horrific place. But how to find the family? I knew I had to make one last effort.

So I jumped to my feet and looked up and down. Then I saw something move on the roof of the building across the street. I stared harder, screwing up my eyes against the sun. It was Serge.

I motioned for him to descend. We met at the opposite corner. Looking him up and down, I noticed that he was wearing a white suit made out of pieces of paper, and I could see that these papers were covered with strange looking symbols.

“This place is too weird for me,” he complained.

I explained the situation of Zak, and the pickup truck, and how we had to get out. He agreed.

“Where’s Irene?” he wanted to know. We decided to walk a few blocks along the main street.

Then I saw her. She was sitting on a park bench, and had taken off her shoes.

“My feet hurt,” she explained.

I told her I was sorry, but that I must head off to look for Leo.

She nodded, and I began to search inside the windows of all the houses. Then, plucking up my courage, I walked right inside the doorway of one of them. There was nobody in sight. Inside the kitchen cans of food were stacked on the table, and on the counter top too. They looked very familiar. Peering closer I was amazed to see all the faces of the Russian family smiling back at me. But how could they possibly be there? Were they working for these food companies now? But it was undisputedly them. Kira smiled back at me from a can of maple syrup. Leo was in full military fatigues, advertising bully beef. And then

Irene, Maya and Serge were all on other packets of food. And finally I found my own face, on a can of spaghetti. I looked old and tired on this label. It wasn't even good quality pasta.

Madness! How had all this happened? I had no idea. Opening a few cupboard doors revealed yet more cans.

But now I heard the sound of a man talking urgently on the phone, very close by. Exiting the kitchen I put my head cautiously through an office door.

There was Leo. He was sitting at a desk, and facing another direction, and thus had no knowledge that I had entered. He was cradling to his head more phones than I would have imagined possible. Intuitively I understood that he was talking to yet more senators and world leaders.

But this was clearly impossible. I wondered if I were dead. Or perhaps we all were?

As I pushed into the room, Leo put down the phones. He looked tired, and brushed a clump of long red hair out of his face.

"It's hopeless," he growled. "They are blind, idiotic men." I understood he was talking about the politicians he had been conversing with.

"What's wrong?" I probed.

"No deal," he barked. "That's what's wrong. They do not know who I am. These people are infinitely foolish."

"What deal?" I asked. He stared at me as though I were a fool.

"There is only one deal," he rasped, jerking himself out of the chair and facing me suddenly. "How to get out of this cursed town, that's the deal." Now there was a tinge of light in his eyes.

"Are you a gambling man, Max?" he asked. Before I could answer he had grabbed me by the arm, and now we were exiting to the street fast.

He hustled me down a dusty, obscure lane until we joined the main street, signposted as *the Frozen Road*.

“Why ever do they call this street by that name?” I asked.

“They freeze your soul here,” he replied. And as I looked round this hopeless town, I was forced to agree.

It was highly disturbing how very dreary the grey, suburban, concrete blocks appeared to be. While walking, we passed many figures dressed in brown or black, all with their heads down. One was even moaning to himself.

“This place is a living nightmare,” I said. “Yes, let’s get out of here.”

“So now you understand,” Leo barked triumphantly, with a harsh croak of a laugh. “Are you ready to gamble, Max? How much money have you got?”

“Not much,” I replied. “But where are we going?” For an answer Leo pointed to a large, glamorous building at the next intersection.

It was a casino, sporting a large roulette wheel on its roof. The wheel was alive and electric, and spinning automatically every few seconds, multi-coloured lights flashing wildly. As I stopped and gaped, staring up at this oddity, I was shaken to see that, instead of numbers printed on the different sections of the wheel, there were illuminated words, *honour*, *duty*, *wisdom*, and so on.

Bleeping sounds and bonanza bell rings were coming from it too, exactly like from one of those gambling machines you find in bars.

Underneath the giant wheel were printed the words *THE JOY FACTORY*.

This shook me.

“What the hell is that all about?” I demanded. “Joy?” It should be the pain factory. Or the guilt factory. We all know that gambling is wrong. Hey, I’m not going in there.”

“We have to,” Leo replied smoothly. “It is the Samsara, the other side of it. Without risk there is no gain. Come in and try your luck. Don’t be scared. This is all

happening by itself. We have no alternative. Do you want to stay in this wretched town for life?"

And there he had me. I admitted that to stay would be impossible. So, warily, we passed two liveried attendants to enter that plush, expensive foyer.

Once inside, we were immediately lost. The place was a labyrinth of zigzagging walkways, and for a long time we could not find the roulette area, or even the exit.

"They build them like this deliberately," Leo growled. "And do you notice that there are no clocks or windows? They want you here forever."

"And yet it's pretty comfortable," I remarked. "Look, everything is here, restaurants, bars, TVs - I've never seen such luxury!"

It was true. We were in a brightly lit wonderland of opulence and comfort. The armchairs were generous and deep. The shag carpet alone must have cost a fortune. Soothing music played from hidden speakers.

Then, almost by accident, we stumbled into the main roulette hall. I recognised the croupier instantly as he hunched over the green baize table, visor pulled low. He had cast off his jacket to reveal waistcoat, braces and high collared, white shirt, as he massaged the gambling chips around the playing surface. Two of the five players, an elderly man and a waspish-faced woman turned and stared at us, hard, as we took our chairs.

For the next half hour we sat and gambled with that roulette wheel. For a while we won, but soon our luck turned and we began to lose badly. Fairly soon we had lost everything. Then Leo became desperate. His face was twisted with anguish as he turned to me, begging desperately for more cash. I handed him my watch.

"Be real, Max," he warned. "This is not some fairy story. They do not take watches as bets in the modern world."

“I will accept it,” said the croupier, unexpectedly, giving me a wink. This silenced Leo. He slapped the watch down on the table. A minute later he had lost it. Now he offered the croupier some of his clothes. I guffawed at this. Yet the croupier took them. At this stage it was my turn to be astonished.

Shortly after, another evil turn of the wheel had lost Leo most of his clothes. He was down to jeans and T shirt now, with no shoes or hat. By now he was in an uncontrollable temper.

“My house!” he shouted. “I will gamble my house.”

“You don’t own a house,” I argued.

“Yes I do,” he raved. “Do you think I tell you everything about myself, little Max?” So mind your own business, eh?”

“Why?” I demanded. “Leo, think about what you are doing! Why oh why?”

“For my music!” he raved. “And to be free! I must make it. We have to get out of this place. It is death to be here, don’t you realise that?”

Now he was filling in forms with the casino manager, signing over everything he owned. Then I saw him beginning to include even his actual family, his children, and an entire further list of items including his very honour, his reputation and also his innocence.

It had become insane and outrageous, and beyond all limits. Now something broke inside me, and I became a wild animal, lunging at him such that we grappled desperately whilst crashing to the floor, inextricably tangled. The casino was in an uproar.

“Don’t do this, Leo,” I roared. “Your family! Your innocence! Think about what you are doing! Don’t do this!”

Our hands were on each other’s throats, squeezing the life out of each other as we rolled over and over. I

began to choke. Then it all went black, and I arrived into a place of calm and infinite peace.

When I finally awoke the darkness was still all around, but this time I was in outer space. Gradually I realised that I was standing inside a glass box the size of a room, watching a million, tiny, multi-coloured spheres descend from far away in space. Gradually they were changing into atoms and molecules, and then actual life-forms.

Part of me knew that I was dreaming, because something truly impossible had happened. But there was even more.

As I looked around my eyes fell on two instantly recognizable figures from the past, none other than Plato and Shakespeare. As I stared at the bearded, great philosopher, he peered outside the box with sudden interest. Then he caught my eye and beckoned to me, wagging a finger.

“Just watch this,” he said.

And now the tiny spheres were getting larger and larger, and I could see writing on them, all kinds of mystical names, and suddenly the sun was hot on our faces, and a cosmic wind roared up from nowhere, and here the huge spheres began to crack, and out of them were appearing tiny babies who were in the process of being born. And I knew that I was witnessing my own birth, out here, amongst the stars, while being bathed in the monstrously hot rays of our own salmon-red sun. But as I looked further, tears began to roll down my cheeks as I understood that it was not just me, but that it was Serge, and Irene and Leo, and also all of my family and friends, and perhaps the entire, wonderful human race. All were being born, at this exact moment, right now, and in front of my very eyes.

Then I went down on my knees and sobbed in gratitude, simply to be human, and to have seen life, and to have felt love, and walked on the beach, climbed mountains, and felt the enormous mother love of the world, all around me, nurturing and protecting me.

And in my heart I blessed the Hindus and the Buddhists, and every religion, and then all the kind and wise people of the world, and Shiva most of all, and I knew that he was with me right now, urging me on, and empowering me also.

At this moment I became aware that to die is noble, and that Shiva must first create, and then destroy our world, and that we love him for this, and also that we live for the glory of being born and becoming sacred, devout searchers of the truth, and then facing death with a good heart and a clean spirit. Birth and death, the wonderful, neverending wheel, the cycle of creation, was now surrounding me... I was spinning... faster and faster, and simultaneously laughing and crying with all my might.

Then it was over. I looked around and understood that I was still on my knees, inside the glass box.

“Art thou hurt? Let me help thee up,” said Shakespeare, and now he did exactly that, grasping me gently by one arm until I could manage to stand once more. Then he looked intently in my face.

“All’s well that...”

“Ends well,” I interrupted, with a sly grin.

“My very thought,” he observed, adding a few more medieval platitudes. Then Plato hustled round on my other side and added a few kind words, and philosophical maxims, clearly designed to help me out of this emotional phase I had been going through.

I wiped my tears back, and said thank you, and then hugged them both, although Shakespeare recoiled slightly from the embrace in a rather formal way.

At this moment there was a rumbling sound and a great wind from above us.

“Friends,” cried Plato, “Witness a miracle approaching,” and he pointed a quivering finger into outer space.

And now an enormous harmonica the size of a skyscraper came roaring into view, with smoke trailing from it, and I could just make out Leo hanging on to one corner of it.

“Follow the railway line,” Leo yelled, and his voice reverberated around the planets and stars, and black holes.

To my astonishment I saw that an actual train line was curving and snaking across and down through the milky star lanes.

We followed. I discovered that the walls of the glass box would allow anyone or anything to pass. At this moment the family began to sprout beautiful golden wings, and then fly.

And now all the stars were exploding. I saw supernovas dance to a heavy rock rhythm, and then white dwarfs and black holes jive to a kind of smoking, driving blues, followed by a rap beat. Then Tchaikovsky appeared inside the glass box and immediately hurled a box of paints into outer space, and instantly they became a cosmic, joyfully eternal symphony. And at this stage all the Russian family had become expert at flying, and finally we had truly become angels, and were dancing through space, in and out of the enormous multicoloured cloud of atoms. And then, to my great delight, a huge and majestic grand piano arrived, shimmering, black and gold, and here it was my turn to climb onto it and soar around.

Quickly I managed to control it by playing various different keys on its vast keyboard, and then, marvel of marvels, I was able to fly right over the Capitol building and witness with my own eyes how the huge crowd of homeless people were finally being cared for by the

authorities, instead of being further attacked by police. A series of vans and coaches were gradually transporting them to safe places where they could eat and rest, and then recover for a few days.

Now my magical grand piano soared upwards again, and off to India, where I eventually found a place at which to talk with Shiva priests, and they were glad to hear of the day's work, and that the concert had gone well. Then I cruised over Russia, and began to scan the mountains, plains and cities with some delight.

I was just picking a suitable spot on which to land my grand piano, and had started to soar downwards, when finally I fell into a dreamless sleep.

Later I woke with a start, sat up in my bed violently, and opened my eyes to see the nurse again.

"You're going to be fine," she said, smiling gently. "We were very worried, but you've pulled through OK."

Now I dimly made out Leo and Maya sitting beside my bed.

"Plato," I whispered, trying to focus on Leo's face. "Is it you? You have his beard! So it's not a dream?" The others suppressed giggles.

"Well done, Max," Leo told me, ignoring my words. "You played magnificently. I cannot thank you enough.

"The gig was fabulous," he enthused. "The entire gang performed like Trojans. Every so often I had to say a few words to the crowd, to pacify them, and apart from a few bad scuffles between homeless and police, we kept the thing under control. It could have been a major riot.

"But what happened to you afterwards?" he continued. "Do you feel OK now? We've been really worried. You were unconscious for a long time."

"I'm just happy the gig went down well," I croaked. "You know, I don't remember most of it? There was just a

blur. And then it all went black, and I had the most amazing dream...”

AN AMERICAN TOUR

The following morning, many luxury limos were entering the forecourt of the United Nations building in New York city. An entire stream of VIPs were arriving, presidents, academics, religious leaders, prime ministers, and the occasional royal. A crucial conference was about to start.

Inside the main conference room, there was a buzz of voices as hands were shaken, coats checked into the coatroom, and various assistants indicated the relevant place to sit for each dignitary.

At 10am the meeting began.

The main speaker, a white-haired academic from Oxford university, cleared his throat, and got straight to the point.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he began.

“Today you are witnessing a world which is on its knees. A crisis of unprecedented proportions is on us all. We do not understand exactly the causes of these latest events. But what is clear is that something has to be done, and right now. There can be no possible delay.” There was a dramatic silence.

At that he began to outline the many aspects of the crisis. Global warming, war in Europe, grinding recession, inflation out of control. And now in America, the spectre of a land that could not even recognise itself, with many millions of homeless people, sleeping rough, or on the move. Every town centre was being besieged, and each financial district. There were never enough police to deal with it. The Capitol building itself had been saturated with millions, who had only just recently been rehoused. America was now a police state with martial law and curfews, but with numbers of homeless in the millions, it

was not possible to rehouse more than a certain percentage. As the academic continued to paint a tragic, apocalyptic picture of it all, the dignitaries began to shift uneasily in their seats, and look around in dismay.

But then the speaker changed his tone.

“And yet, within the midst of this crisis, we are witnessing the seeds of a solution, however unlikely or miraculous that may seem. I am talking about the Shiva movement.”

Here there were a few audible groans of dissent. But the academic was not to be rebuffed so easily.

“These so-called workers of Shiva have in fact been keeping the country together,” he pointed out. “Perhaps here in the western world we may not easily identify with their religion. And yet they are giving the common people a very real hope, including food, and a solid way to survive, and thus we are viewing a new America emerging here, one that very few academics like myself ever dreamed might materialize within our lifetimes.”

Talking further, he gradually introduced more speakers, one by one. The meeting broke for lunch and then convened once more. By now the most bizarre and disturbing truths had begun to be revealed, that capitalism itself had failed, and that even the entire political system, including democracy, had collapsed also.

An Indian politician now took the stand.

“For my countrymen, it is not hard to see why the Shiva way has found favour with the American people,” he said. “The principles of sharing and honesty are the only possible way to survive in a crisis as terminally dangerous as this one.”

Here the Polish president chortled sarcastically. He had absolutely no faith in what this absurd little man was saying. And yet up and down the massive hall there were interested faces and receptive ears, all fascinated by what the speaker was telling them.

Finally an American politician took the stand.

“What we propose,” he said, “is an interim period, where we allow the Shiva doctrine to calm the people who are currently in a state of rebellion. Then, of course, both the homeless and the Shiva people must be granted full political representation. I cannot see my country go down like this. Gentleman, I pledge to you my patriotism as a true American. Let’s stay open-minded yet resolute, and do whatever it takes to get out of this predicament. How about we play along with this so-called Shiva initiative? I believe that the alternative will be sure destruction. Let’s welcome Hinduism to America!”

At that there was a wild roar of enthusiasm and a thundering applause.

Many more illustrious figures and world leaders now took the rostrum in turn. Finally, several religious experts and *luminati* agreed on a policy of peace-minded tolerance in the face of such a gigantic upheaval.

The meeting ended with a rendition of the national anthem, followed by refreshments.

The next few days were a scramble of activity. I constantly tried to phone Leo but his switchboard was jammed.

Meanwhile, our concert at the Capitol building had kept the dangerous mob fairly restrained for the moment, but this situation could not last. The millions of homeless people were demanding their rights, and would stop at nothing to get them. Strikes and demonstrations were rampant, all across the land.

Finally the government called an emergency referendum to attempt to establish some order and sanity, but now an astonishing event took place. The voting stations were flooded by demonstrators waving placards on the sidewalk outside and steadfastly refusing to vote. Even

more odd was the fact that many of them were praying openly and publicly.

One evening I switched on my TV to see a protester being interviewed by a Cincinnati TV station.

“Sir, why are you praying instead of voting?” the reporter asked.

“How can you ask that?” the demonstrator yelled. “Fifty years of armed nuclear standoff? We could be blown to bits at any second, and nobody in power even cares? Politics died the moment the H bomb was invented. If all these politicians could not rid the planet of atomic weapons in 50 years, then the political system is defunct and redundant. Our lives are hanging on a thread. Only religion can save us now. You may laugh, but that’s all we’ve got. God bless you, sir. Keep praying!”

The following day, I attended a meeting of the family band at the office of their record company. It was a high-energy session with wild-eyed executives charging in and out with the latest snippets of news. I could not understand all the details, but it appeared that just two hours before, the government had given in to the demonstrators. The very heart of the political system of the United States was being redesigned and reconstructed as we spoke. History was being made at this exact moment.

Not only this, but we were being assigned a top level, high priority nation-wide project and schedule. An enormous amount of money was being assigned for this.

It was a heady atmosphere. The children were very excited, and Leo was racing around, conferring with executives, gulping down large shots of black coffee, making phone calls and filling in papers. As I left I had a feeling that something truly extraordinary was about to happen.

In the next few months we gradually learned that America had been irreversibly altered. From coast to coast,

a new humanistic era had begun. This mysterious new spirit of quiet optimism and hope had completely gripped the nation. In this manner the country had truly been reborn.

The miracle of the Hindu way had established an entirely new system of values. Spirituality had replaced the widespread corruption and greed. Entire groups of Shiva workers combed the land, replacing fast farming techniques with more humane and healthy methods. Oil, coal and shale were rapidly replaced by green energy.

An entire town was dedicated to drug rehabilitation, and named *Sergetown* after Serge himself. The Russian band also formed their own institute where free, improvised music was combined with film making and audio recording.

Around the world, many religions had formed a common front, and were now successfully combating the problems of poverty, homelessness and disease. The first section of a world government had been established which had immediately banned nuclear weapons and genetic modification technology forever.

But what followed next was a series of bizarre events that I could never have expected.

The Russian band began to tour America. At no time was there any clear explanation as to where they were going, or even when this tour would actually end.

True to form, they arrived without any warning, at the door of my club, one morning, when I had hardly even finished doing my financial accounts in the basement. I was then informed that there was a gig in Philadelphia, soon to be followed by another elsewhere. They insisted that I must help out, begging me to join them. Leo explained that they needed me, and no substitute would do. The kids jumped up and down, chanting and pleading that I must come. It was impossible to say no. Fortunately by this time, I had lined up a manager for both the club and the laundromat, so one phone call fixed everything.

I had an hour to pack.

As I clambered into the bus, a familiar face grinned at me, then growled from behind the wheel.

“Holy crap, did it have to take so long to pack?” I goggled at the driver in confusion, and then it struck me.

“Big Joe! What the hell are you doing here?”

“How dare you talk to my driver like that?” squawked Irene cheekily from the front seat, where she was nestling up to him.

“Yes, dammit, honkey, how dare you?” he rumbled, slapping at the wheel in exasperation.

“You’re the driver?” I demanded, assuming the obvious.

“Damn right, little guy. For the first leg, anyway. I was available and Ram done sign me up.” He chortled uncontrollably for a second, then shut up. “You got yourself a personal tour manager for now, anyways.” I was struck dumb. This was the last thing I had expected. But it was good to have a friend behind the wheel.

“And yes, bro, *I and I* am well off me pills, *rahs clot*,” he grunted, as I passed his bulky frame and grabbed a seat.

Then he engaged the clutch and we jolted into the traffic with a throaty explosion, followed by a repeated series of coughs and snorts as we gathered speed.

The family became quiet as we hit the freeway. Some played cards. I put on headphones. Irene and Big Joe exchanged small talk as bridges, railway lines, parking lots, and then hills and lakes sped ever faster past our view.

I was groggy when, after many hours of driving, we neared the large, ornate building of our destination, and I saw that it was some kind of a religious centre. We swiftly entered the place, set up our gear, and then donned orange robes bearing the sign of the dancing figure of Shiva. When I finally saw the crowd I knew we would be

OK. They were mainly in robes also. The people were already singing, even before we began to play.

It was all so easy. Since we were well used to improvising, we simply followed the melodies sung by the crowd. As we performed I looked up and down the hall, and saw that many were dancing, while others held flowers or sat near the walls.

I knew that Serge had undergone rehab successfully, and now it was good to see him playing away behind us, laughing and cracking jokes between numbers.

The gig ended smoothly and afterwards many Shiva people came to the stage and thanked us warmly. Some brought presents, sweet cakes or little things they had made or written.

After we checked into the hotel, I lay down on my bed, totally exhausted. Then there was a knock on the door. It was Leo, waving a jazz magazine in the air.

His face was triumphant as he sat down.

“Can you look at this review of a gig we did last month?” he demanded, with a curious stare.

“My English is not quite good enough to understand everything,” he admitted.

I yawned, then began to read it aloud.

Brother Karma broke through every barrier at their unique improv show at University of the Streets this year. This is polyrhythmic music at its best, featuring 11 year old Serge on drums. The family band successfully escape from repressive tonality in their mission to deconstruct the redundant western harmonic aesthetic. The shamen father Leo presents an invocation to otherworldly spirits as he combines the worlds of blues, rock and devotional Hindu music. Daughter Irene faultlessly locks down the trance-like bass motifs, while mother Maya can be heard to navigate from phrygian to locrian mode,

pausing occasionally to execute a perfect inverted mordent before completing a finale which is rather less mantra than raga.

Suddenly there was a wild roar behind my head.

“Heaven and earth and all things inbetween! What the freakin’ devil is that ragamuffin nonsense? Tell me that? The man should be shot. Is that music, what he talk about?” I leapt to my feet.

Big Joe had crept inside the door and was leaning against the wall, physically shaking with emotion. His eyes were huge and rageful.

“Yes, it’s a review of our band,” I explained patiently, calming down somewhat.

“You may not understand it,” Leo offered, in his clinical manner.

“It’s a great review,” I shouted. “You guys are breaking through! Do you have any idea what this means? It’s the top jazz magazine.”

“It don’t mean shit to me,” Big Joe growled.

“Does it groove? That’s what he should be saying! Is it righteous?”

“Are you righteous?” Leo asked.

“Yes I am, doggon it. T’aint nobody more righteous than me when I play my saxophone.”

“Chewing gum?” I offered. They both took a stick.

“Shall I continue reading?” I asked, a little warily.

