

Peace, Love and Motorcycles

Short stories written by
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A Bass in the Closet

Say what you will, deny it if you can, but everyone; everyone has a skeleton in the closet.

The first skeleton I saw was not a skeleton at all; it was a bass violin. It looks like a violin but it's as big as a man, and it needs to be played standing up. So people often call it a 'stand-up bass'. But there it was, in the closet. I first saw it when I was 7 years old. It gave me the impression of something imposing, but out of place. Mom said it was a gift from Charles Mingus to his son, Dorian... You mean Dorian, my older brother? Yes.

So without too extensive an analysis, I reasoned that Charles Mingus was Dorian's father. But how? Turns out mom was anything but a 'good girl' in her youth. In 1942, Mom was 17 years old. She was inspired by the icon of Rosie the Riveter. Rosie the Riveter was an advertisement created by government media to persuade women that hard work was sexy, and necessary to support a country at war.

But in addition to war, there was the big band scene and dance halls. Mom loved to dance but eventually was drawn to the jazz clubs that were just too cool to resist. So she and her friends, Marie and Shirley, became regulars at several of the jazz clubs in San Francisco. One night at the end of the show, Charles Mingus was alone on the stage playing the piano. Mom said to him, "I thought you played the bass". Mingus smiled and said, "I saw you in the crowd", and asked for Mom's phone number.

But who was Charles Mingus? A black man with claims to American Indian, as well as Chinese heritage. He said, he was too white to be black, and too black to be white. Fortunately, his family was able to send him to music school where he excelled. But then there was jazz, where the rules of music became flexible. In fact, so flexible that the rules became questionable. Well, Mingus made a name for himself not only questioning the rules of music, but questioning the rules of society. Mingus was outspoken, and he is remembered on one occasion where he was bothered by the noise of the crowd during a performance. He stopped the music and said to the crowd, "You want to talk, we want to play. So here's how it's gonna be, 8 bars of talk, then 8 bars of music, 8 bars of talk, then 8 bars of music, you dig?" They dug.

The late 1950s was also time of focus on the lives of Black Americans because of the ongoing violence and oppression by those who resented the achievements of Black Americans. And then there was Mom, supporting the cause of the Black American, up close and personal. And then there was Dorian born in 1957 after one year of marriage to Charles Mingus. And one year later there was divorce. Mom felt that she needed to escape from New York secretly because she feared Mingus would not let her go easily.

She took Dorian to her family home in Fresno, California. But nothing good ever happened in Fresno, so Mom eventually branched out and applied for work in San Francisco. Since she had actual experience creating a record company with Mingus, called Debut Records, she asked a friend who was a writer for a Jazz magazine if he had any advice. He suggested making a call to Saul Zaentz, the new owner of Fantasy records, who happened to be looking for a secretary.

They met at the iconic San Francisco restaurant called Original Joes. Dad knew he was looking for the ex-wife of Charles Mingus and was 'naturally' looking for a black woman. Fortunately, they found each other and Mom got the job.

Later, Dad invited Mom to his ranch in Clearlake, California. Yep, Dad had a ranch with some, 200 head of cattle, I don't know. Dad must have had some longing, (or dream) for the life of the farmer left over from his two year stint at Rutgers... Well Dad invited Mom and Dorian, to his ranch for a long weekend. Part of the plan was to plant new walnut trees. The other part of the plan was to declare his love for Mom and propose marriage.

They were married in 1960 and I was born in 1962. I never saw the bass until we moved into the BIG house in 1969. The BIG house became possible because Dad took a gamble and scored BIG with the rock band Creedence Clearwater Revival. They became a multimillion record seller in 1969. So now Mom decided that one closet would be dedicated to a legacy from Charles Mingus. But why?

I can only imagine that Mom wanted Dorian to know about his father, but sadly, the message was unclear. Dorian only met him once. When he was older, Dorian said, "Some people think it's hard to grow up in the shadow of a famous father, well, try two famous fathers."

Dad never had a problem with Mom's history with Charles Mingus. The three of them actually met together several times. Once there was a dinner given in Mingus' honor in San Francisco. Afterwards, someone offered Mingus a ride to

his hotel. He said, “No thanks, I’m getting a ride with my wife and her husband”. A telling point; also, is the fact that Mingus was unwilling to allow Dad to adopt Dorian legally.

Fathers and sons, fame and misfortune, a bass in the closet.

Love and Motorcycles

When I was 12 years old, I begged my parents for a motor scooter. They were opposed because of the obvious dangers. Of course it's dangerous. That's why it's cool. A man and his motorcycle are the quintessential image of courage and independence. Like a man and his horse, the solo rider represents defiance of the herd.

This image is so powerful that it has influenced generation after generation. Nothing much has changed. The man wears jeans and a t-shirt, with a black leather jacket and sunglasses, maybe cowboy boots as well. He's got a beautiful lady on back with her hand clasped around his waist, and he's smoking a cigarette with an attitude. Why the attitude? He has been wronged, and he has a chip on his shoulder. But that's what makes him authentic, and irresistible.

In high school, almost all of my friends had motorcycles. We spent lunch and our free time in the back parking lot, smoking cigarettes. Now, of course the real goal of all of this, was not to impress your friends. The real goal of all of this was to pick up chicks, and get laid, right? The venue of the back parking lot offered the potential scenario. If you could persuade a girl to smoke with you, you just might find a car in which to sit and smoke; and, if one thing led to another, who knows?

