

The
INFRARED DEAD

A MAMBO MYSTERY



MICHAEL R. WARREN

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PO Box 50682
Jacksonville Beach, Florida 32240
(904) 748--9179
ebooks@johnesimmons.com
www.johnesimmons.com

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Contents

1.	Raiders of the Lost Dark	1
2.	Gypsies, Vamps and Steves	5
3.	Ghost Writers in the Sky	9
4.	Even Cowgirls Get the Clues	14
5.	Monkee See, Monkee Poo	18
6.	Jumping Jack Flashback	20

1

Raiders of the Lost Dark

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My car scurried through the endless abyss of night like a pregnant cat fleeing a drunk Chinese cook. Desperate for speed, my foot crushed the accelerator pedal to the floor, pushing both cylinders of my little Cancun Express to the outer edge of their technological capability. Someone's life depended on me. And though the terrain ahead was a winding, twisting path of trouble, it was familiar territory. My name is Mambo Ramirez. I run AAA Investigations, and trouble is what I do.

I slowed my car as the headlights illumined a large black dog running across the road. As I tried to digest this portent, a smaller dog crossed the road, hurriedly following the path of the first. "If the black dog symbolizes death, or evil to come," I mused aloud, "what does the smaller dog mean?" Suddenly, the road seemed alive with canines as several others, trailing elongated moon shadows, emerged from the bushes to my right and followed the path of the first two. "Seven dogs, led by a black one!" I said, rapidly trying to remember the Kabbalistic teachings I had recently learned from Rabbi Ben Yorkim's book, *Pruning The Tree Of Life: An Introduction to Kabbalistic Symbolism for Children*. "That could only mean . . . "

"That the first dog is female," my traveling companion, Floyd, chimed in, "and is in heat." Floyd tipped the ashes from his cigarette out the window. "You know, chief, they say all dogs have their day. But I'd say all dogs are fixing to have their way. In fact, . . . "

"Be quiet, Floyd," I hissed as I pulled into the parking lot of our destination, Spring Waters Apartments. "I've had enough of your low brow wit." Dog in heat, indeed, I thought. Lately, my friend's outlook on the greater symbolic possibilities that resided in our vast universe had turned hopelessly mundane. It was my belief that his new outlook was due to the recent change in medication that his latest therapist, Dr. Zorba, had prescribed. Before this new prescription went into effect, Floyd had a tendency to believe in any theory that defied rationality and had a metaphysical patina to it; now, he only believed in rationality-defying theories that had a slight patina of the scientific to them. Sometimes Floyd's life seemed like one big adventure in pharmacopeia.

But I had to admit that Dr. Zorba had achieved a minor miracle in regards to Floyd's delicately balanced emotional state – which was on a par with that of a hysteria-prone thirteen-, year-old girl undergoing a difficult time with puberty. In times of great emotional turmoil, which were at least as frequent as changes in lunar phases for Floyd, he responded by divesting himself of what he considered personal restrictions – like rational thinking and clothes – and then going for a relaxing jog down the nearest public road. Concurrent with the beginning of Floyd's sessions with Dr. Zorba, the public had been denied the sight of Floyd's bare buttocks streaking down the road.

Since the apartment complex was hilly and I had to park on an incline, after getting out I reached down behind the driver's seat and retrieved my post production emergency brake – a large red brick – to place behind one of the back wheels. In wondrous coincidence, or a marvel of planned obsolescence by Mexican factory workers, several major things had gone wrong with my vehicle within thirty days of my final payment on it. At the top of the list was a slipping transmission and an emergency brake that had less holding power than a Hollywood actor's marriage vows.

"You'd better wait in the car," I cautioned Floyd.

Floyd, who was dressed in a rumpled sailor suit and looked like a recruiting poster for degenerates who wanted to sail the world, stared at me dully, his pupils artificially large behind the thick lenses of his glasses. He nodded dutifully, then said, "I'll just sit here and check the sky for UFO's, floating purple blobs, or chem trails." He picked up a pair of infrared goggles that he had lately begun carrying everywhere. "If I see a UFO, I'll honk three times. A purple blob, twice." This was part of Floyd's new scientific way of approaching the mysteries of the world.