“No,” they both moaned.

“OK guys, I was sleeping,” I complained. “Can I finally get some rest now?” They backed out, still arguing over whether the review was good or not, and which of them was more righteous than the other.

Later I could not sleep, and needed some night air. It was quite a surprise to bump into Leo outside in the hotel forecourt, close to the pool, under the stars. It was past

midnight, and the air was fresh and cool. He chuckled at the sight of me.

“Can’t sleep either?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted.

For a while we enjoyed the silence of the night together. But something was making me curious.

“I have heard some strange talk from the family,” I told him. “You spent time living on the street. Then you lead a huge crowd of homeless people to the Capitol, and finally we played. What was that all about?” His face had passed through a whole series of emotions at this inquiry.

“They needed a leader,” he told me. “Somebody had to do it. And now, see for yourself. Big changes happening everywhere now. I had my part in that.”

“I get it,” I replied. “But tell me, did you actually chose to go homeless? Maya says you almost blew the record deal like that.”

“Nothing is blown,” he replied, with some irritation. “Don’t listen to her. You see we still have the deal. We’re selling records right now. The record company arranged this tour. They are providing plenty of cash for tour support. As you know, we have a bus, complete with driver.”

He glared at me before resuming.

“So you ask why I was homeless?” he continued. “Try to learn from Shiva,” he said, in a weary tone. “Our lives are predetermined. We have no control whatsoever over them. Do you hear me? Sometimes, Max, I believe I am talking to a brick wall. I did not try to make it happen, but I did not try to stop it. Clearly it was supposed to take place. How else would half a million of my people make it to the Capitol building? Tell me that?”

“OK, this brick wall admits you have a point,” I said. “But we will never truly understand you,” I added, kicking at the dirt in frustration.

“I know that,” he said. “Don’t waste your time trying, because you never will. I am who I am. I didn’t try to be me. It just happened.”

“I guess you are right,” I admitted. “But I’m tired now. Gotta sleep. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” he replied. As I headed into the hotel he shouted for me to wait.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Thank you, Max, for coming on tour with us,” he said, kicking at the dust with a certain embarrassment. He would not look me in the face.

“Thanks for asking me,” I replied.

The next concert was at a college in Washington DC, and it began with a fight between the kids backstage, five minutes before showtime. It had been partly in fun but had become deadly serious when Serge bit Irene’s ear, then whipped her with a microphone cable. Finally she pinned him down, and then forced him to wear a pair of Leo’s underpants on his head. He moaned and wailed, and then trod on Kira who issued a terrible scream like a siren.

Now an awful demon in the form of their father came and danced, and raved in front of them. Dimly they got the idea that they must play the gig right now, otherwise there would be no money and no food for weeks. This was a genuinely scary idea, so they slunk on stage. However the band’s glowing reputation had preceded them, and the crowd was already chomping at the bit, and delirious with expectation. They took the kids’ strange dejected, sullen style as a specially impressive feature of the stage show. Comments were muttered about these avant-garde Russians, and suddenly the family were giving the performance of their life. Americans are fast to appreciate improvised music, and this was improv like no other. Sensing that anything was now possible, Maya took the mike and began a call and answer with the audience

which worked them up to a frenzy of delight. Every so often she would sing a snatch of a gentle Russian children's song, then morph into a poetic rap which touched on religion, politics, the meaning of life, and why we were all here, and then finally what was going on with America right now.

Before it ended, I was swimming in sweat, and my keyboard so drenched that I could hardly play, but it did not seem to matter. As I scanned Irene's face, I saw it light up with an incredulous, almost wild expression, yet she drove out a constant, steady bass line that grounded everything. Her almond-shaped eyes never lost their sad look though. It amazed me how much she could adapt though, first the fight backstage, and now this stella performance. Yet all the kids were delivering the goods in this way. So many years of hardship, the endless subway gigs, the rough street life, then the continual, tough, bar, pub and cafe gigs and then bigger stuff - this had all honed the family into something iron-clad and powerful. Right now we were switched on. It was a heady, soulful thing to know how far we had come, and how righteous had been our suffering on that road upwards.

We left the stage to a roar of enthusiasm, and as I looked back I saw the dancers dance pace increase when the massive PA system exploded into life with an array of new cuts from the DJ.

The moment I hit the backstage area the kids were on top of each other all over again, fighting to the death like wildcats, but this time, the adults were too weary to stop them. What could we do? By now I knew they had to have it out, jungle style. It was the natural way, and I had given my all onstage and now slumped down onto a sofa into semi-oblivion.

I slept well that night. Then it was on to many more towns and cities across the country, to play more concerts.

The nation was erupting into action, and full of hope and change. There were extra billboards on the highway, advertising unfamiliar products and faces. The police had new uniforms. I saw evidence of factory closures on left and right.

We became swept up in the fever for change. Each morning, riding in the bus, we talked about our music, and this tour, and what the real purpose of it was. Within the new reality of America, music was not just music any more. It had become a manifesto, and a path to a new life, and we were leading the way.

Many months passed, and gradually we became a school of music, more than just a band. At each city we would set up workshops and invite musicians to attend. I noticed that all the new students wanted to talk philosophy with us also. So in this manner we stretched our horizons, bringing in local priests and philosophy professors at each stop. Then, finally, someone had the idea of extending this to healing therapy also.

It was successful. Reporters would sit in and film parts of the sessions, and now we were in the newspapers yet again, with an entire array of reactions from readers, ranging from adulation to active disagreement.

Some newspapers referred to *the new cult of the Russian band*, with more than a slight touch of humour.

The concerts would take place in many varied locations, colleges, civic halls, theatres or occasionally in the open air.

We never questioned the way we were changing, even though it was extreme and rapid. America itself was unrecognisable by now. A partial equalisation had occurred between *haves* and *have-nots*. Any division of blue collar or white collar workers had long since become blurred. Executives and other business men now occasionally

worked the fields of the local farmland, humming little tunes as they laboured alongside the regular farmers.

Many thousands of miles away, in the Vatican City, the pope had finished his breakfast and was entering the *Room of Fire*, one of the four sumptuously furnished Raphael rooms, in order to preside over an important meeting, known as an *extraordinary consistory*, meaning that the entire college of cardinals would be present.

After a brief ceremony involving many bowed heads, the work began in earnest. Up till this moment many cardinals had been admiring the magnificent painting depicting the Battle of Ostia which filled an entire wall, and which they knew had been painted by the students of Raphael, but now they drew themselves to full attention. Great things were afoot. They were all very much aware of the extraordinary activities and transformation occurring in America, and the gradual adoption of religion by the masses, which had finally increased to the point where not only politics was being eclipsed, but also even science, perhaps due to the fact that the people of the world had begun to believe that modern science, and in particular, the computerisation of society, was now being considered negative, such that it would ultimately prove a grave threat to all human and spiritual values. However many cardinals were not feeling so easy about an alternative religion gaining the upper hand so swiftly in this way, and had thus begun petitioning for change, including the suppressing of Shiva-ism wherever they might achieve this. But none of them were prepared for what the pope now decreed. As the great man began to speak, one cardinal seated close to the window adjusted his scarlet *ferraiolo* cape nervously and coughed into his hand, in a rather guilty manner. He could feel a tiny stone that was trapped inside his left, gold buckled, *pantofola liscia* slipper, but could do nothing about this whatsoever.

“Shaivism is no threat to us, or to anyone,” the great man began, facing the central issue dramatically and immediately. “*In amicitia virtus*,” he added.

“Naturally, I do understand that this may be unpalatable news for many of you, but I must make this issue absolutely clear.

“I, Romanus Pontifex, hereby command and decree, that there shall no conflict between us and the men of Shiva.” At this there was a great sound of rustling of papers and creaking of chairs as many cardinals breathed out sighs of exasperation. The pope glared forward glassily, and scanned the throng, as if to mark out a possible rebel, then resumed. His voice rose from baritone to a resounding tenor.

“We shall forge onwards in friendship, side by side with our worthy friends from India, who are now expanding this very spiritual dimension of our world, and indeed have proved to be the most effective agents of change.”

Here the pope paused, and once more he eyed the rows of silent, devout men meaningfully. Then he drank from a convenient glass of mineral water, cleared his throat and continued, in a deep, grave voice.

“I am thus currently negotiating, day and night, with the various departments of the Hindu religion and its Shiva followers, in the spirit of harmony and mutual trust,” he announced. “We are making gradual progress. The Vatican is also holding extended talks, and making plans, with many world leaders right now, including the president of the United States.

“I can assure you that Shaivism is absolutely non-exclusive. They are not forcing or coercing anyone to join their faith. There is no sense of any manipulation involved. We have already found a way to work in tandem with these fine people in addressing all the many relevant subjects involved, the enormous and eternal problems of poverty,

homelessness and all the rest. Europe is now following the initiative of America, in embracing this new phenomenon. Our precious church is in no way threatened by Hinduism, and in fact the reverse is happening. We are now experiencing greater numbers of Christian followers than before. So now I will deal with specifics in assigning to each of you your individual, particular tasks.”

Many cardinals had exchanged glances during this speech. They had never known such an event within their lifetimes, or even world history, and there was much to dwell over. As the pope continued his long speech, the fiery combatants of the Battle of Ostia, from two thousand years ago, stared down at them with triumph in their eyes.

One afternoon I found myself in a meadow on the side of a vast mountain in New Mexico, surrounded by thousands of devotees who were pestering the band with questions about reincarnation and many other similar topics. Our audience were mainly in their teens.

We had just finished playing the gig, and were relaxing, cross-legged on the grass, sipping drinks. I was enjoying a *Mango Lassi* and Leo, a *Masala Chai*. Indian food and drink had become available in far more places recently, also we now travelled with many supplies on board the bus.

At this point Leo began to talk to the gathering.

This was his chosen moment to discuss philosophy with them. Our music had prepared the air for this process. By now we knew exactly what kind of melodies, chords and rhythms to play which would open minds, and make souls curious with yearning.

At first he discussed yoga techniques with certain people in the crowd who knew about such things. Then he came to the point, and began to describe basic philosophical principles. He had a grand opening question.

“What is this thing we call *time*?” he asked them.
“Have any of you ever thought about that? Well, I will try to answer for you.

“There is only the ‘now’ - represented by the sacred OM,” he continued. Then he detected a few bored expressions.

“Aha, I see it is old news to you?” he queried.

“I admit that this has been debated various times before, by many great men. Perhaps some of you are fatigued to hear it. But it is very important. Please trust me on this?” There was a murmur from those close by. I saw lots of very young faces watching and listening.

“As you know, materialism has now largely been rejected by the people of this nation,” he added. “How curious!” A ripple of laughter swayed on the breeze which was rich with the scent of mountain jasmine and honeysuckle. “The problem was that the pace of life has been impossibly fast,” he continued. “We must readjust, and learn to live in a different way. It is very important to slow the rhythm of life down.” I saw a few people nod their heads at this idea.

“There is more,” he added. “I have a question for you all. We imagine that we know who we are, but this is far from the truth. Who here actually believes that he knows himself?” Now we heard an entire chorus of clever chuckles, and many hands were raised.

“I do,” shouted a girl close by.

“You are wrong,” he answered gravely. “Nobody here truly knows himself. It is not possible. We are alive in order to find this out. It may take a lifetime. But we have to do it. Right now each individual has inside himself a crowd of confused voices, feelings and attitudes, fighting for attention. This is why I mention materialism, which can often create confusion of this nature in the mind. It is the mob inside the brain. There can be nothing sacred when life becomes nothing but haggling over pennies.

“Later on, after you have followed the sacred path for many years, you will finally understand, with great clarity and definition, exactly how much you do not know.

“To tread this path I talk about requires many things. It means we have to learn to pay attention, to focus, to be calm and to meditate. Only in this way can we prepare ourselves for certain shocking, amazing truths.”

A boy far away in the crowd had raised his hand.

“Is there any kind of existence after death?” he asked.

Leo laughed delightedly.

“There is no ending of life,” he insisted. “Death is a hallucination,” he continued. “They try to make us believe that we will die one day. Why? It is to take advantage of us. They are trying to sell us fear in this way, by the truckload. This is the way of materialism, to make you so frightened that you would buy all their products which are really nothing but a distraction from life, which is already miraculous in its simplest version.”

There were cheerful nods at this remark.

“Death is a lie,” he said, surveying the sea of faces with a certain satisfaction. “There is nothing whatsoever to fear here.”

“How can a conscious man possibly experience being dead?” he asked in his particular mocking tone. “Do we see it? Can we touch it? Can we taste it? No, of course we cannot. So there is no death. None whatsoever. It is dangerous propaganda, nothing more than this.

“Simply a grand illusion,” he stressed.

“Furthermore, we cannot influence our future or our destiny in any way.”

At that, a young Chinese girl smiled and clapped her hands in joy. Next, Serge pointed a curious finger at her.

“You, over there, what’s your name?” he wanted to know.

“Coral,” she said, brushing her pigtails back carefully, and smiling shyly through her dental brace. Now Leo had a question for her.

“So, Coral, what do you want to be, when you grow up?” he asked.

She looked confused. Then finally she spoke.

“Do you mean what does the wheel of light want me to be, when I grow up?” she queried.

“Very good,” Leo chortled, rubbing his hands with glee. He turned to the others. “Do you see this very curious thing?” he asked. His face was radiant.

“She has one foot on the path. Do we need any more proof? Now, Coral, how old are you?”

“Thirteen,” she replied, in a quiet voice.

“Ha ha,” he crowed. “Even at the tender age of thirteen, Coral has already let go of her addiction to this false idea we know as ‘the self.’ Let’s give her a big round of applause!”

Coral looked embarrassed, but also delighted as many other children lined up to hug her in a big embrace.

Half an hour afterwards, Maya and Irene were wandering with me on the far side of the meadow, close to a little brook, with weeping willows close by. A few bees were buzzing around the plants. By now, the fierce afternoon heat had lessened.

“You are changing, Max,” Maya laughed. “Just look at yourself!” Glancing down, I smoothed out the orange robe I was wearing.

“It’s not just the clothes,” Irene told me. “We thought you were a kind of hard guy, in the beginning.”

“Maybe I was,” I countered, feeling a little confused. A raven croaked from low in the sky.

“Not any more,” she said. “And I prefer the way you are now. More easy-going. These days, when we talk, I feel you are really listening.” There was no possible answer

to this. Maya handed me a flower, and we strolled back to the others.

A few hours later we packed the tour bus, and headed out on the road again. As we drove I had time to think about all Leo had said. I liked the essence of it, but there was a side I was not so keen on. Now I began to feel rebellious. Who was he to preach to us like that? Also there was another problem. I knew he had hit the kids sometimes in the past. How to accept wisdom from such a man? It was a problem. And yet, being friends, I could well imagine that whatever character defect he had would probably change in time. Maybe I could even help him? That was what friends were for, surely?

Around midnight we were still driving. I looked out at the stars over the mountains and thought about what the others had said. Was I still the same man who had only recently been running a nightclub in New York city, carrying a gun and dealing with mafia every few days? It hardly seemed possible. So who on earth was I today? What was happening to me? Leo had spoken wisely to the crowd in the meadow, earlier that day, I now understood. Plus, he had opened up a thought process for me. The mysterious things that make up a particular person's character are far more complex than we know, it appeared. I decided that we never truly understand who we are, and often spend many years, or even decades, finding out.

TWO SHOOTINGS

It was 10am in New York City. From a certain spot at the Seaport it was possible to witness many jet airliners blazing wild arcs across the blue dawn sky, hustling past slivers of cumulus cloud, flying in and out of the three airports.

In downtown Manhattan, sirens roared while clusters of cops thronged the intersection of Broadway and 34th street. A guy had picked up a take-away pizza, and was heading home on roller skates, dodging taxis and cyclists. High class ladies were being fussed over in expensive hair salons, while a busker adjusted his harmonica outside the all night deli, taking occasional hits from his bottle of white wine. A Texan real estate developer was just leaving his attorney's office, accompanied by a fetching, young, Nigerian dancer in a filet-lace robe with angel sleeves.

On the 8th floor of an Art Deco building on the edge of the Flatiron district, a salsa-fusion synth theme percolated from high wall speakers.

Inside the inner studio room of Radio WABC, Andrew Chapman, the grizzled, grey-haired host of 'Spirit of Democracy,' cut the microphone to allow himself to cough loudly, then flicked the switch to live.

"Good morning New York City! Hope you're feeling dandy? Take it easy if you're on the Belt Parkway. We have reports of a multiple collision there. Guys, keep calling in, and don't forget to sponsor the show."

At that moment a government infomercial exploded into action.

"Orange is the colour of tolerance and compassion. Think orange. Be orange. Orange is the future. Orange is you. Orange is life. Orange is love. This program comes to

you thanks to the support of the Orange Caring Action Association.”

Andrew had used these few seconds to down more coffee and gobble a vitamin pack which included ginseng, minerals and royal jelly.

Now he wiped sweat from his brow with a towel, and leaned forward to address the microphone.

“And what’s on the menu today? I’ll tell you. The recent transformation of our country. What is truly going on? We’ve invited an expert to shed some light on this.

“Today we discuss the extraordinary recent changes, both social, political and religious which have upended our nation in the last twelve months. I have with me Mr Gray Walker, a lecturer at Columbia university, and soon we will be receiving calls from guest speakers.

Just at this moment Leo and I were picking up a few essentials from a convenience store on the outskirts of Chicago. There had been a long drive, during which I had become frustrated and bored, and had sneaked quite a few gulps of gin from a bottle hidden in my bag. Then the family had finally checked into a hotel.

After a brief squabble over prices with the cashier, who clearly did not like the look of us due to my angry attitude, and Leo’s long beard, we ended up in an Indian restaurant next door.

“It’s a looking glass world,” I declared, as we selected a table near the window. The long, fatiguing journey had also made me rebellious, and a little confrontational too. Now I picked up a fork, and tapped it on the table to emphasise certain points.

“Everything looks upside down to me,” I continued. “First you guys come over from Russia, escaping communism. Now you are here. I don’t know what the hell you brought with you, but...”

“It’s called an open mind,” Leo interrupted smoothly.

“But something is on fire now,” I forged on, ignoring him.

“What the hell is going on with the government at this time? I never knew I would see religion and politics fighting it out like this. What will be next?”

The waiter brought menus, then retreated.

“Shiva is not about fighting,” Leo pointed out. “The Hindu religions are not that way. None are, actually.”

“But something is going on,” I barked. “And it’s rocking the boat. Millions of homeless marching in the streets, mass unemployment...”

“Naturally, the system is collapsing,” Leo agreed. “Are we surprised? I hardly think so. But don’t blame Shiva. We are merely picking up the pieces.”

“That’s as maybe,” I argued.

A bottle of red wine arrived, and I dived into a glass with some gusto.

“Now calm down,” Leo said, eyeing me with concern. “It’s all under control. What’s your problem now? The tour is going well. We are simply doing our jobs. The performances are excellent and you are receiving generous wages. Why rock the boat like this?” He grumbled in Russian and bent the fork, twisting it badly, then bent it back again with an oath.

“I cannot calm down,” I shot back at him. “I admit I’m getting a little tipsy, but, come on, this is madness. I see us playing all these gigs, but I want to know exactly who is behind this management company of yours. You told me it was the Shiva people. But who are they really?”

“Just some people,” Leo said. “Shiva people, as you said.

“They fixed up this tour,” he added. “They are in with the record company too.”

“And they are redesigning the US government, maybe the constitution, and then what will come next?” I demanded, eyeing him suspiciously. “They are putting us through the washing machine,” I gasped, waving my fork at him.

“Maybe we need that,” Leo said quietly.

As the waiter passed I ordered another bottle of Italian wine. Then the plates of food arrived.

“You don’t need more wine. Stay grounded please?” Leo suggested.

“Sure I do,” I said. “It’s been a long drive. I’m tired, and not used to touring lately. And, hey, I’m not so young any more.

“Look, the kids are going crazy,” I urged, changing tacks suddenly. “They’re kids, not adults, for christ’s sake. It’s not normal, playing so many gigs like this. Do you have any idea what this is doing to their minds, their development? We may be scarring them for life.”

“They’re seeing the world,” Leo answered, with a rather bored expression. “Have more chicken?”

“Yeah, maybe they’re seeing too much,” I answered, with some feeling. Plus, you and I know what they saw on the subway, back then. Hookers, thieves, druggies, the whole damn show. They’re growing up in the street.”

“So did many famous musicians, Billie Holiday, Django Rheinhardt and Edith Piaf, to name a few,” Leo pointed out cunningly.

“Oh ha ha,” I chortled sarcastically. And who are we then, Laurel and Hardy? Since everyone is so famous now? No, I don’t think so.”

A bus, and then a taxi passed the window.

“I know who I am,” announced Leo. “I don’t know about you.”

“Well I know who I’m not,” I said. “I’m not a slave trader, or a drug dealer.” I glared at him.

“You were a drug dealer before,” said Leo cleverly.
“You told me.”

“OK, now quit, smart ass,” I warned.

“Relax,” Leo said, throwing out his arms
submissively. “More curry?”

“Plus, I’ve seen Serge saying people’s names
backwards now,” I continued, well into my assault. “Why?
What’s going on with him? He’s your son. You should
know. He chants also. The kids are constantly playing
weird acting games, but it’s nothing I’ve ever seen before.
Listen, I’ve seen Serge dress up in a white sheet and play
tricks on the hotel maids. Then they all throw food around.”

“They have their fun,” Leo said, chewing
philosophically. “However, chanting is serious,” he added.

For a while I ruminated on that, helping myself to
more sauce. Near the kitchen was a small stage, and by
now a sitar player had begun to play accompanied by
tablas. Incense smoke curled around the front area of the
restaurant.

Leo became reflective.

“Can we be a little sane now?” he asked. I nodded
wearily. I knew the intellectual and rather dispassionate
style of his by now. Highly intelligent, yet slightly cold. I
shivered.

“The east is where all the culture of the world is,”
he announced. “We have no culture here,” he added.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It is all there, in India, from five thousand years
ago,” he insisted.

“Max, how many times do I have to tell you this?”
His voice crashed around the restaurant. A Chinese couple
looked around, startled, and the lady dropped a knife onto
her plate.

“So what is that to do with real life, making money,
paying rent etc?” I demanded.

At that he became exasperated.

“I don’t think you will ever understand,” he groaned. “This mundane talk is fatiguing. You are in a clockwork world of money, money and money. Do you realise that there do exist higher things? But perhaps I should not bother,” he mused to himself. “Not everyone can understand these complex matters, the Indian Gods, Shiva, reincarnation, the way of the Wheel. Clearly I misjudged you, Max.”

“Yes, I admit I have no time for that,” I muttered, staring into my glass.