In the 8th grade I had a crush on a girl. I wrote, "I love Suzanne", in tiny letters it on my desk in math class. As fate would have it, Suzanne's best friend Judith sat at the same desk during the following period. Judith did

the necessary investigation and by lunchtime I was summoned. Suzanne and I talked about the upcoming class trip to an amusement park and planned to see each other then. The happy day arrived and there were two buses waiting while the entire 8th grade class lined up. One of the chaperones called our attention and explained that we would be boarding the bus alphabetically by last name. Since I'm a 'Z' and Suzanne is a 'P' I was worried I wouldn't be able to sit with her. The students, and then Suzanne climbed aboard the bus. A few more and the bus was full. We were all painfully aware of the injustice. My friends, Jim and Donald were calling to me and extending their arms from the window. I grabbed an arm, and Jeff gave me a leg up. I popped through the window. There was cheering and Suzanne was thrilled. Then I was called to the front of the bus. I complained about the unfairness of the alphabet, and I was sent to take my case to the vice principal. I ran to the vice principal's office with the vain hope that she would see things my way. As I was waiting, I heard the buses drive away. The vice principal suspended me for the day, so I began my long walk home.

As I seethed and grumbled, I remembered that one of my neighborhood buddies mentioned seeing a motor scooter in an open garage, close to my school. I began to prowl the neighborhood. If there was an open garage, I scanned it. As I approached one particular garage, an old man called to me from the house next door. He decided that I had no business being there and told me to wait. Soon, a police car rolled into the driveway. My parents met me at the police station.

What did they say? Not too much. You see, their marriage was falling apart and there was talk of leaving Berkeley. I pleaded to stay, for Suzanne. Then Dad said, "that's not important, right now". Really? This was like a final blow to my world.

I mean, first; I am thwarted by the vice principal in my bold and daring attempt to be with my beloved. Then, I am thwarted by the police in my bold and daring attempt to obtain a motor scooter. Finally, I am thwarted by my father to attempt it all again. Love denied, motorcycle denied. Chip granted.

So now I'm a 14 year old with a real chip on my shoulder. But I still didn't have a motorcycle, so I needed something else to be cool. I got an electric guitar. First I learned to play songs from Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith and Jimi Hendrix. Then I started to write my own songs. The first song I wrote was titled, "Suzanne".

*Whence I first saw
You turned me on
Has it been too long
We've been gone
Oh, oh, Suzanne*

And again she comes, my muse, my Suzanne.

*I reserve my love for you
It's all that I can do*

*Everyday I see you a new way
Blooming roses in a bouquet
I can't believe you will be going
Won't let you leave without you knowing
I reserve my love for you*

Corny? Yes. Sweet? Yes. *I write the songs, I write the songs.* Move over, Barry Manilow. I may not have been fully aware of the cause of my angst, but I was aware that something good was happening with music.

In fact, music was like a door to my inner self, my hopes and dreams. What I discovered was the zone. The zone of creative expression. The Ex Zone, if you will. This is where a wordless emotion finds a voice, or where the seed of an idea comes into fruition. Of course one must periodically leave the Ex Zone to eat, and do chores. But knowing that the Ex Zone exists is like finding shelter in a storm, or finding the sun shining, above the clouds.

When I got a chip on my shoulder I thought I was the unluckiest boy in the world. When I discovered the Ex Zone, I became one of the lucky ones.

Seven Bull's Eyes

Spring of 1980, it was my final semester of high school. Time was running out. We had all the time in the world. My PE teacher was a large woman named Blodgett. There were rumors of former athletic prowess and perhaps a thyroid disorder that caused the weight gain. Nevertheless, high school students are not known for compassion, and I had a reputation for missing class. However, when I heard that archery was part of the program, I couldn't resist.

I first learned archery at camp when I was 12. There's something about using a bow and arrow that makes you feel, I don't know, native. Imagine: razor sharp arrowheads made of finely chipped black obsidian, bird feathers to guide the flight, a bow of a flexible branch and a string from an animal tendon. It's human ingenuity at its best. It's also a symbol of indigenous people. But for me, the story of the Native Americans is also a story of regret. There is so much to learn from a culture who live and migrate according to the seasons and patterns of wildlife. Of course there is a tendency to idealize indigenous people as noble warriors, and overlook the less pleasant aspects such as misguided bravery and hardships in health, and family life. That said, such hardships should not cloud the fact that we still have a lot to learn to live in harmony with nature.

My parents divorced when I was 14. I left Berkeley and moved to Marin county, with my mom, brothers Dorian and Jonnie, and sister Athena. Berkeley was infamous for counter culture, and alternative lifestyles. I started smoking pot when I was 13. I saved money from a summer job at my uncle's restaurant, so I secretly decided to buy, no, invest in a 1/4 pound of street grade reefer

before we moved. Marin county was also infamous for counter culture and alternative lifestyles. I soon found out that my high school had a veritable farmer's market for buying weed, mushrooms, cocaine, and LSD. Weed was enough for me, at the time, so I set up shop and offered \$1 joints. This undercut the high-end \$2 joints, but what did I care? I made friends and found my group, affectionately called, the "burnouts". Of course, there were also "jocks" and "nerds", and "babes" and "dogs". The burnouts were closely associated with the "greasers", initially so called for a greased hairstyle. The name now referred to guys who liked working on cars or motorcycles. At weekly "kegger" parties you might find representatives of all of these groups, coexisting in the haze.

The proceeds from my one and only venture in illicit substances, was used in part, to purchase a second hand hunting bow. Now, I needed a target. At camp I remembered paper targets on hay bales with a tall net hanging behind. My cousin Alan mentioned seeing hay bales in a field at the College of Marin. Late one night I went with him to procure a short stack. Easier said than done. It had rained recently so the bales were wet and heavy. And the hay was wiry and scratched your skin. When we got home we stacked the four hay bales in front of a tall hedgerow. Behind the hedgerow was our small basketball/patio area. Behind that was the neighbors neglected backyard. Perfect.