I didn't bother replying. The infrared goggles were part of a series of weird purchases my friend had recently made. Floyd had discovered the joys of eBay. Recent purchases included, in addition to the infrared goggles, a full sized stuffed badger, a collection of World War II German military coat buttons, several pairs of Hefty Girl seamless panty hose, and – this I found particularly disturbing – a series of reprints from a collection of erotic French drawings of co-joined twins. Since Floyd was a computer novice and didn't know how to delete old emails, or cover his tracks by erasing his internet history, his life was an open seamy book to me.

I left him contentedly searching the skies for floating purple blobs.

It was late and no one was about. I quickly found the apartment I sought and tapped softly on the door. There was no response. I was sure this was the right address, though no lights were on inside. Using standard investigative procedure, I jiggled the door handle. As in a bad melodrama, the door to apartment 13 A was unlocked. I pushed it open. "Meryl?" I whispered into the gloom of her living room. Still no answer. I clicked on my penlight and carefully worked its narrow beam around the room. I had arrived too late. There on the floor was Meryl Shepherd, former next door neighbor and the object of my wildest adolescent fantasies.

In death, she was posed like a porn queen snow angel, shamelessly displaying the bounty nature had so thoughtfully provided her. Her coat was open, her arms were flung wide, and her legs splayed at an obtuse angle. Under her coat she was wearing nothing but a pair of spiked heels and some wide-mesh hose of the style favored by Nazi camp followers and cross-dressing Hollywood directors. Her lipstick was bright red. It matched her whoreishly painted nails – and the pool of blood which surrounded her head like a lake of eternity.

Unhindered by the solemnity of death, my eyes wandered over the hills and valleys of her flesh like a tribe of disoriented Hebrews. I felt a deep sense of shame. Here was this poor soul, taken too soon, obviously the victim of some nefarious and deadly plot, and yet all I could think about was, Has rigor set in yet?

I am extremely attracted to passive women.

I shook my head vigorously, trying to dislodge the X-rated visions of myself and Meryl that were racing around my visual cortex. My subconscious mind – as usual acting against my best interest – recalled reading of some ancient rites where it was considered a blessing to the dead to provide them with the pleasures of the flesh one last time before they were interred. If it was a religious principle somewhere, could it be so wrong? In fact, acknowledging that sex with the dead was not a singular cultural aberration, the Ancient Egyptians developed a very practical way to dissuade all but the most determined necrophiliac interlopers: when a beautiful woman died, the priests let her body decay for three or four days before turning it over to the embalmers. Many ancient civilizations, such as the Mochica culture of the Andes, even considered it an

offense to send a virgin to heaven. If the Mochica culture did have a good read on things, Meryl would not be offending anyone in heaven. Far from it.

After a ferocious internal battle, my overly taxed moral restraints managed a nose-length victory and held back the ravaging pit bull of lust that was straining to lunge from my loins. Besides, I reasoned, except for an absence of a pulse, could it be so different than sex with Mona, my girlfriend? However, I finally decided this was a moral abyss I would not cross. Besides, someone might come in.

Also, as a professional investigator, I had a responsibility. I had to maintain my objectivity. I decided to put her physical attributes out of my mind and look for clues to her demise. I opened a few drawers, poked around a bit in her correspondence and found that she apparently hadn't paid her water bill in three months, but came across nothing unusual – that is unless the water department had turned to excessive methods of debt collection. As I moved across the room my leg bumped the coffee table, sending a garishly painted vase of wilted daisies crashing to the floor. The sound was loud enough to wake the dead, though it seemed to have no effect on Meryl.

Perhaps it was time to leave.