“But you cannot escape it,” he argued. His face was shining with triumph now, as he crashed a fist on the tablecloth. “We all have to face our destiny. These things will come to you, whether you like it or not. Nobody can escape. We are born into the wheel. In the end, all must stand up and face the truth. One day you will understand these words of mine. But for now, just relax, it’s OK, and perhaps I should not talk about this more. I am sorry, but I must walk outside in the fresh air for a moment.”

At that he marched off with a disgusted look. I was left wondering about it all.

What if he was right? What if something big was waiting for me? Had I been living a futile life, back in New York? The old Viking often looked pretty crazy when he spat out these judgements, but this time something in his manner had convinced me. Maybe life was not so simple after all. Wait and see, I decided.

Time would tell.

Half an hour later, Leo had returned, and I was just arguing once more with him about whether we should order a third bottle of wine or not, when I recognised that Gray Walker was on the radio. The two of us began to listen immediately.

“Could I start with a question?” the host was demanding. “What caused this enormous change, and is it helping or harming America?”

“Both,” Gray answered. “Democracy has failed. We have all witnessed the years of rioting, the desperation of the homeless, and corruption of politics and many corporations, which have been the hallmarks of recent times. Now the Shiva movement has taken the initiative and successfully calmed things down. There can be no denial of this fact. Listen, for the average American, the idea that a four-armed god with a blue face being any kind of a political answer - is pretty difficult to swallow. And yet, even as a hard-headed rationalist, I can see that the Shiva people have brought America up from its knees to becoming a thriving, caring community once more. Naturally all the other religions have helped also. The current problem appears to be rooted within the spiritual bankruptcy of scientific rationalism itself. The philosophy of science today has accelerated into an endless loop of inhumanity, which is now attempting to destroy our moral code. And morality is usually based on religion, never forget this fact. The main point is that America is today saving itself from the quagmire that it was previously drowning in.”

“OK, some fine words there, thank you,” the host admitted. “But I just don’t get it,” he continued. “Exactly what went wrong with our democracy that many thought was so precious?”

“Plenty,” Gray replied. “The idea of worthiness or truth being proved by numbers of votes is itself suspect. What if the masses are wrong? Next, there is no guarantee that any politician has had any education at all under our western system of democracy. However there do exist alternatives. Within a meritocracy, which occasionally exists in other countries, there is the rule that candidates for office must be fully educated with college degrees.”

At this point the host took the microphone.

“We have many, many folks phoning in right now,” he said. “It seems like everyone has something to say about this. I don’t know if our switchboard can handle this many calls.”

“Damn right it better,” I muttered, grabbing a wall phone and dialling. “Gray is obsessed with politics. But politics is dead. He cannot possibly understand what’s really going on. I’m gonna fill him in. Miracles are happening, and he can’t even see it.”

I was put on hold by the radio station. After many minutes of waiting and paying long distance charges, I gave up.

“This is only the beginning,” Leo said, as we paid the bill and walked back towards our hotel.

Vergil Zak had been driving all afternoon. His black SUV was empty except for a shapeless holdall behind the driver’s seat. Sweat dripped off his brow as he saw the first turn off sign for Chicago. He lit up a small cigar, and turned the heavy rock on the stereo higher. Then he swallowed a couple of amphetamines, and swilled them back with a shot of vodka.

When the first Hindu signs which advertised world peace appeared, his sunburnt cheeks creased as he yelled with manic peals of laughter that increased without limit.

It was a long, sultry evening in the eastern Mediterranean with a few seagulls coasting in the haze, hundreds of feet about the shimmering, emerald waves.

On the USS Missouri battleship, Captain Patterson was making notes when there was a rap on his cabin door.

“Enter,” he barked. First Officer Bradshaw saluted and stood to attention.

“Can I have a word, sir?” he asked.

“Go ahead,” the captain grunted.

“There has been a disturbing message from the paymaster general. All monies to be halted for the next two months. We cannot figure out why, sir. But obviously it’s connected with the great transformation. There is no more government, sir. Not the way it used to be. And now no money too.” He was wringing his hands, with a distraught face.

“Those damn Indian fundamentalists,” the captain barked in disgust. He swivelled his chair rapidly to face Bradshaw. “OK, call an immediate staff meeting,” he commanded.

Two hours later twelve officers were facing each other across a large table in the conference chamber.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” the captain said. “It looks like we’re on our own now. I suspected it from the start. The Hindu crowd have total control of America now. God only knows how they pulled this thing off, but they did. They have our balls in a vice.

“Now listen up. These dudes are pacificists, as you boys know. So what do we do? I can tell you. Look for money elsewhere. I ain’t gonna sit down and cry.

“Anderson, quit chewing gum and shape up,” he raved. “You know I can’t take that. Any more attitude from you, and I will haul your ass right off this ship and drop it in the Sudan. And I’d do it, too. Now hear me out, then you can go back to whatever crap you got to do.

“There are plenty of tin-pot regimes up and down the coast of Africa who will pay us to do their policing. Yes, I know they’re not all squeaky clean. But you boys have been in this game a long time, and you know that we gotta do what we gotta do to make a living. Specially when the chips are down, like right now.

“So we’ll work on this for a few days, then head south, OK? We’re on our own from now on. And so is America. They started this, these dumb-ass wingnuts in

Washington. See how they survive without us, eh? I wouldn't like to be in their shoes."

The meeting broke up.

In Syria, groups of US marines were commandeering another two hundred oil tanker trucks, claiming it to be illegal property. The Syrian drivers tried to put up an argument, but were met by blank stares. In the end they were all put into vans and driven back to the bus for Damascus.

The convoy of tankers now got on the road for the Iraqi border.

"That makes four hundred tankers this week," one American sergeant said to another. "Not bad. The colonel will be impressed. Maybe we'll get an early promotion, and a vacation too. I can't wait to get back to my wife and kids in Denver."

"You bet," the other agreed. "Except it ain't home like it used to be any more. I can't even carry a gun in my hometown no more. The Hindu people changed all that. It so totally sucks. My Danny boy is just coming up to his thirteenth birthday, and I told him I would give him a 38 automatic. He had his heart set on getting it, I'm telling you. Now he can't have it no more. Goddamn priests! A dude ain't even free these days. No way is it America the way we used to know it."

He threw his cigar butt out into the desert sand as they drove on.

After the gig in Chicago, Leo gave a lecture at the university the following afternoon. By now I had discovered that he had written a book about the links between music, consciousness and shamanism, which had been brought out by one of the Hindu publishers.

However his allegation that death was a hallucination had now caused a backlash of critique

amongst some students. As a result it had been arranged that Gray Walker, an expert on both politics and philosophy, would fly in to help defend Leo's position. But secretly I did not believe this to be a good idea, knowing that Gray had a drinking problem and could easily be inflamed.

However the meeting began well. Several priests were in attendance. Leo read out an extract from his book, which was well received. At this point the host, an Indian professor, indicated that the forum was now open for questions. Gray, sitting beside him on the stage, was nodding sympathetically. Myself and the family were seated in the middle of the audience, paying full attention.

Suddenly to my horror, I saw that Vergil Zak was there. He was very close by, in the row in front of me, wearing dark glasses, and he had a big backpack on the seat next to him.

Now everything happened at once before I had any chance to warn anyone. Zak pulled out a semi-automatic gun and began shooting. The place instantly went crazy. Leo rushed for cover, nursing his arm, which had been hit. Gray was sprawled under the table, also hit in the arm. Sirens began ringing and the sprinklers started spraying a deluge of water from the ceiling. Within twenty seconds Zak was jumped by three students and two security men, and disappeared, roaring loudly, under a mass of writhing arms and legs. I ran to Leo, who grinned in painful triumph.

"The bastard," he hissed. "He'll pay for this". He pointed to his arm, muttering, "don't worry, it's nothing but a scratch."

We made our way out of there, but not before the Hindu media had tackled us and extracted our story, with full details.

That day both Gray and Leo were treated at the hospital, but soon discharged, since the bullets had barely

grazed their arms. Both were badly shaken up, however and Gray was given a strong sedative.

For hours the nation was flooded with images of Leo and Gray on all Hindu syndicated channels.

We watched a few of these news flashes back at the hotel foyer, after we arrived there for the night. It appeared that photos and videos had swept the nation, showing Leo nursing his arm, with people gathering around him. Other footage displayed Zak, bound and gagged, being lead away to a police van.

The news story placed the emphasis on Shiva and how Leo's life had been saved by divine intervention.

An orgy of captions now spun dramatically across the TV screen. *SHIVA IS LIFE* and then *NO BULLET CAN TOUCH THE MAN OF LIGHT*.

"Mama, I don't understand it?" Kira cried, as we watched the transmission in the hotel foyer. "Why is Papa called the *man of light* now?"

"Don't worry about it," soothed Maya, clutching her daughter to her breast. "It's a religion. Things like this happen sometimes. I don't understand it either. Just ignore the TV. Would you like a piece of chocolate?"

"Oh yes," Kira screamed delightedly.

Finally an entire documentary on the band was now aired, with every Manhattan gig examined and diagnosed in infinite detail, always pointing out the spiritual direction at every stage, the evolving dedication to the Shiva path, and all the sacrifices of the homelessness which Leo had chosen and suffered for so long.

Next there was a swift break for commercials showing the exact brand of the organic energy drink that Leo preferred, where to buy the Shiva robes he wore, and even a list of Hindu colleges and universities where they taught Leo's particular interpretation of Shaivism, and also

which colleges in America included his book as part of their syllabus.

Finally a priest appeared on camera, and urged all viewers to attempt to live without a home, and also to practice fasting.

“America loves a wanderer,” he said. “Why possess something if you could equally possess nothing? Do you truly know who you are, or what you could be? How about saying goodbye to the life you know, and becoming a simple man, with almost nothing, but one with everything? Shiva will care for you! Live life on the road!”

For the next few days I turned these words over in my mind.

City by city, we worked our way west. There would be entire days of driving past endless forest and farmland, and then empty plains. This was the America that I could recognise. However the cities continued to reinvent themselves in an unusual and astonishing manner, both visually and in other ways too.

Big Joe had left the tour days before, immediately being replaced by Marvin, an overweight ex-boxer from Houston. He was fond of drinking, and liked to tell jokes and talk conspiracy theory. But under strict orders never to drink when driving, he stayed sober and held the bus firmly on the road, taking special care when crossing mountains, or in bad weather.

As we entered Denver, I woke up from a deep sleep and peered out the tour bus window. Mixed in with all the colourful ads for toothpaste, TVs, hairspray, movies, albums and cars, I caught a quick flash of several huge billboards of the four armed, blue faced God, swiftly followed by many little messages.

Shiva is Love. And now there was another. *Have you prayed today?* And then a third ... *the Blue-faced One is Watching.*

We were coasting at top speed down a narrow corridor of the highway, with flashing, illuminated, neon letters jumping out at us from both sides - *Death is Joy*, and then *Suffering is Light*, and next, *Love the Fire*, and then finally, *You have no Self*.

By now I had known the family quite a while. It always astonished me how rarely Maya ever talked, even about anything at all. And yet she was continually busy, looking after the children, cooking, shopping for food, and playing her music too.

At this moment, she sat quietly at the back of the bus, sun pouring off her face, humming to herself, content to be exploring America in this way.

It suddenly occurred to me how very stable she was, and supportive. All at once I was seeing the real Maya, the essence of who she was. I remembered how many times she had gone out taxi driving, in those early NYC days, when the money ran too low. And then how she would personally walk me through those terrible Liberty Avenue streets to the subway when I visited them and stayed late.

But if you surveyed her beautiful, graceful, Russian face, partially disguised by long dark hair, she remained private, silent and inscrutable. However I knew that she appreciated me, as a musician and as a person, and I felt that she understood that like her, I was here to balance the family situation. We both admired Leo and his fearless, Viking way to break through past any rival, or obstacle in our path. Whosoever dared block us would instantly have his nerve shattered into a thousand pieces by Leo's bold approach, and would thus retire, agonised, scratching his head in pain and confusion. At that point Leo would wave us onwards, past this wretched opponent, to reach the

desired goal, whether it be a new gig, a record deal, or merely a place in line at a simple food stand. However what Maya and I knew, and Irene too, was that this great bear of a man, Leo, had his troublesome sides too, like excessive roaring at the kids, for example. We regarded this as a necessary evil, the darker side of a golden coin that was buying our way into a rich future of enlightenment, music and exploration. I felt that Leo was also like a giant bird, such that if he sank his talons into you, then you were done for. In any case, I admired Maya for understanding and tolerating all this, and felt that she was a great woman, a true Russian, and that the women of the west might learn something from her. But most of all, it was her serenity, also the sweet sound of her voice, specially in the morning, that touched my heart. She was a wondrous gift of a person, a good musician, with an open mind and a warm, welcoming soul. She had fought her way to America, bringing with her many tiny children, and she had performed this amazing act of courage and will with no money and hardly any regular place to live. Very much like a soldier, she had survived every possible onslaught, including occasional actual physical attacks and threats in the government shelter where the family had first been forced to live. She was the ultimate survivor, yet also a woman of culture and dreams, and then mysticism and philosophy, and so much more.

All of this ran through my mind as the bus thundered forwards along the highway, and as I watched Maya, her face still shining in the sun, but with eyes closed now, dreaming of our great journey, and of all the wonderful places we had yet to discover.

A lone eagle swerved across the wind, high above the Grand Canyon. Miles below, sunshine raked across the rugged terrain of the midwest. Like an intricate toy, the

invisible wheels of America were turning. A series of random, diverse activities had been triggered by the dawn.

In Oklahoma, farmers were wheeling their tractors out of sheds, preparing for the day's work. Far away, at Niagara Falls, tourists were venturing, inch by inch, along a precarious, high walkway, under the gigantic plumes of water of the enormous waterfall itself. Further south, in the music clubs of Memphis, cleaners were sweeping floors, scrubbing table surfaces, and carefully stacking cocktail glasses on shelves.

The eagle banked and swerved in the heights, but then, seeing a mouse hundreds of yards below, plunged madly, swooping towards her prey.

Jet airliners criss-crossed the cramped air lanes above Washington airport. In New Orleans, the water levels were unusually high against the levees. At a Mormon temple in Vermont, the morning prayers were over and the church was empty once more. At the HQ of General Motors, the CEO was entering a meeting, and calling for immediate refreshments.

A lone cross country runner set off along a secluded forest trail outside Cincinnati.

For a few moments, all was quiet across the land.

Then all hell broke loose.

Down in Houston, Texas, a wild burst of gunfire suddenly broke out within a crowded school assembly hall. The screaming of two hundred children could be heard for hundreds of yards. Within minutes many ambulance vans and police cars had careened wildly to the scene.

What they found confirmed their worst fears. Fifty-seven children and four teachers were dead or wounded. The shooters themselves had been two children with mental disorders, and also serious drug problems.

Tragically, it was then discovered that five Hindu priests had been present, and that two had perished as they

threw themselves into the hail of bullets, attempting to save the children. The other three had been slightly wounded.

When the news avalanche exploded around the disbelieving nation, a trail of vehicles descended on police stations everywhere. Perhaps the sacrifice of these Hindu priests had finally won through to the hearts and souls of people far and wide. Whatever the reason, the Americans were now finally conceding that the era of gun ownership no longer made any sense.

In each police station, dumfounded officers were receiving every possible type of armament. The weapons were stacked in mountains to the ceiling. Some gun owners demanded compensation and were swiftly paid. Others asked for nothing at all, but handed their weapons in anyway.

A week of mourning was declared. The mothers and fathers of the dead infants were interviewed by prime-time cable hosts. The nation had largely acted as one man, in finally rejecting these weapons. However there were the inevitable pockets of resistance remaining in some southern states.

New laws were put into action, and the stores that sold these weapons targeted, taxed and often put out of business altogether.

Outside America, the nations of the world applauded. The impossible had been achieved and the future looked hopeful. American tourists were greeted with welcoming smiles wherever they travelled, and in the corridors of power, attractive, new trade agreements were inked.

All of this affected me very deeply. Up till now I had always travelled with a handgun concealed in my personal bag. But the next time we stopped beside a lake, I walked a few hundred yards away from the others, then hurled the thing as far as I could, right into the deepest water.

But the violent incident in Chicago had unsettled Leo, and also the murderous attack on the children and priests in Houston. For many days he was not himself any more. We would hear him muttering at the back of the van, and he often had a paranoid look in his eyes. My red skin problem had returned, too. It itched like crazy, making me frantic with frustration. I felt that I was ready for another body, that this one was burned out, dry and useless.

One morning we were passing through a long, dry valley. Suddenly I heard a wild scream behind me, and looked back. Leo had slapped Serge's face, and the boy was doubled up in pain. Then I saw red.

"Stop the bus," I yelled, and the driver swerved to a halt.

"Now get out," I roared at Leo. His face was suddenly shocked and incredulous. He slowly disembarked.

"Are you going to fight me, little Max?" he asked, patronisingly, still amazed but grinning now.

"You should not be hitting your children," I answered, standing my ground squarely. "Never. Do you understand?"

Then I opened the driver door, pushed the driver further into the bus, jumped into the cab, grabbed the wheel, and accelerated away fast, leaving Leo standing on the road behind us.

"Max, what are you doing?" Maya asked from where she sat behind me. In her voice I heard a bizarre conflict of emotions. I was so angry that I was almost ready to drive all the way to LA, leaving Leo stranded forever. With a strange chill down my back, I remembered how I had always planned this right from the start, to immobilise Leo, and then steal his family band away from him. Should I now do this? A sensation of raw power and emotion reared up inside me, almost impossible to quell. But then I softened. I knew Leo was not this devil figure of my

imagination. Underneath it all he was a good man, and a great friend. He just had a few negative issues, like so many of us.

“Don’t worry, I only want to scare him,” I told her.

“Max, I think you should go back,” shouted Irene suddenly. She sounded very worried.

After a few more minutes of driving I finally slowed the bus to a halt. We had rounded the side of the hill such that I knew that Leo could not see us any more. The kids in the back were silent now, but Kira was crying softly.

“Should we go back for him?” Maya ventured.

“He’s a bad man, but he’s my Pa,” Serge said. “I think we’d better pick him up. I’m glad you scared him though, Max,” he added. “My cheek is sore.” He rubbed it and winced.

Leo’s face was like thunder when we finally found him.

“Max, I did not hire you to play clever games like this,” he hissed. “You would do well to remember that you are only a hired sideman here. In any case I knew that it was nothing - it did not worry me for a second.”

I shivered under his rigid, frozen stare. He clambered back into the vehicle and barked out the order to drive on. This event was never mentioned again.

VENICE BEACH

Several weeks later we were in LA, driving towards Sunset Boulevard, before heading for Venice Beach. The long tour and the press campaign had finally paid off. Our record company were coming with generous payments towards tour support. But most of all, the US government, backed by the Hindu advisory team, had pulled so many strings that new doors of opportunity had opened for us everywhere.

I was vaguely aware that many of our rival bands had been quietly taken out of action by mysterious agencies. I tried not to think too much about this. After all, they were mainly death metal and horror rock outfits. Did America really need that stuff? I doubted this.

So it was with the greatest of pleasure that I now saw, from the window of the bus, that our promotional flyers had saturated the walls of this highway that we now swept along. One by one, our smiling faces on the billboards flashed past, as the bus hurtled onwards.

Next, it was fabulous to see new, larger, psychedelic pictures of the band. This time we were actually depicted as flying in the air, high above the mountains in India. Then the inevitable stream of quasi-propaganda captions followed. *GET ON THE SHIVA TRAIN, ORANGE AND BLUE* and *DON'T FORGET TO BREATHE*, and then finally *SHHHH...*

Now arrived a group of pictures of snakes curling themselves around electric guitars. The windows of the bus were open, and the warm afternoon air gusted across my face. Another caption made us all laugh. *LOSE YOURSELF.*

After this there was an enormous video screen, a hundred feet high, showing an animated video of Shiva with his trident, sitting on a mountain.

By this time we had entered the heart of the city.

At a stoplight, as we halted, a few Shiva followers recognised us, and yelled and clamoured for autographs. Quickly I pulled down my window and signed one or two just before the lights changed to green.

The Chinese girl, Coral, was riding with us. We had run into her, quite by chance, when buying gas, just before entering LA. She had raced up and thrown her arms around Maya, and sobbed, crying out that she had run away from home because her father had been beating her.

For a moment Maya was confused. Surely the police would be looking for her? But how could she send her back home for more beating?

“Oh please, Pa?” Irene beseeched. “Can she come with us?” The adults had exchanged questioning glances.

“For a while at least?” I had suggested. And this had clinched it. The kids had thrown themselves onto Coral in a frenzy of embraces, all crying and laughing at the same time. For now she was in.

At this moment I was trying to play cards with her, but it was a little hard due to the incessant bumping of the vehicle. Eventually after a few hands we gave up, and I looked outside again.

“Max, what is it like, playing music in New York?” she asked me suddenly. “You did that, didn’t you?” she hustled. Her sweet little Chinese eyes were very curious, as she played with a stray pigtail, and then fidgeted, the way schoolgirls do, clinging on to the top of the seat in front, as the bus careened on its way through the city.

“It’s intensive,” I began. “So where should I begin?”

“Begin anywhere,” she said.

I took a deep breath. All of the Manhattan music life was swirling in front of my eyes.

“There’s a lot to say,” I warned her.

“Say it anyway,” she insisted.

“OK, so there in that town you would live or die for the music,” I told her dreamily.

“Ooh, I love that, *I love that*,” she gushed. “That’s so cool! And you were really there! Ooh!” She writhed in her seat, flushing.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I quipped cleverly, and she giggled. So I combed my fingers through my hair, and prepared to begin.

“Oh no,” she cried suddenly. “You’re starting to go bald!”

“No I am not,” I argued, rather scandalised by this sudden attack.

“It’s OK, really it is, don’t worry because I know exactly how to fix it,” she soothed. “There’s a special cream I’ve seen.”

Leo was smirking at this development, chuckling in his seat slightly further back, as he proudly shook out his red lion’s mane, slightly out of my vision.

“Well, do you want to know about how it was or not?” I demanded, suddenly outraged.

“Yes, yes. Oh sorry. Oh, I do want to know,” she wept. “Please! I am listening now. Really I am.”

So I began.

“For decades, New York had created the greatest players in the world. I could feel that the moment I got off the plane,” I added. “There is a jinx in the air, but a good one. The streets are charmed, and full of magic. And it’s all there, right now, all happening as I speak.

“Nobody ever stops giggling or practising, ever.

“You ask me about music? Well, what music do *you* like, for example? Punk? Funk? Bluegrass?” I fixed her with a stern glance.

“All of it,” she said, eyes gleaming with satisfaction. Then she nuzzled up to my arm as I continued.

“Well, there really is everything you would want,” I admitted. “Blues and jazz, and rock, and of course R&B and soul everywhere. Plenty of black music, and nobody is scared to use that name for it. Whatever colour people are, we are proud of this black music and its legacy. It is the engine driving everything, the music of the slaves, and as such, it takes you to a miraculous place if you play it, either that or it will destroy you. Your life is on a knife-edge in a sense.”