Aside from the fact that I had something to smoke, I now had something to do. My friends came over after school and we passed the time shooting arrows. I can't say that anyone was a marksman. We all missed the target frequently, and nobody ever got a bullseye. My friend Mike once said, "I guess you prefer solitary sports like archery, and scuba diving?" I said, "fuck you", but it was

true. I liked sports, I just wasn't any good at them. I wasn't very team oriented either. I never developed those skills at home, or anywhere else. Nevertheless, I dreaded PE as a boy, and at high school, I rarely attended. Archery was the exception.

When the program began, Ms. Blodgett explained the basics and offered a prize for a perfect score. She said, if any of us achieves 6 bull's eyes in a row, she would put our name in the local newspaper. The distance was 20 yards, we each shot 6 arrows, and waited for the signal to collect them. We worked with partners and alternated shooting. Several weeks into the program, it happened. I shot 6 bulls eyes in a row. I was thrilled. I may have squandered 4 years without academic achievement, but I could at least leave high school with a measure of success, and my name in the paper to boot.

We ran to inform Ms. Blodgett. She inspected the 6 arrows in the bull's eye, and said, "I don't believe it". I said, "I don't believe it either, but look." She shook her head and said, "no, I don't believe it, you guys are always goofing off, I'm sure this is another one of your stunts." My jaw dropped and my blood began to boil. I pulled the 6 arrows out of the target and stomped back to the shooting area. I notched an arrow, drew back the bow, and let it fly. Bull's eye.

Let's Go Europe

Marin County is directly across the Golden Gate bridge from San Francisco. It was once uniquely famous as the land of hot tubs and peacock feathers. It beckons a life of hedonism, peacocks and all. In fact, in 1976, the pursuit of pleasure was my only pursuit when I moved to Larkspur with my sister Athena, two brothers, Jonnie and Dorian, and recently divorced mother, Celia. After completing high school in 1980, I leisurely attended some courses at the College of Marin including: Astronomy, Psychology and Oceanography. Realizing that I needed some direction I went to the College of Marin career center. There was a collection of college catalogs in alphabetical order. In the B section I found Berklee College of Music, and Boston University. I proceeded to apply to Boston University for the Fall of 1982 as a transfer student; major undeclared.

For the summer of 1982 my friend Scott had an idea to backpack though Europe. Since his sister had made the trip the previous summer, he wanted to impart some of her wisdom. He explained that traveling with a partner can be challenging, so we should be prepared for disagreements. And if serious differences should arise, we should be prepared to travel independently. This turned out to be excellent advice because when the time came to leave, Scott backed out.

At the time, the most popular resource for planning the trip was the book, *Let's Go Europe*. I began to read the book from the beginning, starting with Albania. This was not the best approach. Instead I asked

friends and family. My list included the popular cities: London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Rome. Some shady friends of friends suggested going from Italy to Greece and then Morocco. The movie, *Midnight Express*, came to mind and quickly ended thoughts of going anywhere near the Middle East. Instead, I chose to go north, to Scandinavia. I don't know what I expected to find in Sweden or Norway, but at least my plan was taking shape. First, I would get my bearings in London. Then cross the channel to Paris and the French Riviera, oo-la-la. Then I would head north, through Amsterdam, Denmark, and on to Norway and Sweden. I would return to London before flying to Boston to begin classes in the Fall.

Let's Go Europe recommended purchasing a "Eurail pass", valid for train travel in most countries for the 3 week duration of my trip. I also learned that the first place to go after arriving to a new destination is the Tourist Information desk at the train station. Here you could get information about exchanging money, and a list of youth hostels to stay overnight. The attendant usually spoke English and sometimes they even made reservations. With my backpack, sleeping bag, and guitar, I was ready to go.

I arrived in London, and found my way to a youth hostel near the British Museum. There was a common room where some of the guests were lounging. In a strange place with strangers like myself, I wrote this poem.

Nothing to fear

Until

Fear of silence

Comes between us

Nothing occurs

Buzzing blurs

A young woman, about my age, spoke to me. She asked, "Do you play guitar?" I smiled and nodded. She smiled too and said, "Of course you play guitar. Why else would you be carrying one?" Then I handed her the poem. I told her that I just wrote it. She liked it. Her name was Debbie. She said she played the flute but didn't have it with her. I showed her a penny whistle I had with me. We went out for a light dinner and then came back to the hostel and found a room in the basement to play music. She showed me a song she was working on titled, "Gypsy Man", about a man she recently met in Cornwall. She was more than a bit infatuated with him. It made things clear so our friendship could proceed without romantic confusion.

We spent everyday together. We made a song of, "Gypsy Man", and played together in parks. Aside from music, we did tourist things like go to the British Museum, and Windsor Castle. We also went to bars and listened to music. On the last day we got into the subject of religion. Her father was a professor teaching Jewish History at a Christian College in Massachusetts. That seemed interesting. My father was raised in a Jewish household and my mother Greek orthodox Catholic. Religion was not evoked in my household, except that my father had a full wall bookcase with one box set of religious books bearing the titles, "Judaism,

Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism". On top of another bookshelf was a small wooden statue of open armed Jesus with bronze head and hands. I considered the religious books on the shelf as equal sharing the box set. The Jesus statue was something else.

Debbie described herself as a Christian, but she liked to smoke, drink, and dance as much as anybody, so I asked her, "What makes you a Christian?" She answered, "You have to accept Jesus Christ in your heart as your personal savior." So here I am at the first stop on my journey chatting with the first person I meet and I decide to say, (drumroll please), "I accept Jesus Christ in my heart as my personal savior." Ok, now what?" I asked. "You're a Christian", she said, and gave me her little travel bible. I gave her the penny whistle. We hugged and said goodbye.