Still . . . my eyes were transfixed by the vision of Meryl. With a will of its own, my penlight once again illuminated her. There, in the center of it all, covered by a bush as thick as a British hedge row, was her cave of many delights. I felt my moral restraints loosening again, and was wondering what her core temperature was when I was startled by a distant voice, a muffled voice, moaning . . .

“Maaaaambo,” the voice droned ghoulishly.

Though I jumped about a foot, I managed to maintain my upright position. This wasn't good: There was no one in the room but myself and the late Meryl.

“Come closer. Closer, my love,” the whispering voice enticed, “and enter the gates of paradise. Come to me now. Come . . .”

What dark magic was this? My legs were shaking like a pair of maracas and my skin began crawling like a platoon of meth-addicted soldier ants. The voice seemed to be emanating from . . . her vagina? My mind teeter-tottered over a precipice of madness like a high-wire walker in the throes of a major Parkinson attack. I longed to flee, but – apparently having some kind of fainting goat gene lodged in my DNA – was paralyzed with fright. I desperately hoped the paralysis was complete, for I suddenly realized I was, sadly, not for the first time in my life, on the verge of incontinence. Then I heard a familiar snigger from behind me.

I whirled around to find not the Prince of Darkness – come to whisk me away to party in perdition with him due to my recent unsavory thoughts – but Floyd.

Standing in the doorway, he was grinning like a monkey who, with major league skills in feces-flinging, had just scored a direct hit on the zoo keeper's face.

Floyd, in his continuing efforts to find a hobby to help fill the astronomical void of idle time he had, had recently taken a free course on ventriloquism at the YMCA. In fact, I'd seen him demonstrate his new found proficiency earlier in the week. In my momentary terror, and assuming he was still in the car, I had forgotten this.

When my voice returned, I admonished him with all the moral indignation I could muster. “That's obscene, Floyd. Just . . . obscene.”

“Sometimes, Chief,” he said as he entered the semi-darkened room, “it's better to be obscene than heard.” As Floyd bent over her body, I saw the lacy, pink top band of a thong spanning the hirsute crevice between his buttocks. I struggled to control my gag reflex as my imagination fired visual extrapolations at my captive

brain. My synapses would need a major flushing after this. Since Floyd was, as the British say, a dedicated poof, a gay guy, his interest in Meryl's body was purely academic. He gave her body a careful once-over, pausing to stare at her enormous breasts. He knelt and gave one a thump, as if testing the ripeness of a melon, then said, "Say, Chief, these things are big enough to breast feed the Israeli army. Were they built at the Zeppelin factory in Germany? I wonder if . . ."

"That's enough, Floyd," I warned. "Don't be disrespectful. You are not as amusing as you think you are." I would have kicked him, but my cheeks were still so tightly compressed I was afraid to make any sudden moves. "I thought I told you to wait in the car?" Floyd was as prone to disobeying orders as a drunk circus monkey.

He shrugged. "I heard a crash and came to see if you were alright. Say, why don't you turn on the lights?"

"Because it's time to get out of here," I said, "before you compromise the crime scene." I paused and turned for a last look at the body. I cast the beam of my pen light around the room to see if I'd missed anything. Floyd was examining the broken pieces of pottery. I was about to rebuke him, once again, when I noticed something. "Wait! What's this?" I said. Why didn't I notice these before? There was a distinct set of fresh bloody footprints leading away from Meryl's body. A chill came over me as I tracked them across the room to where they ended . . . which was right where I was standing. Carefully, I removed my new tennis shoes, which would now have to be disposed of. Thankfully, they were cheap and Wal Mart had an endless supply of them. Unfortunately, now a clear set of red footprints went from Meryl's body to the middle of her living room, where they ended abruptly, Twilight Zone style, in the middle of nowhere.

"Why are you taking off your shoes, Chief?"

"Never mind, Floyd. You're not a trained investigator. You wouldn't understand these things. Let's go."

I said a silent apology to the local CSI team, fearing that the mystery footprints might result in a good deal of wasted investigative time, if not a demotion or a nervous breakdown or two.