“I love black music,” she breathed excitedly.

“Also, everything in the music world moves at lightning speed,” I continued. “You can make it overnight if you have the right combination of the groove, the song, the connections and the look. Plus, of course, a certain legend. It’s worth going through any amount of suffering to get to the goal. I saw people hyped, wired, caffeinated round the clock. Business meetings or recording or writing sessions can easily happen at 11pm or even 2am, for example. Everybody I know has total faith in the power, and the reach, and the muscle of this city. Nobody ever questions New York, even though I’ve seen some people becoming casualties fast, and often in denial about it. The town has always been dangerous. If you are not beaten up physically, then you could easily lose your mind, or believe that you were someone that you were not, or both, specially if you stay there too long.

“At the same time, very little is real there,” I admitted.

“Not real? What do you mean, not real,” she cried, suddenly very disturbed.

At this moment there was a muffled oath from behind. I chuckled, and wove on with my tale.

“I have to admit,” I added, treading slowly and carefully now, “that New York is not only the greatest

music city in the world. The fact is that this place has always also been a treacherous land of smoke and mirrors.

“Too many hustlers have a fast-talking story, a scam, a rip-off, a line, a bunch of big lies to make money with. Most are in debt, often terminally. There were times where I watched people hit the big time, then crash and fold, all within the same year.

“Nothing is ever solid or secure there. Appearances count for everything, big cars, beautiful women, expensive clothes and gadgets. People relocate fast too. Nobody reveals their home addresses. Trust hardly exists in that town.”

Seeing Coral’s downcast face, I swiftly switched to more positive territory.

“But the music is real. Nobody can argue with that. And it is the best, we all know it. Real jazz, real blues, real rock and funk, often played by hoary old guys from exotic places, with a century of wisdom enshrined in the cracks and lines of their faces. Funk, samba, country, bluegrass, hip-hop, calypso, jazz, R&B, progressive rock, avant-garde, fusion, salsa, gospel, house, rap, Brazilian forro, M-base, calypso, it goes on and on. You cannot fake that stuff. And there is more. You meet guys with a whole world of music in their heads. College kids who have studied music, and who know real, hip tricks, inherited from jazz legends from times gone by. Professor characters who can read music, and arrange big band orchestras with 24 staves on the sheet music. And then engineers and producers, and writers and thinkers, and talkers and dreamers. Always the dream, the essential dream, because without that what else could there be?

“Naturally, there is big money everywhere, but in the world of the real musicians, almost none, meaning that we survive on love and faith, and passion for the music. A real musician, to me, is real because he can see how

everything is fabricated within the commercial music world. Real musicians improvise, we jam, we dream, and we hang out, and then write and rehearse, and gig and record. Real musicians are not flashy or cheap, or superficial, and don't play cover numbers, you know, unoriginal music. Our music is often spindly and awkward, and quite eccentric, and might lose an audience some nights for being so bloody-minded and obtuse. But it is the real, essential stuff, chock full of character and fire, and rebellion and potency, and never-before-heard sounds, and then also impromptu arrangements.

“New York is the best place in the world for that. This kind of improv music cannot be easily liked or understood by ordinary people, generally speaking. It is too strange and secret, and esoteric. It is full of chants and grooves, and hoodoo and capoeira, and then arcane time signatures, and ethnic modes and scales. Real musicians not only talk differently, but live differently, and do everything differently. We are on our own planet. In our world of free music, guys think outside the box and wear strange, unknown outfits, and even talk a different language sometimes.

“Are you truly talking about yourself?” she demanded. Her eyes were on stalks by now.

“I suppose I am,” I said, with a smile.

“You're a freak!” she squeaked excitedly.

“I guess so,” I admitted.

“Anyway,” I continued, “whole areas of the city are devoted to entire tribes of our kind of guys, with cafes and bars where we will sit up all night, discussing music gear or theory, or where the latest underground gig is, or how to hear the most happening players. Of course this is all mixed in with a potpourri of religion, philosophy, aesthetics, and wild political manifestos, including actual revolution, but also therapy, and then plenty of conspiracy theory too.”

I looked across at her. Coral had her chin on her knees, dreaming. The bus raced onwards, passing skyscrapers on every side.

“Are you still awake?” I asked her.

“Yes, of course I am,” she replied softly.

Now I pointed to all the family sitting around me.

“This Russian family band fits in perfectly with the out-of-the-box, bunch of gypsy-punk, ethnic troubadours I hang out with in New York,” I told her.

“I can see that,” she said. We swapped meaningful looks to cement the understanding.

“Oh wow,” she whispered. “Oh my. I don’t understand all of what you told me, but I know that you have seen it all. You guys have really done it. *You are it!* Oh my. This is just totally awesome!”

Before I knew it she had leaned over to kiss me on the cheek, and then jumped up and down in her seat in excitement.

“I’m happy now,” she told me. “You guys are just too much!”

“Thank you,” I said.

“And it all simply happened by chance,” she marvelled. “One day you just ran into this family, who had come all the way from Russia, and you jammed, and now you are touring! It was all so casual. Look at that! It might never have happened!”

“That’s right,” I said.

“I love that,” she cried.

As we cruised gently through downtown LA, I now became aware of orange robes on the streets everywhere. It appeared that many stores here were selling Indian items too. Plus I noticed that the LA police sported brand new outfits, complete with Shiva insignia.

It wasn't just orange robes though. There was more. Pretty soon we were seeing blue faces among the pedestrians on the sidewalk.

"They are painting their faces here, Mama," Irene called out excitedly, clinging on to her window frantically.

"I can see it," Maya answered.

"It's not just hippies, it's everyone," Serge observed. "Dad, can I do that too? I wanna do that!"

"Maybe," Leo said.

We turned into the main road, and now I began to notice that the entrance door of every single major bank had been boarded up. This figured. I had just heard that the Hindu people had finally turned against all the credit card companies, and had made them illegal overnight. I didn't mind in the slightest. In fact I knew that Gray Walker would be rejoicing over this piece of news right now.

In the next few hours we bought newspapers and caught up with the latest stories. There was an explosion of breaking news in the financial world. According to one source, the new government had now pegged the dollar to gold once more, like back in the past, when financial matters were more solid and reliable. There was other news too. Medical care had been made totally free, nationwide, and the university system completely redesigned.

In many cities across the country, teams of Shiva people were knocking on random doors, and offering healing therapy, or free re-education workshops. Of course many people saw echoes of the Soviet Union in this, but nobody complained or kicked up any kind of fuss. At the same time the cultural landscape had become unrecognisable. The art and music world had dissolved into total chaos. Even language was changing fast too.

We were entering a bizarre, unknown, cotton-wool world where many good people of America had mysteriously morphed into mystics and philosophers, and nobody could explain this, but few appeared to care.

Everyone looked high on something to me, but I paid little or no attention.

The good news continued. Very few were homeless or without money any more, since the grand change. The Shiva people had achieved some kind of an economic miracle. Yet no-one could determine exactly where all this new money was coming from.

Our concert today at Venice Beach was going to be right on the sand. It was part of a huge new initiative to celebrate the cleaning up of the city. This gig was to announce the closure of the final credit card company in LA. Those enormous, illicit profits, confiscated by the new regime, were now going to be redistributed to the people, with an actual cash payout happening this afternoon at the concert itself. On top of that, many drug users had been persuaded to quit their habit, and were coming to publicly swear their vow of sobriety, live on the microphone, to the crowd, before receiving their first payment from the repossessed funds. But before all this took place, we would play.

The sun was hot and the sea looked inviting. I jumped in for a dip and then set up. The crowd was forming. We had some top LA funk players on the stand with us.

At a signal from Leo I lead the band into a steaming, funk groove. Then I started up a call and answer session with a group of priests near the stage.

I would yell a word or phrase about all kinds of things to do with enlightenment and reincarnation, and then I would hear them echo my phrase right back to me.

This was something new that nobody had heard before. The crowd pricked up their ears in delight.

It was so simple. But it worked. Pretty soon hundreds of people had taken up the chant. I saw plenty of orange robes out there. Meanwhile, back onstage, the LA

pros were jumping around, smiling from behind their shades.

Soon the crowd was out of control. Many people had climbed up and were partying on the stage, which threatened to collapse any second.

Coral was dancing near the band, and I saw Gray Walker down there too. After a blistering drum break from Serge, Leo went crazy with his harmonica, playing notes I'd never heard before, and always with that wild-man intensity that I knew so well. But I'd never witnessed a gig like this before. We were possessed by unearthly spirits from beyond, and loving every second of it. Maya's face gleamed with satisfaction as she tested out new themes and modes, playing 'outside the box' with all the NYC tricks she knew. But however esoteric our sound became, Irene and Serge saw the dancers and took care that the groove never stop for a second.

Sweat cascaded down my neck. I wondered if I was going mad. The feeling had never ever been this big. Dimly, I saw the palm trees swaying in the breeze as the sun finally began to fall below the sea, shooting out its dying, scarlet rays from the edge of the world. The lights of LA now shone like diamonds in the yellow dusk.

The volume had become overpoweringly loud. Desperately I stuffed wads of tissue in my ears. Now Irene started to solo, and then traded licks with Maya. The PA spat out a few crackles, and a couple of sparks flew from the speaker cones. There was a sea of bodies convulsing and freaking as far as the eye could see. Some had collapsed on the sand, and were being treated by medics.

Then suddenly it was over, and we were down on the ground behind the stage, laughing and crying, and hugging each other.

"You were great, Maya," I raved. "Some of those trumpet lines..."

"You were even better, Max," she told me.

“I loved that wild beat you set up,” Irene enthused, hugging her brother. “It was just the most wicked, righteous pocket!”

“Yeah I know. I broke through,” Serge admitted, puffing out his chest and tapping his sticks together. “This LA vibe is infectious,” he announced. “I figure I just caught a dose.”

“What were those amazing chords?” Leo asked me. “Kind of a blues, gospel thing?”

“Yeah, but it was funk really. Those LA players knew the hippest licks. They triggered it,” I told him.

“Where are they by the way?” He looked around.

“I don’t see them,” he said. “Disappeared. You know how cool those guys are. You cannot pin them down. Probably off to another session already.”

Then something made him sober up fast. The entire family was sensing danger.

I looked up to see two figures standing in front of us. They were in robes that bore the insignia of the Hindu police. A man and a woman, with Indian faces.

“Great gig, guys,” the woman said.

“Is there a problem?” Maya offered gently.

“No,” she smiled. “No problem. We just need a few words with Serge, that’s all.”

“Hey, what have I done?” Serge burst out.

“I will remain with him,” Leo announced firmly.

“Let’s hear what you have to say?”

“Walk a few yards this way with us then,” the Hindu cop commanded. We walked over together towards a giant palm tree where the crowd had thinned out. Then we stopped.

“As you know, we of Shiva live by certain principles and doctrines,” the lady started out gently.

“Can we get to the point?” Leo asked.

“OK, if you want it that way. I think you know that in America today, the spiritual revolution has been

achieved by the reduction of the sense of self, both on a national and a personal basis. We have been monitoring your family at many concerts in several cities. Our records show that your son Serge may still have a sense of self which is not in accordance with what is expected in the new reality of America.

“Is that true?” Serge asked, turning to his father. For the first time in his life, Leo was puzzled. How could a policeman possibly delve into such a personal, private matter? It didn’t make sense.

Meanwhile the lady policeman was getting deeper into the point.

“There is a serious side,” she admitted. “He should stop using heroin, for a start,” she said gently.

“He has,” Leo answered. “You did the rehab, didn’t you, Serge? And you have been clean ever since?”

“Almost,” Serge said in a small voice. At this Leo’s face became cloudy with uncertainty and suppressed rage.

“You should have told me that you failed to quit, Serge,” he said, controlling his emotions with difficulty.

“I won’t do it again, Papa, I promise,” Serge cried out, suddenly tearful.

“You’d better not,” Leo warned, through clenched teeth. There was an embarrassed pause.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” the lady advised. “Our way is based on wisdom, tolerance and love. Serge’s life is written in advance. We cannot help him if his destiny is to take the downward path.”

“One last thing,” the male cop said. “We must ask some more questions.”

“Go ahead,” said Leo.

“Serge?” asked the lady, looking him straight in the face. “What is your goal, or what are your goals in life?”

“To play my music. To help others. To tour. To help my ma and pa,” Serge blurted out. “And to buy a really nice drum kit!” The cops smiled at that.

“You answered well,” the lady told him. “I hope you mean all that you said. We will be on our way then. Don’t worry too much. You guys played a real, happening gig tonight. You rocked Venice Beach. We won’t forget you. Good luck with the tour.”

“You’re supposed to say *break a leg*,” quipped Maya. They chuckled and waved goodbye.

We walked thirty yards down the beach. Then I looked back. The Shiva police were standing quietly in the same spot, their orange and black robes fluttering gently in the breeze. They appeared to be singing softly.

“Hold on, Leo,” I said. “Do you see what the Shiva cops are doing?”

He turned and stared intently. Then a slow grin spread across his features.

“They are chanting,” he said. “They are performing a blessing for Serge.”

Close by, sitting outside a cafe, two women in Mexican hats, colourful shawls and chokers were munching on hamburgers, and chatting about the latest news.

“Hey Zoey, have you heard of this bunch of homeless who are living in a valley outside LA?” Marcia asked. “Many thousands, I’ve read. Maybe more. Some kind of a weird cult, I reckon. It’s a long way off. Who would live in such a place? Just desert and mountains there. It certainly beats me.”

“Well they can stay there, I reckon,” Zoey retorted. “We got enough on our hands right here. Do you know that I can’t even find a bank any more? Me and Sam were going to buy a house, and a car too, all on installments, but the new laws totally changed everything. Damn them! Ain’t nothing sacred?” She wiped hands on her napkin disgustedly, and looked out to sea, blinking against the sunset.

After the cops had gone, the devil entered Leo. I had gone for a swim in the half-darkness. It was very relaxing to frolic and jump in the waves, splashing around like a child for ten minutes. But I had no idea of the unpleasant surprise waiting for me when I got out.

Exactly as I was trailing back up the beach, several pairs of arms grabbed me from behind. Before I knew what was happening I had been pinned down on the sand. Now I became uncomfortably aware that the entire Russian family were fighting to hold me down, giggling with mirth, while on my right I saw Leo digging a large hole in the sand.

“Don’t bury me,” I wailed. “I’m innocent!” I could see the joke by now, but it was still quite an unpleasant ordeal that they were putting me through.

“I can’t breath,” I roared. “Lay off!” Somebody reduced the weight on my chest.

“Go easy,” shouted Irene. “He’s not so young any more!”

“I’m an old man,” I moaned.

Before long I was in the hole with sand up to my head, feeling slightly more calm.

“Well done, guys,” I enthused.

“Bye Max,” Leo laughed. “Come on everybody. Let’s go home.” Then he stuck his face into mine and glared like a demon.

“High tide tonight,” he sniggered. “The water is rising fast. Have fun!”

At this they walked off, leaving me swearing and protesting irritably. Then, one by one, they straggled back, and stood around chuckling mischievously.

Finally they started digging and eventually removed all the sand, and I was able to crawl out of my hole.

“It’s a traditional Russian punishment,” smirked Leo. Then he looked concerned and a little regretful. “But are you OK?” he asked.

“I was better before,” I grumbled, as we walked back to the stage area.

Prior to leaving Venice Beach, we watched a ceremony where many hundreds of drug addicts took the stage, and publicly made their vows to stay off drugs for a year. It was quite a grisly collection of weathered, grim faces, and wasted bodies. They were making the best of it, but there was no doubt that these addicts had been worn down, almost to skin and bone in some cases. The priests were busily attending to all their needs and cares, occasionally referring them to the medical tent in severe cases, blessing them, giving advice and encouragement, and pointing out free rehab centres where they could stay for the next while.

At a certain point I was amazed to see Serge climb up on the stage and make his vow. After doing so he had a few words for the crowd.

“We’re with you guys all the way,” he said. “I’m only eleven, and if I can do this, then so can you. We’ve all been through it side by side, years of poverty, sleeping in the alley, hating the world, using those substances to give the feeling that it’s all OK. But then that same drug takes more and more until there’s nothing left. Well it ain’t gonna do that to me any more. I’m through and done with it now. This time I’m clean, and I’m gonna stay clean. And let’s have a big hand for the Hindu brothers who are making all this possible. And I want to thank my Dad too, and my family band.”

There was a huge cheer at this. The priests chuckled delightedly amongst themselves. I saw Maya’s eyes go misty, and I had a lump in my throat. It was easy to be proud of Serge at that moment.

We had a quick game of football on the sand, then climbed into the bus and set off.

“When do we get some sleep?” I called out to Leo.

“Don’t worry, you’ll find out soon enough,” he told me. After a short drive we turned into a small tree-lined avenue and pulled to a halt.

“Home sweet home,” he said. “The record company lined this up,” he added. “It’s an apartment with a pool.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as we entered. The place was roomy and felt comfortable. I knew that the gig had tired everyone out. Also, the tour bus needed a checkover, since some mechanical problems had been cropping up.

“The record company liked how the gig went down,” he said. “Their man was there at the beach and I had a few words with him.”

Totally exhausted, I chose a room, threw my bag down, and immediately fell asleep, fully dressed, sprawled sideways across the bed.

In the morning I discovered that we were to spend a full week here in LA. The weather was fine and we soon began to recover from the road. I began by lying beside the pool, and writing songs. However the kids were unable to relax though, and soon they invited new friends to visit, and a non-stop party ensued, which then did not stop for days on end. After a while I would bury myself in my room with a magazine, or just check out the city for a few hours.

On one of these trips I ran into Gray Walker, who was already much recovered after being shot at the Chicago meeting. It turned out that he needed a place to stay, so I brought him back to the apartment where Leo, delighted, immediately offered him a room. However I soon became aware that Gray no longer talked politics, and there was also something else different about him too. He was more restrained and serene, and he looked you in the eye more often.

We were also beginning to notice that Irene, always very pretty, had a particular new glow of pleasure on her face most of the time.

After five days Leo became aware that she had fallen in love. He lead her into his room, before erupting.

“This cannot be allowed,” he told her. “Of course you must realize that? We’re a band, touring to earn our living. You’re only thirteen! Any father would say the same. Don’t stare at me like that! Please, Irene, think! It has to stop, right now. We’re moving on tomorrow anyway.”

“But Dad,” she moaned. “I didn’t ask for this? It just happened. Please understand? I love him, Dad! Can he travel with us? Please say yes? I want to be good. But I have these feelings. I can’t stop them! I will want to die if I have to go!”

“I’ve heard enough,” he snapped. “It’s out of the question. Tell him it’s over.”

She wailed and ran out, and then into her room, and slammed her door shut. The family heard the sound of sobbing for most of the night.

In the morning Leo silently handed her a paper.

“What is this?” she asked, tearfully.

“Ancient Hindu scriptures,” he said. “You are to read them, copy them out, and then memorise them.”

Without a word she picked them up and went back to her room, and locked the door once more.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” asked Maya gently.

“I know what I am doing,” he barked. “Now it’s time to pack. We’re leaving tonight.”

Later, when all the packing was done, I stood with Leo on the verandah for a moment. It was already dark, and the lights shone like stars up and down the valley below us. But now I had uncomfortable feeling. I wanted to love LA because of something real, not because this city represented the pinnacle of money and fame.

“We’re changing, Max,” Leo said, breaking the silence. He turned to me with a question in his tired eyes.

“I can hardly recognise you,” he continued. “You are more calm, and less confrontational than you were. What happened? This is not the Max I remember. And it’s not just you. Everything is different now. Look at what we have seen on the streets of LA, and then at the concert. It’s a whole new way to exist. Like one big family.” He paused for breath, then shot me a sober look.

“All of America has altered so fast,” he continued. “It’s making me dizzy,” he laughed. “Tell me, do you believe that America has transformed us? Has our band achieved something magical, as I suspect? Have we altered this country, together with the priests?”

“I reckon it’s a combination of the two,” I said, my eyes fixed firmly on the horizon, watching those familiar lines of perspective which merged together far out to sea in the half-darkness of the night. And once more I was reminded that I must keep travelling onwards, that this was the law of America, exactly as I had figured it out that day in Brooklyn so very long before.

He brushed his long beard back with a rough gesture, and then pulled his jacket tighter against the evening wind. I saw that he was older now, more lines around the face, and that his eyes had become sad.

“We’ve come a long way from the Lower East Side,” he said.

“I don’t like to leave LA,” I told him. Then I had a thought.

“Do you know that back in New York, long ago, I actually wanted to use your audio tapes to actually get you locked up? My idea was to get you committed to psychiatric hospital, and then I also planned to steal your family band for myself? I can’t believe I was thinking that, Leo. Can you forgive me? It’s awful.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, with a grunt of amusement, patting my hand. “We were all going through that kind of stuff together. I forgive you.”

GARFIELD

Soon after that we packed the bus and set off. After a few minutes I saw a corner store.

“Stop,” I shouted. “I need a cola.” We parked and I went inside. After paying, I came out again, but now the bus had mysteriously disappeared. For a few minutes all hell broke through in my head. What was I going to do? Go back to New York? This was unthinkable. Had they deserted me deliberately, or just forgotten about me? Either way, things were really bad. I sat down on the kerb, and desperately tried to rationalise.

Then, after a few more minutes, the bus came sailing into view once more. Kids were hanging out of windows, screaming with laughter. Leo was in the front seat, also helpless with mirth.

“See how it feels now?” he guffawed. He was literally crying with joy.

“Bastards,” I muttered, climbing back in. “Anyway I knew it was just your childish game,” I added.

“Ha ha! Served you right,” roared Leo, utterly pleased with himself. We set off once more.

I was sad to be leaving LA. The gig had left me emotional, and wanting more. I had met and played with some great session musicians. But most of all, the press had praised us, saying that we had altered things more than any other band. I felt proud.

In the back seat rode a new passenger. It was Gray Walker. But this was an entirely changed man. He was dressed in an orange robe now, and claimed that he had cast politics forever out of his life. When questioned about it, he would merely mutter that politics had become rotten to the core, and that he had seen a vision of a newly awakened

America. Then he had peeled back some clothing to reveal scars on the arm from the Chicago shooting.

“I don’t totally understand Shaivism,” he admitted, when pressed. “But it’s clearly the way forward. Otherwise this country will continue to slide down into violence and destruction. Look at what just happened to me.”

I was agog with amazement at this new turnaround. Politics to religion? It was a major shift.

The family whispered to each other about this.

“No, I’m finished with politics,” he concluded firmly, and then began chanting quietly to himself as the bus gathered speed, passing many palm trees on either side.