Let them eat cake

The next stop was Paris. There were a lot of young people in line at the Tourist information desk. Many of us were assigned to a dorm a short walk from the station. As I approached the building I saw someone I knew from Marin. We worked together at the same restaurant. So Bruce and I hung out in Paris and celebrated Bastille day. We caroused the streets, met girls, and got drunk. The next day I went to the Louvre museum and strolled through the Tuileries gardens. In the gardens there was a miniature sculpture of the statue of Liberty. This reminded me that the one in the New York harbor was a gift from France, in recognition of America's commitment to freedom, following the civil war. I was also reminded that the American Revolution was won with the

aid of the French, and King Louis XVI. The French revolution began with Bastille Day and led to the rise of Napoleon and the execution, by guillotine, of Louis XVI, and his wife. Queen Marie Antoinette is best known for hearing about the people's need for bread and responding with, "Let them eat cake". My best Parisian experience was finding a decent restaurant in the fashionable district of the *Champs d'Elysee*. I ordered a delicious *filet mignon*, and *pommes frites* (you know that's what the French call "french fries", go figure) I think it cost me about \$50, including the *bordeaux* and *mousse au chocolat*. That was the most I had ever spent for any meal, but it was well worth it.

I left Paris and travelled by train to the beach area of the French Riviera where it was rumored that French women sunbathed topless. I arrived in Nice (*niece*) and found a popular hostel. The manager was a young man who had young male assistant. They spoke English and were hospitable but the sleeping area was basically a floor shared among all of the guests. Most people, like me, travelled with sleeping bags and padded mats so it wasn't really a problem, except on the first night someone was snoring up a storm. I was so irritated, I sat up in the dark room and tried to locate the offender. Then I threw my hiking boot across the room and snap, the snoring stopped. At breakfast I met several of the guests including an attractive blond American girl and a young Belgian doctor. The doctor had a bruise on his face. I didn't ask why. I asked if the woman was interested in going to a beach. She was. Most guests were already out for the day. When I was ready to go I found that she was lingering and chatting with the manager of the hostel. From across the room I could see he was gently running his fingers through

her hair. She looked uncomfortable, but she kept smiling nonetheless. He proceeded to embrace her and laid her on the floor. At this point I approached and asked her, "Do you still want to go the beach?" She nodded with interest. Meanwhile, the manager continued caressing her. I asked her, "Do you want to go now?" She nodded. I said to manager, "She wants to go now". He answered, "I don't *sink* so". I raised my voice and said, "Get off of her." He got up and addressed me, "*Zis* is none of your business. You are a guest in my home". Then he walked away.

The girl and I took a train towards the beaches. She was distracted. We passed several beaches and couldn't decide which one to go to. Nothing was particularly appealing. Eventually we chose a beach, and got something to eat. As we walked along the shore I caught sight of the no so enticing topless bathers. Being aware of my new friend I didn't stare too much. It was a bit windy, and not ideal for swimming so we didn't stay. I wanted to go to the shopping district on the way back. She continued on. I stopped for an early dinner of the local specialty, *salad Nicoise*, made with tuna, olives, potatoes and green beans. When I got back to the hostel, the blond was gone. At the bar, I asked the assistant manager for a cocktail. The manager was in the background scowling. When I finished the drink, I began to feel sick. The assistant manager suggested it might be because I had wine at dinner. He imparted his French wisdom, "You should not mix *zee* grain and *zee* vine." I went to bed early and woke up with a terrible sore throat. At breakfast, I described my symptoms to the Belgian doctor. He looked in his bag and offered me some medicine. The medicine worked. I was ready to go. On the train to Amsterdam I thought about the strange series of recent

events. It appears that the girl was undecided about the attentions of the manager, and I was therefore, resented by both her and the manager. The manager may have tainted my drink, with God knows what, to take revenge. While I felt it was my duty to assist the damsel in distress, the only hero was the Belgian doctor, who I thanked in advance by hurling my boot at him to stop his snoring, on the first night.

Why I went to Scandinavia

It was morning when I arrived in Copenhagen and I had a few hours before catching the ferry to Norway. I was waiting at a park in the downtown area and playing my guitar to pass the time. A blond boy my age, in need of a shave, smiled, and sat down. Steiner was from Norway and was on his way home. Apparently, Copenhagen hadn't been good to him. When it was time to take the ferry, Steiner helped me buy my ticket, and explained that I didn't need a sleeping compartment. He didn't buy a ticket so I assumed he had one. When it was time for boarding, luggage was loaded in a separate compartment. Steiner rolled up his sleeves and asked for my bag. He walked among the other stevedores and disappeared inside the hold. I wasn't concerned when I realized it was his way of getting a free ride. We met on the upper deck of the ferry and smoked and chatted. We met a young couple from Oslo and the woman, Anna, spoke English. The wind picked up and the couple suggested going below deck. Since we didn't have a compartment, she invited us to theirs.