I turned to regard the room once more before leaving; it was an eerie scene, with the bare tops of Meryl's hilly mounds highlighted by the ambient parking lot light that filtered in from outside.

"I can tell you're consumed with desire for her, Chief," Floyd said.

"Well, Floyd, you are not a mind reader. You're just . . ." I stopped. Everything had gone preternaturally silent. Then I heard a voice in the distance, calling indistinctly. Entranced, I listened intently, my gaze absently fixed on the murky interior of Meryl's living room. Mind you, I have seizure disorder, hence the hi-impact plastic helmet I wear at all times, and have experienced every manifestation of electrical conflagration of the brain that's possible – from a chorus of angelic voices bringing me epiphanies about the importance of roughage in a diet to your standard deep blackout, where nary an electron seems to move across a synapse for hours at a time – but this was different. The voice became clearer. It seemed to be that of an older woman, with a pronounced southern accent . . . "Mambo? Mambo? Where are you child? Yore grits are getting cold" . . . which was strange because I'd never lived in the South nor eaten grits; I smelled perfume, in over abundance, as if worn by a teenaged Puerto Rican prostitute named Zelda. The scene around me became unstable and my field of vision started shrinking; my left arm became numb. This wasn't a regular epileptic seizure: With mounting horror, I realized I was about to have a massive flashback!

2

Gypsies, Vamps and Steves

It had all began innocently enough last Saturday, when Floyd showed up at my trailer raving about aliens living in underground caverns in Arizona, rent free at the expense of the taxpayers. His concern was difficult for me to understand since he was tax consumer, not a tax producer.

“Well, they are aliens, Floyd. And therefore have some constitutional rights.”

“Sure, Chief, but they’re not human aliens.”

I started to remind him of all the rights now available to animals, terrestrial and, presumably, extraterrestrial (didn’t he remember our adventure in Monkey Town, a case I call the Not So Yellow Second Banana?), but since it doesn’t help to quibble with Floyd I assured him I understood his concerns, then asked if he’d like to ride downtown with me while I took care of some business.

We were on our third stop for the morning, a section of town I ventured into rarely because of it’s proclivity for attracting college students and other non-desirables, when we came upon a young man sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk and tapping out a syncopated beat using a pair of drumsticks on an overturned plastic bucket. A hand painted sign taped to the front of the bucket proclaimed that he was the urban youth outreach minister for the First Rehobeth Church of Praise. As his rhythm entranced the crowd, two scantily clad girls in neo-Nubian attire began doing what I assumed was an urban booty-dance of praise, though the specific object of that praise seemed ambiguous to me. “Yo, dig it y’all, cause here it tis,” the rapper crooned rhythmically as he tapped well practiced paradiddles on the tops of the tub. “Like, Jesus on the cross, died for the Big Boss, blood in the wounds, dirty Roman goons, thorns on his head, but he ain’t dead, naw, he ain’t dead. Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does the Son-of-God go? With three long spikes, crossed wood upright, and a crown of thorns just so. Devil do a drive-by, make the son-of-man die, but three days and he’s hip, already back, to give the devil lip. Say, wut’s up’ Paul, are you diggin’ me at all? First you persecute me, then you salute me . . . “

And on it went. It was time to leave. Having been raised in a conservative religious environment, I’d heard it all before. Besides, business came first. I had gone half way down the block before I realized Floyd wasn’t behind me. I turned. He was standing there, enraptured by the Jesus-rapper, his hips starting to gyrate to the beat as he got into the spirit of things. Worse yet, he was trying his best to do beat-box accompaniment – but only succeeding in sputtering and spitting like a spastic llama.

I retrieved him before any serious harm was done – he had not yet tossed all of his monthly SSI money into the rapper’s tip bucket – and we proceeded to the book store, which was my destination. This was The Rainbow Zodiac, a New Age book store whose primary appeal to me was that it had a community bulletin board; I visited it, and a couple of laundry mats with similar bulletin boards, every few months or so to place my AAA

Investigations business cards. Since good advertising is the life's blood of a business, I used attention getting extra large, neon red push pins to make my cards stand out. These are more costly than the run-of-mill push pins, but were a justified business expense, I thought. And they just fit perfectly into my advertising budget. I worked on the theory that people interested in metaphysics needed a lot of questions answered. And, as a private investigator, that's where I came in.