With Marvin cracking jokes at the wheel, we coasted towards the outskirts of town. He had partied full on in LA all week, and was considerably hung-over, but after a stern appraisal by Leo, during which he had been ordered to prove he could walk in a straight line, and that his breath was no longer tinged with alcohol, he was allowed to drive.

It felt good to lie back in my seat and watch the streets flash by. There were plenty of orange robes on the sidewalks, and some recognised us and smiled and then waved as we passed.

However it took several hours to break through the hell of suburban traffic, and finally exit the city. After that it was just sand. We had decided to drive through the night, so gradually everyone fell asleep. I woke up many times due to the bumping and jolting of the wheels, but finally a streak of red announced the dawn, and then, as it broke through, we made occasional stops for food and drink. By mid-morning people were waking up properly. There was a dull buzz of conversation and a couple of flies gamboled around.

At this stage we had all settled down into the rhythm of the journey. Now it was Leo’s turn to play cards

with Coral. I had a song I was writing on guitar, even though it was tough to get the chord structure exactly right. Maya was singing gently to herself in Russian. Irene and Kira were hitting each other, and then flicking rubber bands at each others' faces. Serge was sleeping. The driver was tuning from station to station on the radio. There was nothing much to watch outside the windows, except plenty of cactus plants, a few gas stations, some ridges and valleys occasionally covered in yellow, dry brush.

The radio was on, and now a radio debate commenced. It was a BBC show, coming from England by some kind of live linkup.

As I listened it became clear that several UK experts, including some established authors and film-makers, were welcoming the new Hindu-style America.

"We have to tune our minds into a new reality," Warren Matthews declared dramatically. The independent TV producer paused for a second.

"The colonialist era is over," he announced. "Capitalism has been discredited. Democracy is dead. The last thing we ever expected or wanted was religious fundamentalism, and yet, incredibly, it has today created a success story for America. At this point I would call upon my learned colleague. Professor Pickering, to provide a few relevant insights." There was a short silence, then the sound of another man clearing his throat.

"I hardly know where to begin," croaked the professor. "However, here are some remarkable figures," he added. There was the sound of rustling sheets of paper.

"I see that the US has withdrawn its military forces from many regions," he wheezed. "This is very good. Also, actions protecting the environment are up by 89 per cent - excellent. The crime rate, including murder rate inside the US, is remarkably depleted. The improvements regarding the treatment of animals in agriculture is nothing short of a miracle. As for education, it's simply marvellous. Then,

what else? We observe new schools and colleges opening everywhere. Except...”

“Except that it is a radical, Hindu, fundamentalist takeover,” sniped James Masterton, the leading authority on both religion and social sciences.

“Yet they practice tolerance for all religions,” cut in Pickering sharply. “As does the Vatican, by the way.”

“But what about freedom of thought?” raved Jack Finn suddenly. The award winning scriptwriter was incandescent with rage.

“They are anti-rationalism,” Finn shouted. “All this poppycock about love your death, and destroy the self, and all coming from a four armed, blue faced, nutcase? For Peter’s sake, can you not see when you are being taken for a ride? It’s utter hocus pocus! Hogwash! Sheer bunkum!”

“So what then about Christianity which has so prejudiced British law throughout the years?” answered Pickering. “Don’t you see how unfair that is to other religions? Especially in a Britain which has welcomed so many recent immigrants of diverse faiths?”

At this point the radio conversation swerved rapidly to and fro, contrasting the varying threats to religion or to politics, or to science, or even to sanity itself.

Then, as the family listened intently, Irene had a question.

“Papa, is it true the Hindu people are better than the ones who were running America before?” she asked suddenly, leaning out in the aisle and tapping her father hard on the arm.

“Of course it’s true,” he replied. “We always knew that something like this would take place. It was only a matter of time.”

“And we made it happen,” chanted Serge in a sudden ecstasy, rocking around in his seat.

“We did our best,” Maya called from the front seat.

“I’m proud,” Irene said, eyes wide with pride and satisfaction, and now she leaned back with a triumphant smile.

“I’ll second that,” shouted Gray, who had been silent throughout the entire broadcast.

Suddenly the tour bus engine coughed and spluttered, and then slowed down.

“What the hell?” snarled Marvin. But then it picked up speed again, as we passed some giant cactus plants on the right.

“That’s a relief,” piped up Serge. “Imagine getting stuck out here! You’d be dead in a few hours!”

“No chance of that,” laughed Marvin, in a confident, jovial manner. We all sat back comfortably as Irene twisted the sound dial louder.

“Shhh,” she hissed. “I’m trying to learn something here.” Leo winked at Maya proudly. He knew how very intelligent his daughter was.

Now the radio program was more loud and distinct, as our tour bus gambolled onwards through endless desert.

“Could I remind everyone how very precarious the idea of democracy is?” Pickering was asserting. His tone was nervous and strained. “Please remember that in Ancient Greece, the pinnacle of old world democracy, the entire city state was once entirely overrun by the attacking Spartan army because the Athenian parliament spent two entire entire days debating what to do about being invaded, while the invasion was actually happening?”

“And that’s only the start of it,” he added. Democracy cannot exist when the world is in crisis, as it now is. Has no-one here noticed how fascism is now sweeping the western world? How we are drowning within a swamp of decadence and corruption?” There were mutters of assent.

Suddenly there was a great roar from the radio, and a muffled crash. Then a distant moan.

“My dear fellow!” a deep voice shouted. Now we heard another groan, then stifled laughter.

“Well it’s non-stop action here in the studio today!” the host jabbered hysterically. At this point there were more confused noises.

I swapped incredulous glances with Leo.

“What the hell?” he asked. The radio went silent, and then finally someone in the studio broke the silence..

“Is he OK?” a voice asked.

“It appears that Professor Pickering fell off his chair,” the host admitted, sounding confused and rather guilty.

“Damn thing broke right under me,” Pickering growled. “Blast! I’m OK, I suppose. Still breathing. But can’t you fools buy better chairs? This stuff is nonsense. Bloody nearly broke my back!”

“Are you sure you’re OK?” the host begged. “A glass of water maybe?”

“I was better before,” he muttered. “No, forget the water. Listen, I’m quite alright. Just surprised and a little nervous, that’s all. It will pass. Look here,” he rambled on. “Now what was I saying? I have entirely lost my train of thought. Ah yes.”

“Please, please continue?” the host urged. “We are all ears.”

“As I said before, our British legal system has always been linked with Christianity,” he continued, in an oddly patient voice. “But Britain is multi-racial today, with many religions, not just one. I suggest that here in England we follow the new initiative which has taken America by storm. Why not duplicate the successful example of Hindu culture to seek out a new system which shall be the guardian of world peace? India has consistently co-existed

in harmony with the international community. Surely they have earned our trust by now?

“No, I have more,” he shouted, silencing the new growls of dissent with a swift command for silence.

“Whether we like it or not, the west is mocked, but also feared by the east, in the world today. There are very solid reasons for this, I am afraid. We must accept their moral standpoint and achieve harmony.

“Do we want yet another war, another desperate, horrific bloodbath such as is looming right now? Of course not! There is an alternative solution right in front of us. It is America! They have done the improbable and the impossible! America has created a successful, *Shivaistic* peaceful transformation.

“Let us follow America’s example. I suggest that we pay tribute to the greater wisdom of Shiva and Hinduism, and also to the Indian people themselves, including their government, in recognition of the fact that they are, and always have been, the eternal guardians of sacred knowledge and enlightenment. Let us recognise these obvious, real truths, and pay our respects, and agree to follow their initiative and their pathway to world peace. I would also urge that we do this now, right now, or it will be too late.”

There was a stunned silence. For a while nobody moved or spoke.

“It’s all going to be different now, Pa, isn’t it?” Irene called out anxiously.

“I liked how it was before,” moaned Serge, flicking a rubber band at Irene, who, in turn, flicked it at Kira, hitting her on the lip. She roared out in pain, and Maya hastily cradled her in her arms, and tried to sooth her, but could not stop the sobbing.

And then, from the radio, Masterton finally spoke. He sounded weary, yet resigned.

“I believe that my friend is correct,” he answered. “It is imperative that we find a way to work with America and the entirety of her new-found Hindu teachings,” he continued. “Our own church upholds all the same principles of pacifism and charity which are clearly visible with Shiva. But it is tragically obvious that much of the western world has today lost its sense of the sacred. We are now almost entirely destitute of spirituality. It is essential that we recognise these facts, and negotiate with the east to form a consensus of the able and of the willing, and thus work towards a new future. I hereby welcome all of the people of Shiva, as fellow workers in the global project for the betterment of humanity.

“The way of the soul has always been on a higher level than politics,” he continued. “So what if religion rules America today, rather than parliamentary democracy?”

There was a chorus of groans in the background, but he ignored these, and issued a final challenge, in a voice which was raised, but also proud, noble and defiant.

“Could it be that this new style is better than what we had before?” he demanded. “Is it superior to the circus of greed, corruption and warfare which has been the way of the west up till today? Well, I say it is! Yes, yes and yes again!”

Now his voice became charged and heroic as he delivered the glorious finale with words which reverberated across the studio.

“Let there be a new utopia within our blessed, sacred mother earth, a majestic new world where each man finally learn to respect his brother! If America has had the courage to take this step, I say that we in England should follow!”

At this there was the sound of applause which began slowly, but then increased steadily until it was a thundering roar. I saw Maya wipe a tear from her eye, and even little Serge looked very serious.

The radio debate was over, and the theme music began to play. Someone reached over to switch it off. Then I glanced at Leo. He was grinning broadly.

“Looks like we’re winning,” he said.

The road wound on. We had left the city long behind by now. At this point the tour bus was winding its way through a vast, desolate landscape of low, yellow hills, where nothing moved. Suddenly I felt very alone in this haunted, hopeless place of dry scrub and rocks, and red earth. Not even a bird was visible in the sky.

Right now Irene echoed what Serge had said previously.

“Imagine being lost here?” she muttered, and shuddered. Already it was far too hot. The children began to moan that they needed a rest from the endless journeying. All were thirsty. Maya looked around anxiously, and then hugged Kira, who was beginning to cry.

All at once I became aware of a small shack on the right. The bus skidded to a halt. We poured out of the vehicle, finding our feet unsteadily, and blinking against the blinding sun. Then an angry red-faced man in a plaid shirt, braces down his chest, and a huge, dishevelled Texan hat, staggered out with a wild glare.

“Be off!” he quavered. “Gypsies! I know who you are! Vagrants, is it? I’ll have non of ye on this here my land!” Instantly the family took fright and froze on their feet.

Now an elderly Chinese woman in a filthy green jumpsuit appeared from behind the shack, and flew at him indignantly. Her voice was shrill and menacing.

“Garfield? How dare you threaten my customers. It’s the same thing every time! Now lay off, or I’ll brain ya!”

At that we noticed a small stall of fruit and vegetables for sale close by. The woman had picked up a battered saucepan, and now she waved it, and then flailed her arms in his direction.

“Get back to your ‘taters and clean ’em proper,” she yelled. “And you stay away from our new visitors. How dare you? I said how dare you? Did you hear me? And have you taken your pills? I bet you forgot!”

We remained frozen, and so did Garfield. Rooted on the spot, he chomped his jaw up and down before launching into a clumsy apology.

“Where ye from, strangers?” he demanded. “Praps I was a little frontish before, but I don’t mean no harm. You ain’t from these parts, is you? Where is you from, anyways?” His eyes were probing and burning with curiosity, as he began to creep closer, inch by inch.

“Russia,” Serge suddenly piped up.

At this the old man went wild. He staggered on the spot, and his arms and legs jerked spasmodically.

“Martha,” he whispered, “Martha! Hear me now - you go get my gun. *Russkies!* Call the police! Holy crap! We done be goners now.” Leo covered his eyes, shaking with suppressed mirth. Kira began to wail. But Garfield had only just begun.

“Martha,” he hissed once more, inching backwards, until he was back inside the doorway of the shack with just the tip of his hat visible.

“Don’t mind him,” Martha laughed with a hearty guffaw. He ain’t so quick in the brain since he started brewing his own ‘tater gin. He’ll be fine. Just let him be. He done got no gun anymore ’cos I buried it last year.” She made a happy little face. “Anyone thirsty? We got soft drinks over at the stand?”

The family breathed a sigh of relief, and Leo and I chuckled with glee. The family relaxed. Maya comforted

the terrified little Kira, who alone remained still, clutching her grey rabbit, eyes wide open with shock.

As we chose some peaches and figs, and then colas, Martha launched into a swift account of her life up till now. They had become fed up with LA, she let us know. It was the aggression, the pollution, and then the computers, she told us. Yes, she knew that this here was a crazy, wild place to live, but it suited them.

“Nobody ever comes here,” she laughed knowingly. “There’s only us and the hills, and a few birds,” she cackled, revealing many rotten teeth in a wide smile.

Then she picked on Coral.

“But you’re Chinese like me,” she crowed, her ancient brown face splitting into a thousand cracks of amazement. Suddenly she was fondling the girl and fussing over her, and then inspecting her dental brace and pigtails with motherly attention.

“Come and see *Captain Fabulous*,” she gushed. A long whinney told us that the owner of this name was a horse, and sure enough, Martha soon disappeared round the back, and then reappeared leading a delightful black mare with a long mane and curious big eyes. Coral was instantly entranced, and reached up to rub his nose and whisper in his ear, and then she fed him an apple before Martha finally lead him back to his little stable at the rear.

By now we were all rested. It was time to leave. The heat and the fruit had made everyone sleepy. Groggily, we clambered up into the bus, and I waved goodbye to Garfield who was still spying from behind his door frame.

As our giant engine exploded with a rich, throaty roar, the last thing I saw was Martha waving frantically, and one suspicious eye peering still from the thick gloom of that shack.

We drove on. The heat increased and most of us fell asleep. It must have been several hours before I woke up, feeling hungry.

Breaking into a pack of biscuits I took a bite. Then suddenly Marvin called out in alarm.

“It’s really weird but she’s losing power. I’m gonna have to stop.” There was a chorus of moans and groans as the van slowed, and then eased to a grinding halt beside the dusty highway.

Marvin switched off the engine, then tried to restart. Nothing. He tried again. The starter motor coughed in a feeble way. Still nothing. Then once more, but it was worse every time.

“Oh no,” Irene suddenly wailed. “Broken down and lost in the desert! Oh no! I can’t take this!” Next, Kira took up the chorus, adding a few more yells.

“Kids,” raved Leo. “Calm down! Stop! Enough noise! Stop right now!” He faced them squarely.

“I admit the situation is difficult. But we’re not lost. Many cars take this road. We will get a tow, just wait and see.”

The family relaxed for a moment.

“Anyone got one of these new cell phones?” Marvin enquired nervously. Everyone shook their heads.

By now we were all outside the van pacing up and down in agitation. The highway looked sparse and lonely. There was nothing for it but to wait and hope.

Eventually one lone sedan did pass, quite fast. We waved but it did not even slow down. Then the exact same scene repeated itself a few more times. Now Kira burst into tears, sobbing noisily.

“A scorpion,” Serge suddenly yelled, and with that all the girls ran madly and then turned to peer back from fifty yards away.

“Don’t mind that,” Leo said irritably. He picked it up with a glove and threw it into the distance.

“Someone’s going to have to walk,” said Marvin.

“Well if one walks, we all walk,” said Leo. “Let’s go. Put your hat on, everyone. You, too Serge.”

“But which way?” Marvin implored. “Not back, there was nothing there for forty miles or so. We’ll have to walk onwards.”

“OK, let’s go that way then,” Leo agreed.

“I think I can see something that looks like mountains,” Serge said, but they’re so far away, maybe it will take us all day to get there.”

“All day, and all night too,” Irene chipped in.

“Well anyway, we’d better get moving,” Maya suggested.

“I agree,” I told her. “C’mon everybody, let’s walk? The sooner we start, the sooner we’ll get there.”

We set off. At first everyone talked. We made a brave face of it, laughing and joking under the hot sun. But the desert was so utterly silent, and dry and close, that it was hard to fake happiness for long. Very gradually the conversation dropped down to almost nothing.

Then Irene broke the silence.

“Where’s Coral?” she asked.

Instantly we all looked at each other in horror. I asked if anyone had seen her since the shack with the old couple and the horse. Nobody had.

“So she’s there,” I decided. “We were all half asleep when we left,” I reminded them. “Somebody should have done a head-count. Why didn’t we check?” An ominous, guilty silence followed.

A big tear ran slowly down Irene’s cheek.

“She whispered to me, when we were there, that she wanted to stay there forever,” Irene moaned helplessly.

“You mean she deliberately left us, to live there, *for good?*” I asked, totally blinded by a sense of tragedy and confusion.

“I think so,” she sobbed.

“We have to go back,” I said.

But then, as we discussed it, we slowly understood that it was necessary to save ourselves first, before thinking of saving Coral. And that meant walking onwards, not back.

Now it was merely the slow, heavy rhythm of four adults and three children, trudging along, trying to stay on the tarmac, and not get bogged down in the many drifts of sand beside the road.

We had been going for at least two hours when I saw a few distant figures a long way off, ahead of us. Immediately we walked faster.

Then I saw orange. They were priests. We walked even quicker, and I waved and shouted. Eventually they heard us and turned, and waved back.

Soon we were face to face with them.

Then everything happened very fast.

“It is very good that we find you,” the tall man said. He looked tired, but determined. His robe and sandals were dusty, and his hair tied in a top-knot. There was a glimmer of gold in his mouth.

“Ram!” Irene screamed, hurling herself at him, and covering his cheeks with kisses. He tolerated this, but with a beaming smile.

“Yes it is me. I well remember your concerts, many months ago, in New York City,” Ram said, half choked by Irene. “My little birds have learned to fly, it seems. Very well done, my friends. You have made things go our way. With your wonderful music, we are in a new world now. America is on a wonderful journey. The name of Shiva is everywhere.”

“But what an odd place to meet,” I sputtered incredulously.

At that Ram simply smiled a very meaningful smile.

“Thank *Elder Brother*,” he muttered, enigmatically.

“OK listen,” he said, becoming very serious suddenly. “We discovered you were in this area and have been searching for you.

“Now please concentrate,” he continued. “There is also some bad news. Something serious has happened. Part of the government is now contesting the Shiva movement. There are many new laws and constraints. Fear is everywhere. But the situation changes all the time. Each new day the pendulum swings first in our favour, then against it. Unfortunately you all have been targeted, and labelled as undesirables, because of your constant support for our movement. I am truly sorry to bring you this news. By the way you have been mentioned on the radio and that’s how we knew you were around here.

“They have put the finger of blame on you and your music, which has been categorised as a security threat. You are even wanted for interrogation, all of you. There could be government agents attempting to track you down as I speak.”

Leo stiffened. At that moment he looked more terrifying than I had ever seen him, wild red hair waving in the wind, steely eyes set, jaw raised in defiance.

“Let them try,” he spat. Maya drew Irene and Serge to herself protectively. Ram glanced from face to face before continuing.

“Fortunately there is a secret location very close by, where we can hide you,” he explained. “For the authorities it appears to be only a few caves in the mountains, and they suspect nothing. However for us, it is the city of the priests. We will be invisible there. You will be comfortable, and more than welcome.”

“It is only a few hours walk from here,” the other broke in. “Possibly three or four at the most. But we had better start now.” He looked out at the horizon and scowled.

“See those dust clouds forming? The wind is rising. We must get you to the safety of the mountain caves before the desert storm breaks.”

“Thanks for this,” said Leo, shaking the hands of both men. I did the same, with an enormous sense of relief.

Armed with much-renewed strength we set off once more, heading for the mountains which appeared to be slightly larger now.

Side by side we struggled onwards beside the priests. The family were more than tired by now, but our new friends had restored our flagging hopes. However the road was becoming hotter and dustier than ever.

“How much further, Mama?” Kira moaned. “I don’t like this place.”

“Not very far,” said Maya. “I’ll carry you for a bit.” Instantly Kira jumped on her back. Maya plodded on, not wanting to admit to her daughter that their resting place was horribly far ahead. The mountains were scarcely visible.

“How many hours to the city?” I asked Ram, who was trudging onwards beside me.

“I am afraid it is still a very long way,” he said. “At least three hours.”

The family plodded on, in the lowest of spirits. My mouth was dry, and I was getting hungry, and even more tired.

Everyone was close to total psychological and physical breakdown by now.

At times like these, anything can happen. I was utterly frustrated, and soon became argumentative.

For some reason Leo and I now began to discuss who was the best musician of the two of us, and which man had created more success in his home country before arriving in America. For a moment we forgot our tiredness, and soon it got quite heated, until we were shouting at each

other, and yet there was a certain fierce joy to face off against such a noble rival as himself.

“My band was right at the top,” I raved. “Number one live funk act in the UK! We played all the top British venues. Nobody could touch us. The record was on the radio all the time!”

At this he swiftly countered with an astonishing speech.

“I played blues up and down Russia, at the Soviet time,” he shouted back. “Do you know what that means? The authorities saw us as a threat, and would come to close down gigs, and lock people up!”

He was roaring like a bear in my ear by now.

“We brought down the system,” he added triumphantly. “Big gigs, like yourself, but live, national TV also. It was the time of great change, long ago, when I toured in Russia. My band spearheaded the freedom movement. We were the greatest band in the land!”

I was astonished at this. He had never opened up in such a way before. We all knew about the recent big changes in Russia, and now it appeared that he had truly been a major part of this process.

Yet something rankled within me. I was in no mood to hear big-time speeches, and anyway, it all looked too brutal to me, the manner in which he presented his past, too crude and raw, and with no sophistication at all.

“You are a little too brash, and rather arrogant with these assertions,” I complained. “Is all this really true? And are all Russians like you? Big talk and grandiose gestures? In London we are more sophisticated. So can we both calm down a little?”

For a second Leo was shaken. He was remembering something... what was it? A Doctorate in arrogance, and then a Bachelor’s in alienation and despair? Yes, of course, the dream. Now it all came back to his mind, including the

ludicrous parrot who taught philosophy, and then Max as a chimpanzee, leaping around in the trees.

He got the point, knowing that he could be rather expansive at times.

“You remind me of a dream I had, long ago,” he said distantly. “Very interesting. I dreamed about a nonsensical university, offering degrees in absurd subjects like arrogance and despair. I wonder why? What was going on deep within my subconscious? A problem with academia, perhaps?” He chewed on this for a moment before exploding once more.

“So you think I am arrogant, Max?” This with a fierce glare in my direction.

At this moment he was all Viking, with his long, red hair so dusty and matted, beard jutting out defiantly, and grey eyes probing out like steel swords towards me.

Then he smiled, eyes shining proudly, but also in amazement, and now slapped me on the back, roaring with laughter.

“Ha ha,” he jibed. “Do you think I do not know this? Ha ha ha! Little Max! You amuse me very much. Well said! Very well said!” This was not the reply I had been expecting.