Anna was very kind and even invited me to stay at their apartment and show me around Oslo. Steiner lived outside of the city and gave me his address to meet later. Anna was sweet and attractive but her husband, Ivan, was like a Viking, so I kept my distance. Ivan worked at an electronics repair shop and offered to fix my Sony Walkman. I met him after work and asked what I owed him. He was happy with a beer. *Skol*, is how they say cheers in Norway. Before I left, Anna gave me what she described as the best book she ever read, "100 Years of Solitude", by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. For me, it was hard to even get past the title. Maybe I'll finish it one day. I left Oslo to visit Steiner. He met me at the train station and took me to his grandmother's house in the country. Steiner was not playing with a full deck. The reason that Steiner had to leave Copenhagen was because he couldn't hold a job. He was probably an alcoholic and he sunk so low as to accept payment to participate in a couple's S&M games. Steiner told me he was the one holding the whip but otherwise he knew he had hit bottom. (hit bottom, I know) He was very sensitive and not a Viking type. He had Viking friends though, and one of them wanted to beat me up because I couldn't play a song he knew. When I was at Steiner's house I offered to help by chopping wood. His grandmother gave me a bowl of yogurt with homemade preserves. The next day I wanted to hike the local mountain Steiner had reminisced about. I explained that I wanted to explore it alone and spend the night. I thought, maybe this was the reason I was drawn to Scandinavia. Maybe I would receive my special purpose? I started up the mountain with only a few necessities: water, a blanket, matches, fruit and nuts, and a new penny whistle I recently acquired. After hiking for a while on the rocky slope I found a landing suitable for a camp. Certain that I was alone, I

took off my clothes and pranced around like Pan, playing the penny whistle. I think this was my idea of summoning the spirits. I heard someone approaching and hid behind a rock. It was just a young couple hiking. When it was safe, I put on my clothes and made a fire. I slept by the fire as it burned low through the night. In the middle of the night I woke up with a start. As I sat up I saw something run away. It was the size and shape of a coyote. But in my memory, I see the face of a wolf, white with gray around the edges. I put another log on the fire and slept with one eye open. If it were another time in another place the wolf would be considered my spirit guide. But if any animal were to be my spirit guide it would be the coyote, because they're full of mischief and like to laugh. It is said that the coyote is a teacher of hidden wisdom with a sense of humor. There are no actual coyotes in Norway, but that's beside the point. I came down the mountain with a lighter step.

I bypassed Stockholm, to Uppsala, Sweden. Uppsala is a college town, and I was still more interested in parties than culture. When I arrived in Uppsala, I went to the tourist information booth. The young woman spoke English and recommended a hostel for me. I also asked her what to do for fun. She said the hostel provides bikes and has a nice trail for riding. Then I asked, "What do you do for fun?" She smiled and said, "I'm meeting some friends at a bar". She told me the name of the bar. Her name was Lotta, (I know). I checked into the hostel and took a bike out on the well groomed nature trail. Later, I went to the bar to meet Lotta. She was sitting at a table with two other guys, just guys, not Vikings, fortunately. I joined the group. We drank beer and chatted. Just before 10pm, Lotta reminded me that my hostel locks the doors at 10pm. There

was just one other guy at the table now. I asked, "Where else can I stay?" Lotta said, "You can stay with me". Of course I agreed, and with that, the other guy left the table. But I have never been invited home by a woman. On one hand, she worked for tourist information and may have been acting through professional courtesy. On the other hand, maybe this is the reason I came to Scandinavia?

She showed me her room

Isn't it good

Uppsala wood

She set up two futon-like mats on the floor of her studio apartment. Laying next to each other in the dark, I was paralyzed about making a move. In the morning, I resolved to ask if I could stay another night. I stayed about a week, and my paralysis was miraculously cured. The walls of her apartment were bare so I gave her a poster of a romantic painting I bought in Paris. It was titled, "Cupid and Psyche". Psyche is depicted as a beautiful young woman seated on a hillside wearing almost nothing and bearing her naked breast. She looks away as the winged and naked Cupid tenderly embraces her and kisses her forehead. In this painting Cupid has curly auburn hair, just like me (at the time). "That's us", I said. One night I made her dinner and she was a little dumbfounded, because real Vikings don't cook. "That's woman's work", she teased. "I'm evolved", I countered. When it was time to go, I flew back to Boston, using my new wings.

The Grasshopper and the Samurai



In 1972, I was 10 years old. I attended the 5th grade at Franklin elementary school in Berkeley, California. An ugly urban blot of concrete and asphalt, but my parents believed in public school. Despite the pathetic setting, I learned to respect my strong women teachers of African American descent. We actually had a period for music where they taught us songs like, *We shall overcome*, in a place where the spirit of Martin Luther King still reigned. At recess I played with my friend Ian. We brought fingernail clippers from home and pretended they were bulldozers in the small patches of dirt near the playground. One day during recess, Ian and I needed to visit the bathroom. As we entered, I held my breath to avoid the stench. We were standing side by side facing

the full length urinals when suddenly, the lights went out. There was shouting as several boys raced into the bathroom. I tried to hide by pressing myself against the urinal. But they weren't after me. The boys punched and kicked Ian from behind while cursing in Spanish. In two minutes it was over. Ian was crying but he wasn't badly hurt. The perpetrators were two short Latino twin brothers. I believe they attacked Ian simply because he was tall. I escaped their wrath, but they were mean and nasty and no one would stand up to them. That's when I decided to learn karate.

Dad found a Kenpo karate center within walking distance from my school. After the lessons I took a bus for a short ride to meet Dad at his work. It coincided that a new TV series had just begun. *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine, was about a Chinese monk wandering through the old west of the United States in the late 1800s. As a monk, his character was peaceful but if he was attacked or his help was needed to defend an innocent person, it was time for Kung Fu. The show was very popular, in fact everyone referred to the main character as *Kung Fu*, even though his name was supposed to be *Kwai Chang Caine*. Part of each show included flashbacks to his life as child, a boy with a shaved head called *Grasshopper*, receiving lessons in the Monastery. A famous quote from the master was, "*When you can snatch the pebble from my hand, it will be time for you to leave.*" The boy and the adult character were powerful influences that inspired my fascination with Asian philosophy, spirituality, and the martial arts. Growing up near San Francisco also exposed me to Asian culture, and Asian pop culture. My teacher in the 2nd grade was Japanese, and so was one of my best friends. We

constantly talked about the *Ultraman* TV show, where the Japanese superhero was part god and part human.