Floyd said, "Say, Chief, I'm just going to hang around outside and wait for you. Okay?"

I gave him a severe look.

"Uh, no, I'm not going back down to the corner. I promise."

I eyed him steadily and held my hand out. Floyd frowned, then dug the rest of his SSI money out of his pocket and passed it to me for safe keeping. I already had his EBT card. This was a defensive move by me; if Floyd ran out of money before his next check came, who do you think would be supplying him with Mickey D's fine cuisine and supporting his nicotine habit until the government filled his coffers again? Mambo and AAA Investigations, that's who.

I had just finishing putting up both a business card and a flyer, and stepped back to make sure they were placed in a catchy manner amid all the notices about lost pets, used autos for sale, rooms for rent, vegan restaurant advertisements, garage sales notices and the surfeit of psychics for hire cards – the latter all featuring a monolithic eye and pyramid somewhere on them – when I bumped into something large, round and soft.

I turned around. "Excuse me, I . . . "

"Mambo? Mambo Ramirez?"

An icon of female sexuality stood before me. Looking like some sort of post-modern urban Gypsy, she was wearing an ornate skirt with a silk sash tied around the waist, hi-top boots with heels that tapered to a point as sharp as a French maitre d's tongue, and hoop earrings large enough to pass a grapefruit through. Her shoulder-length hair was dark and wavy and she had enough metal bangles on her wrists to outfit a modest Indian harem. To top it all, she had breasts that would have looked at home on a mammoth. For some reason, these seemed vaguely familiar to me.

"I thought I recognized the helmet," she exclaimed, smiling. "It's me! Meryl Shepherd."

"Meryl!" Now it came back to me, the endless evenings as a teenager I'd sat at my window in my darkened bedroom, peering through a crack in the curtains toward her bedroom next door, hoping to get a glimpse of her as she prepared for bed – Meryl was somewhat careless about closing her blinds. For most of my high school years I had worshiped her and her gravity defying breasts from afar. (The joke in high school, among those in the accelerated classes, had been that Meryl's breasts were so massive they bent light.)

Let me explain. My fantasies of Meryl gave me a little release from the day to day tension I lived under; High school can be a cruel place – particularly so if you're short, freckle-faced, wear protective headgear every-



where and are prone to falling down and having seizures in the hallways. Kids are cruel, and their torment of me was unrelenting. Even my effort to display school spirit by spray painting my bicycle helmet in the school colors didn't appease them; for some reason, the jocks reacted to my efforts with the calm demeanor of African killer bees.

Even Meryl didn't totally escape the youthful vindictiveness: There had been persistent rumors among the football team, the basketball team, the debate team, and in the teacher's lounge, that she was a nymphomaniac; but in the few times I'd been in close proximity to her she'd never displayed such inclinations in front of me.

Anyway, since you don't learn too many specifics about a person through a set of half-raised blinds, the brief period when I had been main-streamed in high school gave me a chance to study Meryl up close. In both junior high and high school, due to my "challenges", I had been shuffled about quite a bit. This was usually the result of changes in the political administration, with each side trying to use political alchemy to create positive public perception that would transmute into votes for their respective parties; hence, when the conservative administration was in power I usually got sent to the learning disabled or special education classes; conversely, when the liberal party would take over I would wind up in the gifted classes, since they operated under the wishful premise that everyone was special and unique; therefore it was determined that I, and almost every other low academic achiever in our school district, had a great latent intelligence – though not the kind that was amenable to objective testing, nor understood in normal terms of linear logic. In actuality, it mattered little. Only the signs on the classroom doors changed. My two-year main-streaming occurred during a brief interlude when a reform minded administration took control of the school board.