“Do as you like,” I muttered moodily, eyes lowered.

“No, I do listen to you,” he replied, suddenly all ears, and becoming more diplomatic and refined by the second. “I understand you mean well for me. But I have to be who I am.”

“I know,” I agreed. “And it is all predestined anyway,” I added cleverly.

“Exactly,” he replied. “Plus, we are all one body. I am who I am. What you take for arrogance is simply pride to be a man, and to be a human being. Also, I could no more change than the sun turn into the moon.”

“I see you as more moon than sun,” I replied.

A few large birds passed above.

“You talk so much about Hinduism and Buddhism,” I continued. “But have you got rid of your sense of self? I am not sure that you have.” He did not reply.

“Papa is who he is,” a faint voice whispered behind us.

Little Irene had crept up to defend him.

“Thank you, Irene,” Leo said warmly, turning and patting her on the head, and now there was triumph in his eyes. He managed a croak of cynical laughter.

At that, all of my criticisms of my friend disappeared. The father and daughter clearly loved each other so much that there was nothing more I could say.

THE CITY OF THE PRIESTS

We walked on further, dragging our feet slightly at this stage. By now my fatigue had become so very extreme that I had even begun to hallucinate occasionally. From my troubled perception it appeared to me that the mountains ahead were smouldering, perhaps actually on fire. I stared around at the exhausted figures trudging on left and right, and then I noticed that we had entered a valley, and also that the wind was rising even stronger.

Irene marched beside me, with eyes half closed. Her face was bathed in the delicate light of the setting sun.

And at this moment it occurred to me that she might have become an angel. I clearly saw something magical, or supernatural about her, and yet I knew that she had always had something of that, but the intensity of this new suffering was making it more defined, as though she were coming into focus, after many years of not quite being complete or whole. Then I looked at the others, who were protecting their faces against the rising dust, and who now appeared like biblical figures, just like those who had crossed the desert thousands of years before.

A great emotion was rising inside me. I began to start to see things that were not there. The long journey had caused my mind to play games. In this way I soon drifted backwards in time, witnessing images of rainbows, waterfalls, and other idyllic scenes, meadows, forests and ocean shores. All this time I was trudging onwards, desperately trying not to black out entirely.

Memories of New York played and replayed in the cinema of my mind, complete with a sound-track of all the greatest NYC music, free jazz, rock, Indian music, blues, funk and most of all, the improvised chants and melodies of Brother Karma. The potency and life-force of these

sounds gave me the strength to carry on stumbling blindly along that valley floor, for a few final miles.

And now I was even happy. It was dementia, but I did not care. Perhaps we were dying, but I was witnessing toytown, pastel wonders and a sick little beauty to everything. Probably I had become deranged by now. But still I continued to dream of the past. What a time we had been through together, in the Big Apple! And what a happy little tribe of Vikings! For that is what we were, I now understood.

So many gigs, I remembered, so many audiences, all the hustle and bustle, the stage-lights, the driving from freeway to freeway, then all the paraphernalia, guitars and drums, reefers and beers, dancers and singers, melodies from the Russian mountains, all mixed up with hip, NYC funk and Afro-beat percussion, plus the didgeridoo, the chants, the prayers, the sense of the sacred, and the way to worship music as the door to the soul.

And it went on and on. Yet at this moment I was actually proud of the path of suffering we had followed. I saw the desolation and pain with new eyes. It was our true karma and, after all, were we not named 'Brother Karma'? This was part of the entire picture, the new way of America, including the recent understanding and acceptance of the importance of so many ancient, mystical things, ranging from the grand philosophy of the ancient Greeks, all the way to the refreshing, silent, wonder of Hinduism.

Then more... reincarnation, the glory of Shiva, the fantastic multitude of temples, and the holy men, the proud river Ganges, and finally Mother India herself, who was blessing us, and restoring us for our rightful path onwards, forging through the desert as we were doing now, heading for what we knew not, except that surely it must be divine and sacred, and a brotherhood the like of which we had never known before.

And as I pondered on all the things we had been through together in NYC, all the gigs, the rehearsals, the conversations, and the meals spent happily talking together with the family, I began to understand that although we had enjoyed the metropolis, and also had been empowered by it, that also we had arrived there to fight with New York city, as does every man who begins his crazy quest in such a place as that.

It had been a wild, mad, bitter yet ecstatic struggle towards fame and fortune, and in the process I had seen many go down along the wayside. But we had survived, and also triumphed.

And now I finally recognised that New York city was Babylon reborn, city of life and death, of creation and destruction, of joy and misery. A place so burningly confused and torn apart by demons and angels, manipulators and magicians, that it had become more like an avalanche than a mountain, more an explosion than a castle. Most of all it had become a battlefield where wild, manic, minds ransacked each other's souls, and wore their rage proudly as emblems of honour for all to see.

All in one second I woke from my semi-coma to glance left at my friend. Leo was trudging beside me, and as I stared at the weary lines on his brow, and then his exhausted, reluctant paces through the sand, I understood that he had fought all this way on the path to enlightenment and glory, which for us was now the same thing. With his unstoppable Viking energy he had taken Russia, then New York city, and finally all of America by storm. Together with the Shiva priests and Hinduism, and the nationwide tour of our Brother Kharma band of gypsies, we had inspired and provoked a peaceful uprising, an insurgency so powerful and devastating that neither the city of New York, nor America the country, would ever fully recover. This was enlightenment of an explosive style, almost at the

edge of a sword, and I laughed bitterly at the impossibility of this paradox, and yet he had achieved the goal.

How many more hours we sweated and cursed through the abyss of sand and wind I cannot recall, but, in the end I reached a happy, sunlit sanctuary in my thoughts where all became unreal, such that the sky of my mind was flooded with colours, and swiftly changing images. It brought on a new revelation, and I was suddenly proud, and felt that we were truly noble people, and strong and righteous, and that we had changed America for the better, and then lived to tell the tale.

“Leo, listen,” I croaked. He turned and waited, with a kindly, but exhausted face.

“Do you hear something, far away?” I insisted. My throat was parched and my voice rasped, then died.

Perhaps we had been in the desert too long for our own good, but I was sure that there in the distance the sound of an orchestra was wafting across the dunes.

“What is it?” he asked, in a faint voice.

“I am sure it is an orchestra,” I repeated. Yes, plainly, there were the sound of cellos and violins, and even a bassoon. In shock and amazement we listened on, and now I could hear entire sheets of sound, then exotic soloists, playing rare and wonderful instruments, and after that it became something utterly unreal. I could swear that I could hear whispers of Russian laughter, now the sound of a didgeridoo, then a trombone, a harmonica, a bass, a trumpet, a crashing of drums, and also my own piano, linking it all together.

“It’s us!” I raved, clenching my hands and punching at the sky. “It’s us!” But he looked at me in a rather pitying way.

“It cannot be us,” he pointed out. “We are here. We are not playing any music right now.”

We began to argue this point out, and gradually became heated and even intense. Then I stopped suddenly,

and held my head in my hands. He put an arm round my shoulders.

“Max, are you alright?” he wanted to know.

But I could not reply. I was lost.

And now I knew that this family, this wonderful family, and their fantastic temple of music, would haunt me forever, and at this moment the beauty and the pathos of this realization brought tears to my eyes, and for a few seconds I found myself to be standing at the very top of the world, the highest possible summit, and yet at the same time another part of me was impossibly high in the sky, watching myself from that great, extra height. Craning my eyes, I could distantly see myself as a tiny figure, and then Leo, and all the band were there too, and all of us were illuminated by a blinding, wonderful light.

And then the song ‘One body,’ reverberated round and round that valley, and now I was finally down there, standing on the sand once more, and wide awake. As I looked around at these precious friends, who had become so important to me, I felt so very proud of them, and grateful that they had let me walk with them through part of the great journey of life. And at this moment I blessed them all, especially Leo, and forgave him for his constant way to be confrontational and on the attack. I prayed for Irene and Serge too, and asked that they be protected, for surely we might die before finding this mysterious mountain which we were trying so hard to find.

Suddenly I heard a plaintive moan from behind me. Turning around I saw that Kira had collapsed, and was lying face down on the ground. Slowly, and with a huge effort, Leo scooped her up onto his back, and we laboured on.

After one more hellish hour, more dead than alive, we finally straggled into the city of the priests. It was

enormous, yet craftily tunnelled into the side of the mountain, to evade possible discovery. An ancient tribe had used it as a military fortress, I was soon to learn.

We began to enter an astonishing labyrinth of tiny alleyways and ornate courtyards.

But when we started the final climb, I hardly knew if I could go any further. The kids were almost unconscious. Darkness had fallen many hours earlier, and the mountainside was bright with moonlight.

Eventually Ram called for the party to halt.

“I will show you your living areas first,” he said. Then, later, we will visit Elder Brother. It’s not much further,” he soothed.

Labouring upwards through miniature winding lanes, I was dimly aware of wall-mounted braziers and candles illuminating every step of the way. Occasionally we saw child devotees in tiny orange robes scurrying around, laughing and staring at us. Their eyes and teeth flashed in the starlight. I felt pleased, but hardly had the strength to smile back. In a daze, we climbed on, summoning our final reserves of strength.

Vaguely I was aware that we were passing ledges and parapets, arches and courtyards, painted every possible shade of pastel, interspersed with black and gold. Occasionally there were donkeys tied up, or chickens and goats wandering freely. It was a long, steady climb, right up the steep slope of that enormous mountain, and then finally down into what appeared to be a long, wide valley. As the view came into sight, I gasped. There were pathways and tiny buildings, and twinkling lights as far as the eye could see.

Our priest friend, Ram, laughed in some merriment.

“What did you think?” he mocked. “We are a family of almost thirty thousand priests here.”

“That’s not possible,” said Irene.

“Why not, though?” asked Serge, hitting her arm.

“Of course it’s possible,” said Leo. “Tomorrow I am sure you will see them when you look down over the valley.”

“But how come I never heard about this before?” I gasped.

“We do not see any reason to talk about it,” Ram said bluntly.

“And yet you rule America from here?” I gaped.

“We do not rule,” he said. “America rules itself, as always. It is all predestined.”

Leo howled with laughter at this.

“What’s so funny?” Maya asked, panting a little. But we could not get any sense out of him. For five minutes he leaned against the wall, chest pumping with wave upon wave of mirth.

“Papa has always said that,” shouted Serge triumphantly. “America rules itself. There is no government. Everything happens by itself.”

“Well, we need some kind of organisation,” I started out carefully.

Irene put one finger to my lips warningly, then looked at me in a loving, yet pitying way.

“Max, shut up,” she said.

Later we were shown to our rooms. They were almost totally bare, with simple mattresses to lie on and very little else. After a shower and a meal, which we ate ravenously, Ram came to collect us.

“Elder Brother is ready to see us now,” he said.

The funny thing is that I could never remember very much about that meeting. I know that we walked up and up. We were finally in a tiny courtyard very close to the clouds.

He didn’t look old at all, despite his name. I do know that he said some beautiful things, stuff that made me very proud of myself, and also of the family, and of all the gigs we had played. But I cannot remember exactly what he

said. And even his face was hard to recall. His skin was very, very smooth. You always felt that he was smiling even when he was not. Also you felt he knew what you were thinking.

And the funniest thing of all was that he never really looked like himself at all. It was always somebody else. Occasionally he would have facial expressions or certain turns of phrase similar to Leo, and then sometimes he would walk like Maya, or sound like Irene or Serge, or even little Kira. But most of all, when I stared, utterly fascinated, into his face, I just saw myself. But it was not the ordinary me, it was me at my very best, myself at my most noble, or myself when I was thinking the most wonderful thoughts in the world.

As we left, I really did not want to go, and I think a few tears must have collected in my eyes, but I wiped them off quickly. Elder Brother flashed me a quick, triumphant look, when he saw that.

The family also appeared devastated by something as we departed. The kids hugged each other, as if overcome by some unusual emotion. Maya appeared sad, and Irene too, but Leo looked fiercely proud, and merely stared upwards at the sky, saying nothing.

It was only when we had said goodnight, and I lay down in the semi-darkness, that I realised the enormous change that had come over me. In my head was nothing at all. No light, no sound. Just darkness. But nothing bad, just a sweet, comforting peace, and a sensation of rest, and of having arrived, which of course we had done.

All the torments and confusion of life had gone. Nearly all the worries, the worldly concerns, the anxiety, the pain and the guilt, had vanished. The hustler in me had disappeared. I was part of a bigger picture now. My very sense of self was altering. It was dissipating, becoming like an all-embracing mist, whispering here and there, touching

and entering the trees, the desert sands, even the mountains themselves. As my sense of self departed, it carried with it many great burdens and responsibilities, huge crushing weights which had pinned down my consciousness and soul, trapping them into a tiny dark box, and which were now crumbling into nothingness. In short, I was waking up after a long, difficult sleep, and opening my eyes to witness a new dawn shining down on a landscape which was uniquely personal and precious, because it was me, at least it was part of me, or perhaps I was part of it. There was a mixture of wonder and pathos in my mind as I surveyed this landscape, because at the same moment I was also saying goodbye to many things from my past. I could feel a part of myself disappearing, and this felt unnatural and disturbing. So much was gone already, that for a moment it struck me as a tragedy. And yet I told myself grimly to focus on the reward which beckoned distantly like an enormous parade of stars in the sky, and yes, second by second, it became evident that some kind of rebirth was here, that the thing I truly sought was waiting for me. A new kind of power was entering my body. But paradoxically, all at once I felt tired, like an old man who suddenly surveys an enormous new world that he must organise. And at the same time I had become invisible. I was just a simple man now, plain and ordinary, after so many years of chasing fame and fortune, and working so hard with my music and the New York club, and the Russian family band.

But it was wonderful. I needed nothing any more. Instead, I had become part of the all. It was obvious that this was something that was not really supposed to happen according to my original plan. I understood that earlier, in my New York days, I was meant to be the big guy, to keep on hustling and stay tough and everything. But now it was over. However I could feel that something in my head was still missing. I could sense that another thing was coming, a

much larger thing, but for now it remained mysterious as to what exactly it would be.

Certainly Elder Brother had changed everything, that much I knew, and I did trust him on this. So what on earth was coming next?

We were all about to find out.

Just as I was settling down to sleep, my bedroom door opened. It was Serge. He was in pyjamas and looked frightened.

“What are you doing up this late?” I demanded. “Go to bed right now!”

“No, Max, you don’t understand,” he said. “It’s my sister. I think the long march was too much for her. She’s feverish. And I don’t think she can hear me when I say anything. Please come?”

Swiftly, I hustled down the dark stone corridor following him, and soon we were inside Irene’s candle-lit bedroom. Leo and Maya, and several priests were there, close to her bed. Their faces were gaunt and worried.

Irene was pale and sweating heavily as she tossed around, clearly in the throes of a bad fever.

“What’s going on?” I asked. There was a piteous sob from Irene, then heavy breathing.

“We don’t know,” Leo muttered. But whatever it is, it’s pretty serious. She’s fighting off something bad.”

“Should we get her to hospital?” Maya asked. She looked agonised, and had red eyes from crying.

“Yes, for christ’s sake, she needs antibiotics,” hissed Gray, who had crept in unnoticed.

“No chance of that,” Leo snapped, glaring at him. “You know our situation. You can go, Gray,” he added. His voice was terse and stark. “I know you’re trying to help, but please leave,” he added.

Gray exited reluctantly, muttering something about how everyone was crazy, and that they would kill her this way.

The priests began to talk in hushed voices about herbs, and various concoctions, and then scurried off to make some. Maya placed a cool damp towel on Irene's forehead. Now the sick girl looked up for a second. Her eyes were staring and manic, and Serge burst into tears at the sight of them.

Outside another big wind had started up, rattling the windows and moaning down the valley. Irene closed her eyes again. Her hands were clenching and unclenching, and she turned her damp head away from us, and now we could hear her babbling something about deserts, and the bad animal, and the big wind. I was shaken to the core and felt a rising sense of dread creep up my spine.

"What the hell is it?" I asked.

"We really don't know," Leo repeated, in a stunted, gruff voice. I had never seen him more emotionally affected by anything. He wiped his eyes and took a deep breath.

"We don't know," he repeated. He swivelled around in his chair and clasped Serge to his knees protectively, then played with the boy's curly hair.

Then he turned to me with a vacant face.

"Something about that desert march was too much for her, it seems," he said.

Suddenly, with a clumsy jerk and a deep groan, Irene leaned over away from our direction and vomited. Maya asked me to fetch a bucket, and I ran off to find one.

When I came back Irene looked deathly. Serge was crying again. Now Leo took me aside, and spoke quietly but urgently.

"There's not much more we can do right now," he said. "Serge and you should get some sleep. Maya and I will look after her. Go on, please get some rest. We're all

exhausted from that struggle through the desert. You two need to sleep.”

“But will she be alright?” I demanded.

He gave me a long, slow, careful look. There was tragedy in his eyes. Then he turned away for a second, before slowly facing me once more.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But there’s nothing you can do. Please, take Serge to bed, and then get some rest yourself?”

I took the boy by the hand and walked him to his room. He gave me a grateful look before closing the door.

But it was hard to sleep after that. I tossed and turned for a long time. Then after several hours, miraculously, I dropped off.

For three days after this Irene remained in a desperate, critical situation. Her life was in the balance. It was the bleakest moment I have ever known. An unimaginable darkness had fallen on the family. We crept from room to room, hardly ever eating, but whispering, tending to the invalid, praying, hoping, or just staring out into the valley whose beauty we were unable to see just yet.

Irene was in my mind all the time. Her lovely way to be graceful and kind, and her brilliant bass playing, and her way of looking after family, specially Serge and Kira, but also Leo too. Her voice floated across my mind at odd moments, and sometimes I found myself in tears as I heard her words again and again... *you are a good musician, Max... you are helping our family band ... oh come and play with us again ...please teach us more songs?*

Day after day, Maya and Serge cried almost nonstop. Leo was serious and distant, and it was hard to meet his eyes now, or even discuss the patient any more. I believed he had given up hope and was preparing himself for the worst.

The priests continued to try many kinds of herbs and special drinks made from ingredients they knew and trusted, and which had proved to work for generations. Irene hardly spoke all that time, and never ate, and drank almost nothing either. But then, finally, came an evening when she managed to get a full cup of hot, potent, liquid down, and then soon afterwards a priest came to my room. His eyes were shining with relief when he told me that Irene had finally now fallen into a deep, calming sleep.

“At least there is some hope now,” he said. “If it is the will of Shiva.”

In the morning Leo reported to me that she was now awake, and sitting up. She was eating, he said, and talking a little, and he had even seen the palest flicker of a smile cross her ashen face. I told him how very relieved I was. There was a bounce in his stride as he departed.

Later, at lunch, he confided in me further as we sat side by side on a bench together.

“I now start to believe I know the cause of Irene’s terrible illness,” he ventured.

“So what was it?” I asked.

He leaned over on one elbow, and scanned my face, before explaining, confidentially.

“It had been something strange from the desert, perhaps,” he said. “An unusual bacteria maybe. In any case, the priests tended her well. I suppose we had better thank Shiva for this?”

“I guess you are right,” I said, though secretly I was not so sure. But since it looked like Irene was safe, I thought to keep my feelings to myself.

THE THIRD EYE

Life now settled into an idyllic, endless cycle of events, music, conversations, explorations and the process of learning new things. This mountain city was so full of love, wisdom and miraculous happenings that each new day would bring startling new breakthroughs.

The family, including me, Coral and Gray Walker, thrived on this, especially the sunshine, health food, prayer sessions and random excursions around the mountainside and valley. All the priests were friendly and welcoming, and we were happy to join in with their various activities, whether it be farming, cheese-making, wine-making, yoga or a myriad of other things.

Irene recovered slowly, and soon began to take little walks in the valley, gradually recovering her strength, as some colour returned to her cheeks.

By this time the priests had sent out a mission to find our abandoned vehicle, and repair it and then drive it back home to us, so now we had our instruments once more. Irene received her beloved bass with a cry of joy and began practising hard, even sleeping with the instrument close to her bed at night.

At this time I saw Leo undergo an enormous change for the better. New York city had tired and aged all of us, and touring across the States had hardened us up further. But now he visibly relaxed, ate well, put on weight, and often laughed and relaxed with the family when he was not playing music or going for long expeditions on his own, or meeting with priests in the highest section of the mountain. I witnessed Maya becoming less stressed, and it was a great relief for me to see the children gradually behave more like children, and less like the overworked, adult-like, wiry little performers that they had been before.

One day Leo explained to me how we had miraculously happened to be so very close to the city of the priests when our vehicle broke down. There had been a specific reason for it, he now admitted.

“I have been talking with Ram,” he told me.

“There had been things going on with the Shiva people, our management, that I knew nothing about,” he continued.

“Go on,” I told him.

“The Shiva priests who were connected with our record company and tour manager, had a certain plan in mind,” he said.

We were out on the verandah as usual, enjoying the calm night air, as a plume of mist gathered around our mountain, and the evening sunset illuminated the desert valley floor. I could hear a few cats fighting, further down the mountain side.

“So it was not just a very lucky coincidence that they saved our lives?” I asked.

“No,” he grinned. “It appears that they were planning to contact us on our next rest stop to propose a special meeting anyway.” He scratched his neck thoughtfully, peering into the distance.

“It was to be partly a celebration of what we have already achieved, but also to talk about the rest of the tour,” he concluded gravely. “This was actually the reason why the LA show was originally booked. “There was also an extra plan being sketched out for the band to go straight on to India, for more touring,” he added.

“Wow,” I said, startled by this news. “OK! But will that still be happening?” Kira darted out, hugged his legs, then sped off again.

“In theory, yes,” he said. “But then that unfortunate, negative event occurred. We are wanted by the government now, as you know.” As he mentioned the authorities, his tone became clinical, as though he was dealing with an

unpleasant little insect that must be sanitized, and then crushed.

“There are some rather insignificant men, with very small minds, in the government now, and these characters have placed us on their list of undesirables,” he intoned in an offhand, bored voice. “In other words we are wanted, as I mentioned before. However, as you can imagine, I have no wish to be held for interrogation, and am not willing to have my family leave this spot for now. I assume you feel the same?”

“Of course,” I agreed. “It would make no sense.”

The sun had long since gone down, and there was a long, pregnant silence, as we leaned out over the stone parapet, scanning the infinite darkness of the valley. I shivered, as Leo grumbled to himself for a while.

But finally, as we said goodnight, and departed for our rooms, I knew that we were both left with the same thought.

Why leave paradise if you have found it?

The family and myself had so many questions for the priests that for a while it was natural that we set aside a particular time each day to discuss Shiva and all the goings-on within this curious place. After all, the entire country had been turned upside down by now.

In particular, I was determined to understand who was this mysterious figure who had become so very important to all of us, and central to our existence.