My karate lessons were a piece of cake. I passed through the white, yellow, orange, and purple belts and it was time for my first tournament. My teacher told me there would be sparring matches, so he said, "Ok, move around and try and punch me or kick me in the chest, and make sure you block my strikes." What? I know 80 different techniques. Just tell me what to do. You mean nothing I've been taught is useful for sparring? And that's how it was. I tried another school about 5 years later but it was the same thing. When it was time for sparring they just threw you in the ring. There must be a better way. It wasn't until many years later when my mom introduced me to a woman named Barbara who had her own school of Indonesian style martial arts called Poekoelan.

The school was based in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. I became intrigued because there were about 70% women in the school. There were also demonstrations created by the students as part of their practice. So it appeared that students were required to be creative and choreograph fighting scenarios. When I began, the first goal was to practice and memorize about 100 self defense techniques, similar to karate. The test was another story. It included several students, who, one by one, initiated an attack against me based on one of the self defense routines. But the attacks were continuous, and random, meaning it could be any of the 100 routines. Of course, there was an occasional allowance of time, for me to get into position, but my primary instructions were to

just react; "do something, do anything". Talk about reflex training. This was it. I passed and earned my white sash.

Now I began to attend the 3 hour group class. A typical class included a warm-up, followed by a focus on a specific technique with practice, often in pairs. Then there was a period of freestyle movement with music. This was somewhat unusual but I gradually understood the free movement to balance the strict instruction during the class. It allowed us to break the 'rules' a little and in fact, to play with the art. We were encouraged to create combinations and move with the guiding words, "One hand in, one hand out; one hand up, one hand down. Nothing you do is wrong, everything you do is right".

At the end of class there was sparring. Everyone put protective pads on their feet, hands, and head. We were taught to move in a circle with our partner and keep our eyes on our opponent's belt, not their eyes, because eyes can be deceiving. Watching the center of your opponent allows you to see all peripheral movement. In the beginning, the less experienced fighters, like me, usually punch and kick with too much force. Soon after, I learned that a touch, or light push, is all that is needed in sparring. When I learned this, everything changed. Once you allow yourself to be pushed, you lose the fear of being hit.

Once you experience being pushed and pushing back, you've experienced the essence of fighting. You no longer fear being hit because you no longer fear fighting back.

As I continued in group class, I became a little too aggressive in my sparring. I was too focused on winning by taking down my opponent, often with a headlock. In the last class I attended I was sparring with an advanced female opponent. She skillfully avoided my attacks and at some point signaled to pause. In a guiding tone, she said, "slow down". She imitated a Crane as she swooped her arms and head below my guard. I felt her back against mine but when I swung my arm around, she wrapped it like a Snake and disabled my guard. I gently broke the hold by doing the same Crane gesture as she. We continued in the slow motion dance of Poekoelan. Experiencing this dance was a turning point. I wasn't willing to continue with the more forceful elements of the practice. I had snatched the pebble. It was time for me to leave.

I soon discovered a new practice in my Newton, Massachusetts neighborhood called Dahn Yoga. There was class described as "T'ai-chi like" called "Dahnmoedoe" (*dan-mu-doe*). I learned new stances and symmetrical forms with synchronizing breathing. There was also usually a period of freestyle movement with music. I loved it. What I didn't love was that the school was also a recruiting center for the Dahn Yoga cult based in Korea with a center in Sedona, Arizona. At the end of each class we would sit down and be served a cup of delicious licorice tea. We would then take turns talking about our experience of the class. The young female teacher made announcements of special events at the school and we were encouraged to go. I explained that I was really only interested in the Dahnmoedoe class and she seemed to understand that I wasn't cult material. Then she gave everyone a hug and said goodbye. I continued for several months, and sometimes I was the only student.

Once I commented to my teacher that I thought she moved beautifully. It was not intended as a flirt and I don't think she took it as such; however, the next week there was a new male teacher for the class. I continued for a couple of weeks but he was too much of a cult type, so in the middle of one class I made my exit. I was putting my shoes on in the lobby when the Korean lady manager asked me if something was wrong. I answered, "Well, there's too much sharing and and too much hugging", and I walked out the door.

I actually felt cheated that I could no longer attend the classes I enjoyed so much. Fortunately, I purchased some Dahnmoedoe videos to practice with. I noticed on the videos that one of the forms I had learned was adapted from a sword form. Eventually, I obtained a wooden practice sword and learned the form. I later heard of an Aikido school in Cambridge, Massachusetts that offered Japanese *Iaido* sword practice. I spoke to the *Sensei*, who suggested that I observe a class and then discuss it. I described my martial arts experience with Poekoelan and Dahnmoedoe. He was not familiar with either (surprise) but was willing to give me a one month trial.

Iaido is typically translated as, the art of drawing the sword. It is also the art of the Samurai. The basic form is traditionally practiced from a kneeling position, with toes curled back, to spring up or forward while you draw the sword. The idea is that you develop the ability to fight from a resting or grounded position because that is the most vulnerable. Each form consists of drawing the sword, blocking, slicing, or jabbing,

and then sheathing the sword. The technique is precise and is almost silent when done properly. The *Sensei* was an American Vietnam veteran. He was patient and generous, and very serious. There were several other students, some younger, some older than me. The training is formal, and the etiquette is precise. Perhaps too formal, but I understand the necessity, especially if we were using real swords. The swords we use for practice are weighted and balanced like traditional *katanas* (swords) but are made of aluminum and cannot actually be sharpened. This is so they are not legally considered a weapon that might be confiscated by the police. After the month was up, I was accepted in the class. I purchased a practice *katana* and sheath for \$100; a *hakama*, (Samurai skirt) and *obi* (belt). Later, I ordered a high quality practice sword from Japan for about \$700.