Anyway, I was pleasantly surprised that Meryl remembered me. "God, it's been years," she said. "What have you been doing? How's your sister, Godzilla?"

In high school, my sister Ramona, whose affectionate nickname around the campus was Godzilla, was renowned for her size, strength, and ferocity. It was only her presence that helped me survive my high school experience.

"She's on the semi-pro wrestling circuit now," I said proudly.

"Wow. I can so see that. Well, what are you doing these days?"

"Uh, law enforcement."

"You're a cop?"

"Well . . . sort of. I'm a private investigator. I'm licensed," I added proudly. "And you?"

"I'm a teacher. As a matter of fact, you sort of inspired me to become a teacher."

"Really?" In high school I wasn't sure if Meryl had even been aware of my existence. I couldn't help but grin. Obviously, though I held no claim to being an academic whiz, one of my cogent observations in either the history or literature classes she and I had shared must have inspired her. "And what exactly is your field of expertise?"

"Special education. But," she continued, glossing over the dumb struck look on my face, "my passion is for spiritual knowledge, personal growth, the mysteries of time and space. That sort of thing." She glanced around at all the bookshelves. "And what is your passion? What brings you here?"

"Wha . . . ?" I glanced hurriedly at the bookshelves over her shoulder – not an easy task. My short stature made it difficult since her breasts took up most of my field of vision. "Ah, you know, the usual stuff," I said, and then began reeling off the subjects of the book titles I could see over her shoulders. "Uh, my passion for . . . "Gnosticism, Norse mythology, UFO crashes, Psychic fasting . . . the Kabbalah . . . Christian mysticism,

Big Foot, alien abductions . . . ah, the relationship between quantum entanglement and Schrodinger's alien cats." It was hard to stop once I'd started reading.

"Geez. In high school I never realized you were so deep. We should have hooked up," she laughed. "I always suspected that the dumb persona you projected was just a put on."

I shrugged my shoulders modestly.

"Oh, you're a Pisces?"

My eyebrows crinkled quizzically and my brow furrowed in response. Then I realized she was looking at my wrist, where a green, curving fish tail, with scales, protruded from my coat cuff. It was actually most of the lower end of a Mermaid – I hadn't realized how painful getting a tattoo was. Anyway, as Floyd said, half a Mermaid is better than none.

I nodded. Pisces was fine with me. I'd have to remember that.

"Cool. Say, you know, there are no accidents. It's fate," she assured me, "that we've crossed paths again. As a matter of fact, I'm attending the monthly meeting of my psychic workshop, seance and discussion group tonight, at seven o'clock. The main topic is going to be Kabbalistic symbolism and its relationship to Neo-Pythagorean Gestalt – you would fit right in. Also, Steve Wellington, author of *Contacting Alien Ghosts* will be there to field questions on his theories. Trust me, there will be a highly informed crowd of original thinkers there."

I got the picture. In Noir speak, Meryl's psychic workshop would be comprised of a population of mental coelacanths, all eager to feed on the theoretical detritus that drifted down from the rational world above. "Well, sure, that sounds like it's right up my alley," I said. It was tempting. To just for a little while be in the orbit of Meryl's . . . charms. It wasn't like I was intending anything untoward with Meryl; after all, I was in a semi-committed relationship with Mona, my lawyer girlfriend. But, like any semi-committed couple, we had our problems. The last time I'd seen Mona she'd said that we had half n' half sex, meaning, as she explained, that it lasted half as long as it should have, but wasn't half bad. I would go to Meryl's event in an effort to broaden my mind.

I wondered if Floyd knew anything about Pythagorean Gestalt, or Kabbalistic symbolism? At various points in his otherwise uneventful and meaningless life he'd trucked in a lot of mystical nonsense. For once he might prove useful. "Do you mind if I bring along my friend, Floyd?"

"Is he spiritually adept also?" Meryl said.

I gave a what I hoped was a convincing nod and said, "Sure. Very much so."