“Shiva has many qualities, and represents many things,” Ram said one morning, when we had taken our places in a convenient classroom. It was a fresh, bright day, with sunlight streaming in. I enjoyed the fact that this room, like all rooms here, was in fact a cave, hewn lovingly out of grey stone, and furnished with the minimum necessary, a few desks and chairs, paintings on the wall, and so on.

“Courage, balance, honesty, respect, innocence, to name a few,” he continued.

“But excuse me, he destroyed the world,” Irene broke in. “What does that mean? It sounds very frightening to me.” She was clenching her fists at this idea.

“A very good question, Irene,” Ram smiled.

“Certainly he destroys the world,” he told her, “but he creates it at the same time.”

“It’s all happening at once?” asked Maya curiously.

“It is an analogy,” came the reply. “Can we live without being born or dying?”

“There is no respect for death in the modern world,” Leo growled.

“Death is nasty,” shouted Serge. “I don’t want to die, ever!”

“You’re right, Leo,” I said. “They make it seem illegal or taboo to mention it. Why is that?”

“Because it’s painful,” said Irene.

“It’s really sad,” said Kira. There were tears in her eyes.

“Come on now,” soothed Leo kindly, patting her on the head. “It’s not so terrible.” He was grinning now.

“Yes, but I do agree, there is something wrong going on,” I pointed out. “Some kind of strange block.”

“All superficial. America gone mad. There is no meaning in anything,” raved Leo.

“You may have something there,” said Ram, rather amused by all this sudden commotion.

“Of course I do,” exclaimed Leo. He was rageful now, with glowering eyes.

“All of these are good points,” Ram acknowledged. “This is why Shiva exists.”

“But who is Shiva, really?” Serge asked. “And why does he have so many arms?”

“Aha,” Ram chortled. “You, the little drummer, of all people, ask that? You may as well ask yourself! Are you

ready to destroy your inner demons, Serge? I am sure you have some. Because that is what we mean when we say that Shiva destroys the world.”

“By the way,” he added, “the many arms are to indicate that he can do many things at once.”

“Shiva’s third eye is the pineal gland, isn’t it?” asked Leo shrewdly.

“It can be so,” Ram admitted. “A very precious thing that every human being has, but in varying degrees. When we open the third eye, we gain a higher consciousness.”

“Normally they destroy the third eye by the age of six,” Leo grunted. “That’s why I keep my children out of school, and on the road with me, performing music. It’s to prevent that from happening.”

“I do understand,” said Ram.

“Is he wearing a tiger skin?” asked Irene. She had got up, and was examining a large portrait of Shiva on the wall.

“Yes he is,” answered Ram.

“And he has a snake round the neck,” shouted Serge. “Ha ha!”

“That represents the ego,” said Ram. “Do you know what that is, Serge?” He had walked over to the boy’s desk and was watching him with great care. There was love, but also sadness in his eyes.

“Yes I believe he does,” said Leo. “I have told him.”

“But Serge is surely too young to understand all this?” protested Maya.

“Very few children have mastered their ego,” said Ram calmly. “Not many adults even. But Shiva has succeeded, and as a result the deadly snake is coiled round his neck as an ornament. Otherwise it would bite him.”

Ram stared at Serge silently for a moment, then stroked his arm gently and curiously.

“Be careful with that snake of yours,” he warned the boy. “Do you understand any of this, Serge? Do you know that you are carrying Shiva with you very strongly? And if that snake of yours turns against you, it will be very dangerous, much more than to any normal boy?”

“Yes, I think I do,” Serge said. He looked round at the others in a worried way.

“We love you very much,” Ram said. “You know that, don’t you?”

“He probably does not understand every detail,” Leo said, frowning, and shifting in his chair uncomfortably.

“How can he?” Maya cried, bursting from her stool at the back, and running and hugging Serge in a tight protective embrace.

“Yes I do!” Serge squeaked, fighting against his mother’s arms frantically. “Let me free!” he squawked. “I must be free!”

“Let Serge be as he is,” Leo said.

At this point the door opened, and some small dishes of yoghurt were brought into the classroom, with a tray of coconut cakes. The family ate contentedly as Ram talked on. He was very close to us now, sitting on the edge of a desk, and for the first time I noticed that he wore his hair in a top knot today, and his robe was dark, but embroidered in gold along the edges.

Outside the room we could hear sounds of priests shuffling around, moving from room to room, at this, the sacred time of learning, halfway through the morning. It had recently rained, and outside the window large dark birds wheeled, high up amongst the clouds. There had been an electrical storm the previous night, and today the morning was fresh with that particular feeling which the electricity and rain had liberated, a sensation of hope and

calm, and also of something new and exciting about to happen.

By now we were all caught up in the story of Shiva. Ram had proved to be a good teacher, never pompous or academic, and always allowing questions from the children. He was not forcing us to embrace this new religion in any way. He knew very well that, as westerners, the whole thing would be strange and perhaps difficult for ordinary people to understand. However we were far from normal people, and Ram knew this too. So there was much wisdom and patience mingled with joy in his manner as he continued to speak.

The sun had darkened and browned his face considerably, but it was just the same Ram who had appeared suddenly at my club on the night of the very first performance of the family band. He had watched us deal with all of the perils and triumphs of New York city, and had studied Serge in particular, and then he had saved us in the desert, and now here we were. There was a sense of completion and destiny, and as we listened on, fully attentive now, I felt grateful to have found such a great friend, a man who I felt I could trust to the end of the earth, and who was now explaining such precious information with the greatest of care.

Ram finally now let us know that Shiva had been the very first Yogi, and at this, Serge and Irene proudly exclaimed that they had already begun to practice some basic yoga exercises, which Leo confirmed was true. Then Ram lit some incense, and rang little bells, and then slowly explained the *sacred Om* ceremony, all about how the sound of this word would bring peace to a troubled or confused mind, and also how sometimes the priests would pour water or milk onto a stone symbol while chanting. Leo winked at me a few times at this stage, and I remembered that he knew all about the Om, and had tried to teach me,

but I had brushed him off in an irritated way at that time. But now I started to see some kind of sense in it, and even resolved to try it myself, privately, in the future.

At the end of it all, Ram talked about India, and then several more priests entered the room and they all chanted side by side. The kids were more quiet now, and Maya and Leo were smiling, and we finished the session with the entire room chanting together, while one priest lit more incense, and jingled more bells, and yet another waved the plumes of incense smoke all around the room.

The sun was in my eyes, and I became sleepy, and suddenly I saw myself once again back at the club in New York city, arguing or perhaps fighting with various mafia hustlers, and I simply could not believe that I was the same person, or how far I had travelled, and how much I had changed.

As the chant ended Ram looked up delightedly to the family, and welcomed us all to Shiva one more time.

“Now you are really one of us,” he crowed.

“This was all written in advance,” Leo chuckled.

“I’m not so sure about that?” I argued.

This discussion continued for a while, and then the children became bored and went out to play.

“Just ten minutes,” shouted Leo to them as they frisked out of the doorway. “Then come for rehearsal, kids!” he added.

By now Ram had departed, and then as Leo and I exited the room, Leo beckoned to me. We halted in the corridor. His face was a poem. Glancing swiftly down the passage in each direction, he then put his head very close to mine in a conspiratorial manner.

“Serge is my son, and he is a Viking son,” he grumbled. What is a young Viking without ego? Can you answer me that?” His gravelly voice reverberated up and down the corridor as he gripped my arm feverishly, waiting for an answer, but I had none.

Each day, Irene, Serge and I would practise our music together early in the morning. Leo, Maya and Kira usually arrived a little later on. The family had a special rehearsal room close by, just down the mountain, with the musical equipment all set up.

“Max, will we be here forever?” Serge asked me one day, in the middle of a session. He was blinking his eyes in confusion, and there was a strange blend of anxiety and helplessness in the way he submitted this question. I answered that nothing was decided yet. Another time Irene asked me to come outside with her for a private talk.

“I don’t think my brother is happy here,” she whispered restlessly, and would not meet my eyes.

“Does he miss New York?” I asked, incredulously.

“Yes, I think so, and the touring too,” she answered. I shrugged my shoulders, and we returned to the rehearsal session.

Then there came a moment where Maya found Serge crying in a corner of his room. Sunshine was pouring in through a tiny window high in the wall. She ran to him.

“What’s wrong, *malysh* (baby)?” she asked gently, putting an arm around his shoulders, and rocking him gently. But he just turned his head to the wall and wept on.

Very often Leo and Gray could be found discussing politics, religion and the great transformation that was occurring in America. They would usually share a bottle of wine, on a terrace under the stars. As I overheard snatches of these conversations from my nearby window it became apparent that while Leo had accepted the strange and wonderful new life in this magical place, something deep inside Gray was rankling and fermenting.

One night it all came to a head. We were shocked to hear from our rooms the sound of raised voices, then a

great cry, and the sound of a glass being smashed against the rock.

“Damn you and your religion! So what if I am political? *You cannot rewrite my mind,*” Gray roared.

Then nothing but silence, and a low wind howling around the mountain. A night bird screeched in the distance. Behind closed doors came the sound of a young child beginning to sob.

The following morning, at breakfast, Maya broke the news to me with a wry face.

“They left,” she said.

“Who?” I asked.

“Him. The odd one, Gray. And Marvin too. They both left, and just now I found a rough note on Gray’s bed to explain things. Neither were happy here, it seems. What can one do?” she added, spreading her arms helplessly.

Exasperated lines appeared on Leo’s forehead upon hearing the story.

“Please, can I eat my breakfast in peace?” he requested, waving us away in irritation.

“I cannot be responsible for every troubled soul around,” he added, rather patronisingly.

One evening an unknown priest entered the communal dining room, where we sat eating berries, nuts and edible flowers, with a hundred friends, all various followers of the light. I noticed that his dark robe was embossed with curious, colourful symbols which I had never seen before.

He arrived at my table and tapped me gently on the arm.

“There’s a phone call for you,” he said. I had the sensation that he was looking right through me.

“A phone call?” I echoed, rather astonished.

“I thought there were no phones here,” I added.

“We do have a couple, for emergencies,” he admitted. His voice was distant, and slightly fatigued.

“Is this an emergency?” I asked, starting to escape from my chair.

“Yes, the caller claims as such,” the priest concluded reluctantly.

Hurriedly I put my half-finished meal to one side, then followed his brisk pace up many short flights of steps to ascend the mountain a little higher. After a few minutes he showed me into a small, dark chamber, with nothing inside but a table and chair. A large white telephone awaited me.

I picked up the receiver, hardly knowing what or who to expect.

“*Tarnation!* Now I found you. Where the *rasclot* you been?” The voice exploded out of the receiver, rough and angry, like the bark of a big mongrel dog.

“Who is this?” I asked nervously, instinctively wrapping my robe around me more tightly.

“Damnit, you *honky, skanky ole dude!* Dontcha know who your friends is? Big Joe! Remember me? And where is you, anyway? What is you up to? You don’t sound normal. Me, I’m off my pills, and feelin’ on fire, an’ ready to haul ass round to fetch me some tail tonight. Big Joe is ready for some big ass mama, sure am y’all!”

I was knocked to the floor. His voice appeared to be crackling up through time and space from some distant abyss.

“Where is you, mofol!” he thundered.

“Joe, hold on, let me try to find my words,” I ventured, rather feebly. “OK, we’re in a place, its a city, actually a mountain. Yes, we are in a desert.”

“Sounds like your head is gone,” he crowed triumphantly. Join the club. I know you needed Big Joe. Why you done abandoned him, anyways? Why you left the home drag? Whats wrong with the hood? Oh my gawd, you

done gone crazy on me. They done gone do some voodoo on you, ain't that true? Oh my cripes, Max is dead! Wake up, boy! There ain't only one life to live, don't you know that?" Then a thought occurred to me.

"How did you get my number, this phone number, the one for here?"

"Shorty done got it."

"Who is Shorty?" He ignored my question.

"Shorty gets everything. Don't mess with Shorty. Anyway we're comin over! Now what's your address?"

"I, I - don't know it."

"Jesus! Hey you sonofabitch! Don't mess with this n***** now! Don't mess with Big Joe. Everybody got an address. Think I'm crazy?"

The conversation continued like this for a while. During that time I found out that he was in real trouble. His band had mutinied, he was out of money and almost homeless, and also off his pills. Plus, he was back on drugs, and some of them were the worst kind. I tried to calm him down, and eventually he did become a little more sane and human. Finally we said goodbye.

"Look after yourself, Joe," I told him. "We miss you."

"Don't hold out on me, Max?" he begged.

"Everything's gone wrong for me. I think I'm goin' down," he sobbed. "I need you," he croaked. "My luck's finally run out. I reckon I'll pack my bags and hit the road."

"You'll be OK," I whispered, though there was a catch in my throat. "You're Big Joe. I'm telling you that you're stronger than you know. There's nobody like you."

"Don't I know it," he groaned, and then the line went dead.

MOUNTAIN VISIONS

Every so often messengers would arrive bringing cryptic messages about how things stood politically in America. We would hear about how the Shiva priests were now running entire government departments, and also large sections of the private sector.

Then one morning a message arrived through the grapevine which was so extraordinary that it had us all scratching our heads for the next week or so. It was simply that *Texas had gone*.

Whatever did that mean? Texas disappeared off the face of the earth?

Next, a few months later, *California has gone*.

Nobody could make any sense out of these confused messages.

More time passed. Then, one morning, we heard that ‘the government had shut down,’ and that it had been totally replaced by some mysterious new organisation called *the Wheel of Light*.

None of this made much sense to me. America without a government? Texas and California gone? Various priests had very learned opinions on this matter, but the general consensus was that we should continue with our own personal schedules, in other words, our own paths towards enlightenment.

One morning a priest entered our rehearsal room and made an announcement with a slow smile.

“A visitor arrived yesterday, late at night, and she asked for you,” he began.

We looked at each other in astonishment. What possible person could have found us in this place?

Then the priest waved his hand, beckoning to a mysterious figure who was waiting outside in the corridor.

Slowly, a young Chinese girl entered.

“Coral,” Irene screamed and flung her arms around her. Then everyone shouted at once.

“Coral, where have you been?”

“Baby, how did you get here?”

“However did you find us?”

“Are you OK?”

“Were you safe at that place?”

“Yes, were you safe there?”

“Is Garfield a madman?”

“Was Garfield dangerous?”

“Is Garfield still off his pills?”

“How did you travel?”

“What time did you arrive?”

By this time the kids had fought so hard to get at her, and hold her, and hug her, that they all ended up fighting, screaming and laughing on the floor in an impossible tangle of arms, legs and flying pigtails.”

“Leo, let them be happy,” Maya protested when he began to explode. “This is how kids say hello,” she explained, knowingly.

It took hours to get the full story out of Coral, but the truth was that it had all been fairly straightforward.

“I am terribly sorry,” she wept, cheeks flushed with emotion. “I fell in love with that lovely horse. Oh, I am sorry. You must have been very, very worried? And you have always been so very kind to me.”

“It’s OK, Coral,” Maya soothed, kissing her cheeks again and again, and smoothing back her long black pigtails. Don’t worry about anything. You’re back in the family. You found us. You did it! You survived! That’s all that matters right now.

“Thank you,” she gasped, sobbing more. Leo beamed, and I felt in my pocket for a chocolate, and gave one to her.

As more time passed, I noticed that the priests were taking more and more of an interest in Serge. Every day they would be talking more with Leo or Maya, explaining that the boy had ‘special abilities’ and deserved extra attention. They proposed a regime of drum lessons, and would often be seen taking him off on walks around the valley. We would hear of exciting and wonderful games and sports that he had enjoyed, but when we asked details it was not anything that we could understand easily.

Then there was more. A series of ‘awareness workshops’ where Serge would be asked to play his drums on the stage. There was an open amphitheatre further down the valley, and on these occasions, many hundreds of priests would attend. Sitting on tier after tier of stone steps they would watch entranced while Serge played, some praying, some laughing with delight and others actually taking notes in large notebooks they had brought for this purpose.

In the evenings Maya had to work hard to pacify the other children who by now were very envious of all of this attention on Serge.

“It’s just because he is a boy,” bleated Kira unhappily. “I don’t think its fair. Irene and I should be getting all these nice treats too. Why not?”

Leo and I kept our feelings and judgements to ourselves, but of course we knew what was going on. It was not simply that Serge was a boy. We knew that the priests had recognised Serge to be one of their own, one who was carrying Shiva with him. The priests knew that Serge was growing up to be a man who would have the greatest love of all within his heart, and that it would be a gift for the entire world. They also knew that he was fast

attaining all the attributes of Shiva, the joy, the power and the fire. Finally they knew that his energy and will-power would be deadly if ever it went in the wrong direction.

In this way, as more days passed, they made sure that Serge was treated well, and cultivated and honed, and fashioned into something marvelous, a truly gifted child, whose light would continue to pour out of him, yet they made certain that he always remain grounded, conscientious and serene.

But the girls continued to be disturbed when it came to the point that Serge was outfitted with an elegant new wardrobe, all of the finest clothes made of silk and other luxuries. They were also not happy about the fact that he was often given special, luxurious and nutritious meals when he was out and about with the priests.

When questioned about these things Serge was rather tight-lipped.

He knew that to talk was to risk his sisters becoming very difficult to deal with, so he wisely chose to remain silent, and if he did ever talk, it would merely be to describe these special events of his as rather uninspiring, and uninteresting.

However, if he talked with Leo, Maya or I, we soon found that he was changing fast. He would talk only about drumming with us now. We gained the impression that he had left the entire world behind and was now living in a place of nothing but music, namely drums and rhythm. He explained again and again that these things gave him joy, and that nothing else mattered any more.

“And why not?” asked Leo, when we were walking alone in the valley one morning. A lizard scuttled across the sand. The sound of chimes was faintly audible. I knew that this was a sign that priests were chanting close by.

“When you are bringing up young lions, then sooner or later, they will find their prey,” he added proudly.

This was an interesting notion to me, the idea of hunting our music in life, and I told Leo so.

“Of course we are hunting it!” he exclaimed. “We feast on it. Music is our food. Without music, we would perish much faster than without food.”

“It is the need of every musician to be like Serge and to achieve that goal,” I admitted. “I do see that once that door opens fully,” I continued, “then the original world would simply drop away.”

“I agree,” Leo replied. “Serge has stepped into the unknown. He has already become a master musician.” We walked on, through a glade of lemon trees which sheltered us from the sun for a while.

Suddenly Leo pointed to some scars on my arms.

“Whats going on here, Max?” he demanded. “Look, you’re bleeding in many places. What’s wrong? How did this happen?”

“It’s on my legs too,” I admitted wearily. “I’ll be alright. I don’t know why it comes there. Often I get bad dreams at night, and then wake up bloody, and never really know why. Don’t worry, I’ll be OK. It won’t kill me.”

We walked on. He shot me a strange look. Then it was back to Serge again.

“I wish him all the best, and admire what he has achieved,” I said. “But at the same time, something worries me about his future. The life of any artist is full of danger, if he is a true one. Serge is still a boy, so we must protect him.”

We trudged on. Leo said nothing. I knew that he believed that everything that was to happen was already written in stone. The next time I cast him an anxious glance, he turned and confronted me with a look which I will never forget. The feeling was of staring into a hall of mirrors.

“Let’s wait and see,” was all he would say.

One morning I left my bed very early, resolved to climb to the top of the mountain to watch the sun rise. Near the top, I found a convenient balcony, and then leaned over, surveying the vast, sleeping valley below and breathing the cool dawn air. It was still very dark.

The silence was full of poetry and also a sense of impending destiny. Several big birds screeched as they coasted high above the mountain, searching for prey.

My mind was full of questions. Who had I become? Where were we going? And what was going on with America itself? Should we, or could we ever venture out again from the safety of this hideout? In the heady, mystical atmosphere of this place, I could hardly even tell how long we had been here.

All I knew was that I was finally at peace, satisfied, resolute, and proud to be the man I had now become. This mountain city had given me a new kind of strength, a sense of calm, and most of all, the necessary serenity and patience to wait for what must come next.

Far away across the valley, a dog howled. Something was happening. Lower down the mountain side I could just make out the sound of voices. The wind had dropped to almost nothing.

A scent of mint wafted up from a herb garden below.

And now I closed my eyes, still leaning on that wall, as I remembered that moment long ago in England when I had achieved so much in music, but then how I had thrown it away, and at the same time a disastrous marriage had caused me to lose my children and finally even my country itself.

And then I thought about my move to New York, and meeting the Russian family, and finally all the challenges of fighting for survival, and making my way in the new world.

But at this moment, as the first, fiery rays of the sun began to shoot out from the very peak of the mountain, and across the valley, I knew that everything had been worth it.

Right now I was seeing far more than I'd ever seen before. New, wonderful ideas were spinning around my mind.

I thought about the idea of time itself, the enormous expanse of it.

And suddenly I was watching the entire passage of history, and hearing the roll of drums and great choirs singing, just as I had heard them on our desert trek, so many months before.

Emotions raged in my heart. Alone on this mountain I now began to dream. Deep, beautiful feelings were in my heart. Proudly I surveyed the world, with all of its nobility, its tragedy, its colours and its bitter-sweet laughter.

Drinking in every possible detail I now watched the rise and fall of the British empire, and then the Russian, and now finally the American, which at this stage was crashing before my eyes in a torrent of thunder and lightning, but also explosions and madness.

Gripping the parapet I bowed my head and prayed. But the power and the glory of the moment had only just begun. The sun was balanced directly above the mountain now.

Finally I knew that I was a man, a true man, not full of insecurity and fear, and deceit, as I had been in my New York mafia days, but that I had become more real, meaning more genuine and honest, compared to before. I had survived a great struggle, and hopefully matured from this, and it was a giant relief to feel more relaxed, and open and free as a result.

And here the music became more and more intense, and I perceived that it was coming from the sky, the same as before, but more familiar, and now I understood with joy

that it truly was myself and the Russian family who were playing these sacred melodies, and we were all flying together in the heights, and would play on forever. We had truly become angels. All of this was in my fantasy mind, but in this new world of Shiva, there was no longer so much difference between that and what we know as normal reality. The cold lines of rationality had become blurred and worn down by a new, enormous joy for all things. Science had bowed down in front of spirit and paid homage.

My head was on the parapet as I prayed, but now I looked upwards into the sky, and saw how the sun shone full on this, our beautiful valley, and I knew that our precious city was a place of love, and that we were here to heal, but that our healing process was almost complete.

At this point my previous wounds, all my lifelong sufferings and traumas, came out and confronted me. They were there, dancing in the sky of my mind, right in front of where I stood, a terrible, frightening mass of pain and despair, so many dark symbols, a great horde of objects confusing me wherever I looked.

This was my past, what I was staring at, including the physical things in my life, and everything I had been through, in short, it was me, but in a frightening, sinister version. It was how wrong I had been, how superficial and unfeeling, disconnected and immature.