In 2012, I was 50 years old. I admit, it is a bit unusual to be attending a Samurai *dojo*, and a bit difficult to to explain to strangers. While most people are familiar with the sport of fencing, a Samurai sword is generally perceived as a deadly weapon and is not used in competitive sports. I believe part of the attraction for me is that I am facing my fear of the weapon by learning to use it. But the main part of my attraction is the goal to perform the techniques with silent precision. Working towards this goal focuses the mind and body with clarity and grace. Of course, learning *Iaido* is not practical. I will never have the opportunity to defend myself using my aluminum *katana*. Despite the serious atmosphere of the *dojo*, I believe that we were all playing in some kind of Samurai fantasy; at least I was.

In 2014, my marriage broke up and I moved to New York. I had to remove a chandelier in my apartment so I could continue my sword practice. In 2016, I went to Japan with my fiancé, Doris. I was hoping that this trip to Japan would somehow answer the question of my fascination with Asian history and philosophy. Tokyo is difficult to comprehend; it is so vast and modern. Kyoto represents old Japan with more traditional architecture and way of life. Many Japanese people have a small shrine in their home, garden, or place of business. A shrine is a sacred space, or sanctuary, to reflect upon anything, or nothing. There are countless public shrines throughout Kyoto and even Tokyo. I recall visiting a small shrine located in a tiny corner outside a restaurant across from the restrooms. The garden had a source of water running into a stone bowl. I was struck by the fact that this tiny corner could be transformed into a place of beauty and inspiration.

Buddhism often refers to following the middle path; to avoid extremes. Anger or obsession can be the basis for many of our actions. Fear can also be an obsession. I wanted to learn Karate because I was fearful of bullies as a child. For better or worse, my plan to learn Karate didn't make me a tough guy in my youth. It was rewarding to learn to spar at the age of 40, but that school, like the others, was a stepping stone. Like the wandering monk from *Kung Fu*, I continue to search for a place to enlighten my soul, and improve my mind and body.

Lunch with Porky and Beans

Beans was my Dad's best friend, and my favorite of Dad's friends. Beans had an easy nature, and cracked jokes constantly. In the early days my Dad got his name in the newspaper for being the producer of the Creedence Clearwater Revival rock band, but Saul was misspelled as Paul. From that point forward Beans called Dad, Paul. When they were young men they were inseparable. Beans earned his nickname because he was a good jumper in basketball. Dad was acting manager for the team. In fact, when the team needed uniforms, Dad was given \$15 from the players, and managed to pull in \$75 from card playing with his buddies. Now there was money for the uniforms.

In those days, Dad's nickname was "Porky". He tried to explain to me that the name came from "Porcupine" because of his short prickly hair. But it all became clear when I realized that he's always been portly, so he and his best friend were known as "Porky and Beans". When Beans married Gladys, Dad was not only the best man, but also accompanied them on their honeymoon. It seems inconceivable, but sure enough, after the wedding, they all went to Las Vegas. I can only imagine that Beans and Gladys enjoyed their privacy but also, more often than not, met up with Dad for dinner and a show.

As Dad rose in fortune and fame, he made every effort to take Beans with him. In the formation of Fantasy Records, Beans was listed as a partner. A new office was opened for Beans to work in New York city. I don't believe it was a full functioning office, but it was intended to keep

Beans on the payroll. It was also a grand gesture of generosity by Dad, but sometimes a man needs to find his own way.

I graduated high school in 1980. In the Spring of 1981, I went to the College of Marin to study Environmental Science. "Saving the Environment" was all the rage back then, and California was at the cutting edge. Sadly, on the first day of class the professor gave an impression of disillusionment. Instead of preaching to the choir about, "Saving the Environment", he informed us that the program was very intensive requiring the study of Chemistry and Statistics, and that careers in Environmental Science are primarily limited to the energy industries. Yes, the very Devil we were hoping to avail. So, "Saving the Environment", would have to wait.

I dropped out of my 2nd semester of Community college, and read the "Want-ads". Somehow I was drawn to an offer of, "work on commission, your own hours, the more you sell the more you make". I attended the orientation. The presentation was persuasive, and I believed without a doubt, that I too, could be a successful vacuum salesman. These weren't your run-of-the-mill vacuums, these were the King of vacuums, the "Kirby". And of course, it wasn't only a vacuum. It also shampooed rugs and upholstery, and had a special attachment for vacuuming stairs. There was a polished metal base housing the motor and an attractive patterned fabric encasing the exhaust bag; the ultimate in style and function. This was my first taste of sales and I was sold; hook, line and sinker.

We were trained to demo the vacuums and rehearse the sales pitch, "what can I do to put this Kirby in your home, today?" The business plan, or "set up", was in two phases. In phase 1, we knock on doors. Yep, the door to door salesman of yore. Once the door is opened, I introduce myself and ask if they would like to be entered in a drawing for a free rug shampoo. Enough agree to submit their name and address to go to phase 2. That is when the office calls to inform the homeowner that they have been selected for a free rug shampoo. The office also makes a small request for the homeowner to attend a 15 minute presentation given by the salesman. That is when we salesmen, sling out our own hook, line, and sinker.

For the demo the vacuum uses a glass covered exhaust pan that allows everyone to see the dirt and filth that is being vacuumed. We ask the homeowner to do a test. We shake a little salt into the carpet, and ask the homeowner to use their vacuum. Then, when everyone believes that the salt is gone, we use the Kirby. And sure enough, we see more and more salt entering the fully reliable glass covered exhaust pan on the Kirby. After we've 'proved' the superiority of the Kirby, we add one more closing thought. Did you know that the body sheds thousands of skin cells every night, in bed? Yes, so why not vacuum the mattress. With Kirby, you know you have the very best to maintain a clean, and sanitary household.