"Well, the more the merrier, then."

I pulled out a business card and Meryl scribbled the address down for me. As soon as she left, I purchased the cheapest book on Kabbalistic symbolism I could find – with the balance of Floyd's SSI money. He'd have squandered it anyway.

Floyd was outside where I'd left him, propped up under the sagging awning, smoking a cigarette while casting furtive glances this way and that for a policeman. Floyd had an intractable bit of the criminal in him. Once he'd been stopped and ticketed, wrongly he maintained, for running a stop sign. To punish the authorities for this miscarriage of justice, he went back to the same stop sign, at three a.m., and ran it a dozen times. "That'll teach 'em," he explained to me the next morning. Moral victories are everything to Floyd.

"Come along, Floyd," I said. "We're invited to a seance, or something, tonight."

"Sure, Chief. It's been a long time since I've talked to my grandmother."

Ghost Writers in the Sky

Floyd and I showed up promptly at seven. The house was in a surprisingly swank neighborhood. Some dwellings looked like Victorian manors, with dormers in profusion and lawns filled with Manetesque explosions of flowers bounded by ornate iron fences. There was also a peppering of Gothic Revivals (if you haven't guessed, my office magazine is *Architectural Digest*); but a surfeit of the homes had a Spanish Eclectic architectural style – sweeping ranch designs with red slate roofs, stone facades, and adobe walls carefully finished to look fashionably half-ruined – that is to say, they looked like they'd been designed by a peon who had recently hit the lottery. Our destination was a Dutch Colonial affair that had a weedless, extremely verdant lawn. The shrubs and hedges were cut with geometric precision and smiling squirrels joyfully capered about the lawn.

As I took in the splendor, I realized once again why it is the rich are always the dilettantes of the occult; working slobs, that is to say, bus drivers, waiters, street walkers and those in other menial positions, are too busy worrying about paying the rent to have time for the luxury of metaphysical angst. I found a discreet place to park at the far end of the car-lined street then had Floyd get out and set the emergency brake. The street looked level, but you never knew. Bitter experience had proven to me that mean old Mr. Gravity enforced his rules persistently, even on slight inclines.

I was wearing a pair of pressed jeans, brand new but reasonably priced tennis shoes, and had on the shiny black, bicycle helmet that I reserved for formal occasions, so my self-esteem tank was tipping the full mark. Floyd was dressed as usual; like a slob for whom self-esteem was a distant memory. When it came to fashion, Floyd worked on the presumption Why put lipstick on a pig, which means his personal appearance was not worth wasting descriptive phrases on. Since I was somewhat familiar with this type of crowd, I predicted, correctly, to Floyd, that I would have to field no questions about my helmet, since the participants would figure that; a) I'd ridden a bicycle there, which classified me as some sort of fitness freak and was therefore admirable to them; or b) the helmet covered a trepanation I'd undergone to increase my psychic skills – which was really admirable to them; or c) they would be afraid of showing their ignorance of anything dealing with non-luminaries such as myself, and hence wouldn't ask questions.

Once inside, the fashionably obese host directed us and other newly arrived guests to a large room that was full of neo hippie-era bric-a-brac, i.e., lava lamps, framed concert posters, incense burners, and the odd beanbag chair.

In the center of the far wall was a fireplace large enough to roast a Yak in. It's spacious mantle was overflowing with Buddha icons, Shiva statuettes, and several figurines of deities that had evolved in the pre-dark-ages. Needless to say, the place reeked of patchouli incense and, though the ceiling had state of the art track lighting, every flat surface in the room was home to a large colorful candle.

“This looks like the Taj Mahal of a hippie wet dream,” Floyd said, much too loudly.

With my left foot I gave a well-practiced kick to his ankle.

“Owww,” he said. “That hurt, Chief.” It was then that I noticed that his breath smelled like he’d been sucking up used kitty litter through a straw.