I stared at this circus of objects in disbelief. They were engulfing me, flooding me with a toxic unreality, pressing my nose against the monster I had recently been.

It was such a strangely random group of guitars and guns, but also drugs, then all the paraphernalia of New York life, here banknotes, and there beautiful girls, and even stocks and shares, and then also clothes and houses, planes and trains, in short, the entire world of materialism and capitalism and corruption, but also many modern gadgets and equipment, all those things we feel we need to

have to survive, and yet, of course, deep down, we know that we do not need any of them.

The sense of disgust was so intense that I began to vomit, but nothing came out. In a nightmare trance, I scratched and scabbled at my own skin which now began to shred and peel away in huge clusters. The grotesque horror of this began to overpower me until I realized that I was being renewed, even reborn. At this very moment I was shedding my wounds and my skin, all at the same time. In triumph I stepped out of the mass of useless, dry stuff that had so recently been me. In the air above me there was a great commotion, and as I looked into the sun, I appeared to see a giant serpent writhing as he too shed his skin.

Then I understood. The message was clear. The recent, great transformation and rebirth was not only for America, but also for the family, and even within my own soul. The feeling of liberation was overpoweringly triumphant. I was free.

Staring at the mountain opposite, I blinked unsteadily, swayed on my feet, looked at my open hands, then back down into the valley again. As the wind tickled my cheek, I gave thanks for having been reborn into such a fresh, shining, new world in this way. It was an uncanny, intoxicating pleasure to understand that I no longer needed anyone or anything to guide or teach me any more. The sublime knowledge and the wisdom of the city of the priests had now passed directly into the essence of my being. I did not need to know any more. I simply knew. I did not have to try to be any more. I simply was.

It was an intense, infinitely profound moment, and as I stood up and gave thanks, and prayed into the sun, I knew that the cycle was almost complete, the game was done, and very soon I must leave this place, this city of the priests, and also that I must walk out alone.

But suddenly all these revelations overpowered me with their enormous weight of emotion, and I became

delirious, stumbled around for a moment, and then slumped against a low wall in the dust, and shielded my eyes against the sudden blaze and glare of the sun, because it was all too much, too bright and too soon. Then I fell into a deep, dark sleep.

Later, when I awoke, all was quiet. The big thing had come and gone. I knew instantly that I had become cleansed. Could it be that I had passed some kind of a test? A wonderful calm, and a sense of numbness surrounded me as I made my way to my feet, and began the long descent back to the family.

We spent three years at the city of the priests in the end. I learned to pray and meditate, take long walks around the colourful, winding pathways, tend to the harvesting of medicinal herbs, and of course, continue with the music. And what a series of performances we gave! I had never known that music could be this intense. By now we had become the favourite band of the priests. Their religion and our music had merged and become one.

There was no venue large enough to accomodate the crowds of priests who wished to attend each concert, so we would play outside in the open air, at the centre of a long, dusty open space. All the way up and down the valley I would see orange robes of priests on their verandahs, such that the entire sides of the mountains would be a mass of orange dots.

Nobody ever truly understood what was happening to us as we played. At almost every performance we were enveloped in a huge tide of blissful emotion which was very hard to control. Sometimes I could hardly even keep playing. All I knew was that an astonishing, burning, happiness was radiating through my very soul.

Occasionally I would look across the stage and see Maya with her trumpet, laughing as she played, or Leo,

proud and righteous, holding up his hands in submission as the priests roared their approval.

Then the children would be shouting, or even crying with bliss, playing as hard as they could, hardly daring to look up and down and all around at the immensity of the valley and its sacred occupants.

As always, we improvised the music, and simply played what was in our hearts. It was easy to follow the priests as they sang, and so we soon learned to embellish their music with our own ornamentation.

I had been provided with a keyboard by now, and so I played that, singing along, but occasionally switching to guitar.

After each concert was over the discussions would begin, always philosophy, spirituality and religion, or similar things.

Sometimes Elder Brother would take the stage, and say certain things, many of which I did not understand. As always my vision too would begin to play games when he was there. It did not seem to be possible to be close to this man without one's senses becoming extremely confused.

But I loved it when he did come up. There would be the strangest feeling almost as though I had become a little baby again. Everything was possible, I now understood. The world was bright, new and innocent, with all the colours of creation visible around me. My whole body would turn to liquid, and I would be awed at how much meaning life suddenly gained.

Most of all, I understood that I loved myself right now. How very different from those bad old days in the past where I had been Max, the New York City club owner who carried a gun, and constantly tussled with mafia. No, today, standing here on this stage, surrounded by the marvellous Russian family who I cared for so deeply, I finally became aware that I had learned to love myself. And because of this, a great door had opened, such that I had

truly become free to love the world, completely and totally, and without reservation.

Elder Brother appeared to be performing actual physical miracles many times when he was on stage with us. I saw the crowd give off great shrieks of amazement, but I was in no fit state to determine exactly what was going on. All I knew was that my body was nervous and shaking, and very close to exhaustion. It was almost a relief when each session finally ended and the great line of priests trailed off to their living quarters.

After each concert I would usually explain to the family that I needed to be alone. Then I would walk off for a few hours, searching out a quiet spot. Many times I would be talking to myself, almost demented in a way, and trembling because of the great emotion of what had come before. It was quite hard to return to any semblance of normality. And yet I would be flushed with strange, wonderful feelings and revelations, also new hopes and plans.

Gradually, delicately and methodically, I would pick my way through a spider's web of twisting lanes and alleyways, gradually ascending the mountain until I was fairly high up. Then I would choose a convenient spot at which to rest. It felt good to sit cross-legged on the hard, dry stone, dreaming, thinking, meditating or simply recovering from the enormous exertion of the performance.

One sunny evening I was alone in this way, quietly musing, with eyes closed, after one of these extraordinary events, when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder, and then heard a sly giggle. I opened my eyes.

It was Elder Brother, sitting opposite me. His face was radiant with amusement.

"You did well today," he remarked. "We enjoyed the concert very much. I loved your long solo at the end."

“Thank you so much,” I answered. Stunned by his sudden, silent arrival I hardly knew what to say. He spoke a little more about how important music was, and also how that sound was always the window to the soul.

The two of us sat in silence for a moment. The wind had dropped and dusk was falling. Several priests were cooking over an open fire just down the lane. A blackbird landed very close to Elder Brother, then hopped onto his leg. The head priest bent down and said a few words I did not understand. Then the blackbird quickly shifted his tiny head side to side, and finally reached down to clean his beak on Elder Brother’s thumb before taking to the sky.

“I was telling him to look sharp. Winter is coming,” he announced.

I started to feel many wonderful emotions as I always did when I was close to this man. Then he looked at me carefully.

“You have been here three years now,” he ventured.

At that, my heart was immediately full of dread.

Was he about to ask us to leave?

“No it’s not what you think,” he answered, guessing my thought.

“I would have you stay forever,” he confirmed.

“You are the special ones for us. Actually you are the chosen ones. Did you think it was merely by chance that you came here?”

A tear of gratitude splashed down my cheek.

“But Leo has confided in me recently,” he continued patiently. “He said that he loves being here, and has been honoured to be our guest for such a long time, but that he knows that fairly soon, he and the family must follow their own, particular path of learning. He told me it gives him much grief to decide this, and to tell me his decision, but that he cannot refuse the call of destiny.”

Now Elder Brother peered at me anxiously, attempting to divine how I was taking the news.

My heart sank. Yet I had also decided to leave, and to leave alone, very soon. If they were truly leaving, then this made things easier. I relaxed and breathed out very slowly.

Again Elder Brother anticipated something of my thoughts.

“I suspect that you will be departing with them,” the sacred one said. “It is a great loss for me, and for all of us. But I do understand that you have your own unique journey. You must search and search in order to find yourselves. I cannot do this for you. Again, it almost breaks my heart to let you go. Yet I have to bid you farewell.”

At this I could not possibly reply, my emotion was so intense. All I could manage was to muttered out some kind of an acknowledgment, before he uttered his final words.

“Can I thank you for everything you have done?” he continued. “I will now bless you, and wish you well in your future life. You have enriched our community in this place. Your music is sacred and magnificent. We will never forget you.”

At that, he blessed me again, and then hugged me, and looked directly in my eyes.

“Never imagine you are alone,” he told me. “I will always be at your side.”

Then I turned and walked down from that mountain.

THE WHEEL OF LIGHT

Many years later I relocated to Canada, without ever revisiting New York City. The club and laundromat had gone out of business anyway. Leo eventually moved back to Russia, but Maya and the children remained in the west. As the children became adult, most of them moved to different parts of the country.

Meanwhile the computer age had evolved too fast, and to the point where certain areas of the world were now in a complete state of confusion. Yet some changes were for the good.

Regarding America, the unthinkable now occurred. Morality had won over politics. The old-world politicians had been thrown into crisis, and subsequently lost all power and control. A new age of awareness had arrived, and across the nation life continued smoothly and normally on the grass-roots level.

However some changes were dramatic. The US constitution had been dismantled. Many states split off from the union to become separate nations.

At the same moment, across the Atlantic, the United Kingdom, and many other countries were dividing themselves up in like manner. The corruption had been too extreme. The popular feeling was that smaller units were better able to deal with what was unfolding.

Within this strange new landscape, life looked very different. The sharing of housing and food became more normal, and there was less desire for any aggressive, economic expansion as in previous times. The stock exchange was abandoned, and predatory financial practices were made illegal. In keeping with Shiva doctrines, vast amounts of people became vegetarian, practising

meditation and also chanting. Wars became a thing of the past.

Pollution was finally brought under control by a strict series of laws.

Life became more simple and natural. Cities were vibrant with vegetable gardens, herbs and flowers once more, and backyards teemed with goats, rabbits, chickens and vines. Holy men, and also women, could be seen all around central plazas and malls, discussing philosophy, drinking tea and enjoying the sunshine.

Under the new regimes it was not possible to see war films or find violence anywhere in the media. After a few more years many Americans no longer even knew what a gun looked like.

I never did discover whether Serge had truly been an avatar of Shiva. All signs had pointed to that, but it could not be finally established one way or another.

My life moved on, though I could hardly forget the Russian family.

At the front of my house was a small, comfortable office room, where I would go and write every day.

Through my window to the right, I'd see falling snow, and many people passing by. In the evenings, just neon streetlights, and more snow.

But to my left, framed, and hanging on the wall, was the paper I had discovered after visiting Carla, so many years before. I had carefully placed it there so that it would always remind me of her, and New York, and also my Russian friends.

You gonna get out of this place. Don't know how or when or why. But I know you gonna do it. Carla knows. You gonna follow the horizon. The wheel is turning. Carla sees it. You gonna find that mountain, at the end of the frozen road. Peace and love be with you, honky chile.

One day I was glancing at these very words when the phone rang. It was Leo.

The two of us were old men now, and we had the habit of phoning occasionally, to chat and remember, the way old men do.

But today he had something special to suggest. He urged me to write our entire story down.

“You are good with words, Max,” he pointed out. “Tell the world what happened. I want my people in Russia to know.” After turning it over in my mind I agreed, and as soon as we had said goodbye, I turned to my desk and began to write.

Many months passed, such that when I phoned him again, late one afternoon, the manuscript was almost finished. He sounded pleased to hear my voice.

“I have many birds in the garden here,” he began. “It’s peaceful. I have no regrets. But how are you doing?” he asked, and laughed.

“Surviving,” I grunted. “No regrets.”

“Do you remember how we talked about the Samsara once, long ago?” he wanted to know.

I understood that he was referring to the cycle of life and death. He appeared unaffected by the fact that time was running out for us.

“You act like you are controlling it all,” I said.

“Nobody controls it except Shiva,” he replied.

“However I make sure to carry Shiva with me, so I think that I accept my destiny a little more than the others.”

As usual, I felt the need to bring the conversation back to more ordinary matters.

“I am drinking a cup of tea here, in my office room, in Canada,” I announced with a kind of hollow valour. This tickled him.

“Me too,” he replied. “Let’s make a toast?” I felt my heart warm towards him.

“We had a beautiful dream,” I pointed out.

“Musicians are very much like holy men,” he mused. “We live for the spirit.”

“I’ll second that,” I said. There was a pause.

“I’m sorry we threw you out of the bus, just before LA,” I confessed.

“Yes, that was not your best day, I would say,” he growled. “But then I turned you out also, soon after.” This, with a snort of disdain.

I edged around in my executive chair uncomfortably. But there was something else that I needed to get off my chest.

“Did you know that, in the beginning, you looked like a madman?” I demanded. “I was plotting to have you committed to a psychiatric hospital, and then to steal your family band,” I muttered. “Can you ever forgive me?” I shuffled my feet around nervously.

There was a long pause. Heavy breathing, and then what sounded like a muffled swear word in Russian.

“Quite bad,” he admitted eventually. “But did I seem that crazy?” he probed. “Surely not?”

“You had your moments,” I admitted. But at this point I thought it best to change the subject.

“The kids, are they OK?” I asked.

“They are not kids anymore,” he replied. “Today they live in many different places. Yes, they are OK, but not working musicians any more. Irene never stopped playing though. She’s a real pro now, and doing gigs, and sounding great.”

A large truck careened past my window, splashing through puddles near the kerb. I rocked a little in my chair.

“Recently I talked to her on the phone,” he continued. “She was in New York city, with Maya, at the

time. Her mood was upbeat, happy and easygoing, as we discussed her career. I asked her what her future plans were. What did she want to do? Now can you guess what she said?"

"What?" I demanded.

"She wanted to know if I was asking what did the wheel of light want her to do," Leo said.

I felt something break inside me. A grey cat stalked along the sidewalk outside.

"That's so strange," I told him. "Did we do something wrong here?"

Then Leo continued, speaking slowly like an automaton.

"Soon after that day, she returned to the city of the priests," he announced. "They welcomed her back with open arms." His voice faltered into silence.

A wave of emotion swept through me. But I could not reply. Now Leo was speaking again.

"In the meantime, Serge's life is not easy," he said. "He is not totally off the drugs still."

"I'm sorry," I said. There was another difficult pause.

"Are we still wanted by the police?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You were always too nervous. Just relax." I mused on this for a moment.

"Remember how you always said the world was about to end?" I probed. "That never happened, did it?" He laughed.

"*Their* world ended, and we helped with that," he mumbled. I saw his point.

"It's true that America has finally split into pieces." I admitted. "So how much of this was caused by us? It's all so surreal now. In the beginning it was just you and Serge talking endlessly about Shiva and the new way. Then gradually the message spread, through the miracle of what India represents, and via the music, and the priests, until

suddenly we had the new government sponsoring us, and transforming our lives right in front of our eyes. And then, just as our records were selling the most, another huge change occurred such that many states became independent, more and more, until it finally became decentralised, like how it is today. But what I want to know is - exactly how much of this did we, ourselves, cause?"

He chuckled.

"Who knows?" he said. "But we played our part, for sure. Yet it was clearly destined to happen anyway. I saw the signs well in advance. The corruption was out of control, the national debt also. Mainly, there was no more integrity of any kind. The nation was sick, and on its knees. I knew it all had to crash. Finally the computers had created a form of mental illness, which was hidden for many years. Nothing of this surprised me.

"Do you know that in the last few months before the fracture, when the senators were coming in to work at the house of representatives, they were high on all kinds of drugs?" he added, snorting with laughter.

"It had to change," he continued. "The system was broken."

We talked a little longer before finally saying goodbye. I learned how he was still meditating, and enjoying the peace and quiet of living deep in the forest in Russia, just outside St Petersburg. We discussed all the things we always loved to dwell on, yoga and shamanism, and all kinds of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, and then how he was preparing for the long, gentle sleep that both of us knew was arriving fairly soon. As we talked, I recognised, with a great love in my heart, that here was a kindred spirit, a person who had given all for his ideals, and who had fought a terrible battle for what he had believed in. Also I knew that my entire life had been changed for the better by him, and if his style had often been abrasive and

confrontational, it was simply because of his Viking ancestry.

Putting the phone down, I gazed out through the window, and saw that the sun was setting over the twin spires of the little church beside my local park. Russia seemed very far away at this moment. I did not know if I would ever be able to visit him again. As night surrounded my little town, the snow was falling softly everywhere.

Many winter months passed, and I had just finished washing the dishes in the middle of yet another snowstorm, when the doorbell rang, and I opened it to see an old, black man huddled up in the porch, beating the snow off his fur-lined cap. He was a large-boned, bulky figure, with beard and moustache stained white by a combination of age and snow. His eyes were lined and weary, but they lit up dimly at the sight of me.

He looked vaguely familiar, but it took me many moments before I finally understood who he was.

“Big Joe,” I gasped. “Is it you? What are you doing here? Welcome! Come on in!” He struggled through the door. I sat him down in the kitchen and made him a hot drink.

He poured out his story. Things had continued to go badly for him in New York. He was washed up, out of cash, quite desperate and in need of help. His options had run out. Could I put him up for a while? He would do anything to pay his way, he told me.

I told him not to worry, and that he should stay, and we would work it out together. At that he broke down, hugged me, and wept. I poured a generous slug of whisky into his tea, and then showed him a place to sleep.

He ended up staying two years, before finding a job, plus his own place to live. But in the meantime I was pleased to see that he kept our apartment clean, did all kinds of household chores, and also we had plenty of time

to play, and to talk music too. He loved to tease me about the Russian band.

“Remember the crazy bullshit in that magazine?” he chuckled one night, when a rainstorm was raging outside, and the wind battering at the windows, and we were toasting sausages on sticks on an open fire in the living room.

“Tell me Max, what was that honkey talk? What did that writer say?” he begged.

“Oh, yeah, he wrote that Maya played the *phrygian mode*,” I said. “Or was it the *locrian*? I don’t remember exactly.”

This tickled Big Joe. For the next half an hour he rocked in his chair, whispering to himself, and then made a little *tee hee hee*, all secretly and quietly, but then shooting looks at me to see how I was taking it.

“She played righteous too,” I said.

“Lord, I knows that,” he howled, “I do knows that! She was righteous! I heard her play! She was sure as hell righteous! The kids were righteous too!”

The following year, on a windy, summer evening in April, I was just entering my little brown office when I received another call. It was Leo’s familiar voice once more. Shutting the door, I sat down slowly at the desk. He had something new to tell me.

“You have not heard the latest event,” he said at last. There was an uncomfortable silence.

“What?” I asked. “It’s something to do with Serge, isn’t it?” I could sense a kind of darkness approaching.

“You are right,” he admitted. His voice was distant and troubled.

“The pressure was just too much for him,” he continued. “Remember that Irene went back to the city of the priests? Well soon after that, Serge went back on hard drugs, even dealing them also. Of course we were

completely shocked and did everything we could to stop this from continuing, but it was no good. And in the end he chose to live out on the streets once more. It was his way, his love of freedom. Part of me could understand that he was being very brave. However it was gradually killing him.”

“Poor Serge,” I whispered.

“And then he finally passed away two months ago,” Leo said, in a tragic, but strangely wooden tone.

“Oh no,” I muttered.

“Yet he was always totally free,” Leo repeated. “He chose to live as he wished. There was nothing anyone could do.”

I breathed deeply for a few moments, trying to remain calm, and attempting to understand.

“You must have been destroyed,” I said.

“I was,” he replied.

There was another silence. Outside my window the trees were gently swaying in the breeze. The light was fading, and a few more cars passed the window, driving slowly.

And now Leo spoke for a long time, and I knew that it was good for him to let it all out. He talked about the terrible pain he was in, but how it was also mixed with joy, and then how he could see they were two sides of the same thing. He said he knew Serge had been wild, but also fearless and strong, and a true Viking son, and how proud he was of him. And then he told me I was a good friend, and how Serge had not really gone, but the wheel of light had taken him, and that he believed Serge would be back again one day, and that he, Leo was keeping his drums safe for that moment. And as he talked, Serge was becoming more than just a boy in my mind, he was something sacred now, the spirit of rhythm itself, and I knew he was there beside us once more, with that mischievous smile of his,

and that young heart full of hope and excitement, and love for life.

There was another long, long pause. I heard the trans-Canadian train moan far away in the distance.

“Leo, you and I may not live much longer,” I said. “But I want to thank you. You helped me find the suffering I needed. And you know what? I look back on all that pain now, and it looks like joy to me. Like diamonds glittering in the desert.”

The old Viking croaked back something down the line, which was crackling badly now. I could not make out everything he said, but I knew he had been moved by my words.

“We live for the wheel of light,” he said. “Light is suffering but it is also joy. Pain is everywhere, but we must always walk into the fear. I salute you, Max. You were the only one to understand these things. We saw eye to eye from the first. We could have been brothers. And now I am ready to cross the ocean once more, and I will think of you at the place where sea meets sky.

“Remember my words after I am gone,” he continued. “I will be waiting for you there, at the frozen road.”

“Perhaps I will be there first, waiting for you,” I told him. We began to argue, then laughed, and finally said goodbye.

I put the phone down with a heavy heart. It was impossible to believe that little Serge had gone. And now, what to do? Should I continue writing the book? And if so, how could I possibly explain that my friend Serge had lived and died for freedom, and for our music? I could not bear to think that his life had been in vain.”

“Please God no?” I whispered, and then I put my hands together, and prayed for a while.

Trying to ignore the awful shadow which had fallen over me, I now began to write feverishly, hoping that the simple act of writing would cleanse my soul, and would eventually bring relief to the wave of anxiety and guilt that had swept over me. What if Serge had not had to play all those gigs for years on end? Would he have survived?

It was hard to find an answer. But I planned to find this out, even if it take a lifetime.

I knew that I was on an endless train to eternity, holding the hand of a little Russian drummer boy, who was laughing cheerfully in the sky, and that I would never, ever let him go.

THE END

AFTERWORD

Serge now lives on in our hearts and souls as an icon for all those millions of young, talented musicians like himself, all over the world, who live too hard and too fast, and who continue to fight the same dark forces as he did.

AUTHOR TESTIMONIALS

Alex's writing is simple, detailed and concise, effective, straightforward and realistic. He portrays the music world of the 70s to 90s quite skillfully. It's a delight to read him and imagine his adventures.

—Azadeh Azad, author and poet.

A prolific writer, master musician and creative king of the black and white keys, Max Fabian has lived a Jazz life to the max. This is another lively volume in his startling sequence of autobiographical novels. He tells it like he plays it, from the hippest of the hip.

—Paul Gilroy FRSL, FBA, English sociologist and cultural studies scholar who is the founding Director of the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Race and Racism at University College, London.

MORE BOOKS BY THIS WRITER

(under various pen-names)

ARCANIA by Brother Xanadu

DONNA DONNA DONNA by Zandy Alexander

BRISTOL GARDENS by Zandy Alexander

LIBERTY AVENUE by Max Fabian