For practice, it was suggested that we ask family and friends for permission to do a full demo at their house. The full demo would of course include the sales pitch. So I chose my friend Steve, who I've

known for a long time. I showed up at the appointed time and Steve was there with his dad and stepmother. I attached the glass covered exhaust pan and everyone was fascinated, if not embarrassed, by the dirt coming into the pan. Then it was time for the salt test. I sprinkled the salt. Steve did his best with his old vacuum. When he was sure the salt was gone, I fired up the Kirby and lo and behold, the salt kept coming. Everybody was impressed and the excitement led to the stepmother asking for the price. I was a bit shocked, because this was my first demo, I was having fun, and now it's about to get real. I called the office and they walked us through closing the deal with monthly payments. I called Mom and Dad. Mom said, "Congratulations". Dad said, "Very good, now try with people you don't know".

So I did. My 2nd customer was an elderly lady who was very attentive to the demo and very pleased with the results. That was my 2nd sale. I made a 3rd sale, but that was to my Mom (thanks Mom). The next three customers were equivalent to three strikes to my career as a vacuum salesman. The first customer was an elderly man who said to me as I entered the house, "I'll watch the demo, but I'm not buying anything". An experienced salesman might have thought, "We'll see about that", but I felt the wind drop from my sales. My next demo was for a young Mexican woman who was very polite, and when I asked what I could do to make her a proud owner of a Kirby, she answered that she needed to talk to her husband. In these cases, I can leave the vacuum for the family to check out overnight. The next day I called, and the woman said I should come on the weekend when her husband is home. When I arrived, I continued my sales pitch for the husband. At a certain point, he

stopped me and said, "Listen, I can't buy a vacuum for \$800, my friends would laugh at me." Things were quickly put in perspective so I began to pack up the Kirby. On my way out, he said, "Thank you for the 'free' shampoo," and stuffed \$25 in my back pocket. I wanted to give back the money. I was so ashamed.

My last customers were a young couple. The man was skeptical and wanted to try out the vacuum one more day. The next day I called to check. The man said, "We don't want it, the salt test is a scam." I was shocked. He continued, "It will always vacuum up more salt. It never gets it all". I picked up the vacuum and returned it to the office. I was starting to understand why salesmen are sometimes despised.

It was about this time that my Dad mentioned that Beans was in town and invited me to join them for lunch at a restaurant in Berkeley. Meetings or meals, or anytime with my Dad was often awkward. I was often at a loss for words, believing that I needed to report on the progress of my life. Beans was easier to talk to. He asked questions, basic questions that my parents never asked, like what have I been up to, how's school? So I answered that school was not going well, the program was not what I expected. "So instead, I got a job selling vacuums". Beans smiled, "They say it builds character". My Dad asked with enthusiasm, "So you like the money?" I got choked up and confessed, "No, I hate selling vacuums." Then my Dad blurted, "Well you can't stay in bed for the rest of your life!" Tears began to well up in my eyes. Beans was appalled. He said, "Saul, take it easy, can't you see he's having a hard time". Beans gave me his napkin, and I got up to go to the bathroom.

I looked at myself in the mirror, and asked, “Who am I?”

I went back to the College of Marin and took a course in Study Skills, and Self Discipline. One of the projects was to create an Affirmation tape, to make a recording to praise your skills and personality and describe some short term and long term goals. I think this was very worthwhile. When I think about this period and listening to this Affirmation tape, I imagine an image of myself sitting a desk in an private office wearing a white collegiate sweater. I never became the collegiate in the white sweater, but I did graduate Boston University with honors in 1986.

In the Fall of 1986, Dad offered me a job to work on, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” starring Daniel Day Lewis and Juliet Binoche. It was being filmed in Lyon and Paris, France. Dad knew I had some understanding of working on the film set because I had worked on “Amadeus” as a production assistant and apprentice editor in 1983.

Working on “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” was a completely different experience. There was a lack of unity in the crew. There was also a lack of respect for the director, Philip Kaufman, and the directors’ son, Peter, who was my age, who didn’t exactly have a defined role. At one point, Peter and I were assigned to work with the B Camera Unit. The B Camera films material that is secondary to the plot, doesn’t involve a main character or require the director’s supervision. It included shots of sunflower fields and in one case a car passing with a secondary character driving. Working with B Camera was fun at first,

because I learned about describing the types of shots and calling “action” and “cut”. Peter and I took turns when the shot changed. But when the day was done, and people asked, “How was it working with the boy?” I was not comfortable being considered in the company of “the boy”, so I didn’t continue working with the B Camera Unit.

Dad also invited his brother Bernie, who worked as head of food service for “Amadeus”, and Beans who didn’t have a defined role. Uncle Bernie mainly supervised the food budget because the French chef pretty much knew what he was doing and what the crew likes. In fact, the film crew union allows for a half bottle of wine to each person for lunch. So most of the time Bernie and Beans were just hanging around with nothing particular to do. This was fine for Uncle Bernie, who liked to watch the action and make small talk. Beans, on the other hand was a changed man. No longer was he the joker, or easy going man on the street. He was often complaining, about the hotel, or organization of the production. He was actually unpleasant to be around.

It takes a firm resolution to complete a film in such circumstances and that is what Dad was able to do. He didn’t have a high regard for the director, personally, but he trusted him, and supported him to make the film his way. I believe that, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” is a film to be proud of, but I realized that I was not cut out to pay the toll of being the producer’s son. And Beans was no longer willing to pay the toll of being the producer’s best friend.

Sometimes a man needs to find his own way.