“Floyd! . . .” I was about to warn him that his chronic halitosis was acting up when I saw

Meryl approaching, jiggling and creating gravity waves as she came. “Never mind. Go busy yourself. Go look at the lava lamp collection, or something. And try not to embarrass me.” It was dangerous to let Floyd off his leash at a soiree such as this, but I saw no need to shock Meryl with his presence so soon.

Meryl seemed enthused to see me, which caused my heart to begin palpitating like Neal Pert playing his drums on speed. Our first stop was a table laid out with hors d’oeuvres and canapes. Merely to be polite, I choose something that looked vaguely edible from an array of Tofu canapes stamped in interesting shapes, such as stars, crescent moons, and magical wands, and picked up a small cup of Green tea, figuring, as a way to apologize to my stomach, Floyd and I could stop and pick up a couple of Big Macs on the way home.

Meryl took me by the hand and graciously started pointing out notables to me. “That sexy looking a man with the wild hair and the beard is Hammed Mohammad, the urban freedom fighter from Palestine. You may recognize him from CNN.” Or the FBI’s most wanted terrorist list, I thought. I bristled a bit as she smiled at him from across the room – not because of politics, mind you, but at the frustration sensitive, intelligent men like myself feel when a woman he’s interested in – perhaps – turns out to fancy the hairy brutish, alpha type of male.

Meryl scanned the various groups around the room and then waved at a tall impeccably dressed man who, even from across the room, reeked of suaveness. He seemed to be listening attentively to the hostess as she rambled on about, I presumed, some obscure point of metaphysics – like, When two sexless angels dance on a pinhead, how to they decide which one leads?

“That’s Roger Johnson,” Meryl whispered. I noticed that she did a lot of whispering, which was fine with me since it provided a sort of intimacy between us. “Poor Roger,” she continued. “He’s just returned from Washington, DC, yesterday” she continued. “Among his other accomplishments, he’s a lobbyist for PHNARA.” Correctly interpreting the perplexed look on my face, she added, “Para Human Native Americans Rights Association. Big Foot. Anyway, he found out his companion, Pegye Gibson has been missing for over a week. “Pegye is a psychic archaeologist. She specializes in ancient Hopi pottery and was on a dig out West. She’s also an author. Under her pen name, Jeffery Richards, she wrote *The Sky Is A Lonely Place*, which is a lightly fictionalized version of her experiences with the ancient Hopi culture, the Ant People aliens who befriended them, and her many other wild adventures in pottery collecting. Have you read it?”

“No, but it’s at the top of my bucket list,” I assured her.

Meryl was a fount of information. She glanced around the room once more, then dropped her voice yet again. “In fact, I’ve a sizeable investment in a piece Pegye and Roger sold me.”

“Why are you whispering?” I whispered, caught up in her sense of intrigue.

“Because I don’t want anyone else to know that I paid . . . “ and she named an amount that made me give a soft whistle.

“Do you have it insured? In a bank vault?”

“Well, technically, according to the materialistic lame brains at the Department of the Interior, it’s illegal to buy or possess ancient Hopi artifacts that are excavated without a valid permit. So no insurance. But its

spiritual potency makes the risk worthwhile, believe me. As far as protection goes, it needs no extraordinary means: It came from a collection of Kiva pots so it's protected by the spiritual aura of the ancient Hopi. Anyway, I've got it hidden like Poe's purloined letter. So it's safe. Who reads Poe anymore, right? And should I ever need to liquidate it, there are collectors overseas who would pay me a small fortune for it. Roger says I could see a return on my initial investment of as much as ten to one! If you're interested in a sound investment, I can speak to him for you. He acts as Pegye's agent."

I started to ask her if the pot had come with any magic beans in it, but managed to hold my tongue. Floyd was rubbing off on me.

As someone approached, Meryl leaned close and I felt those vast holy mounds of joy press into my arm and chest. "Don't mention a word of this to anyone," she cautioned. Thankful to a panoply of gods that she lingered a bit in this position, I shivered as I assured her she could count on me to keep quiet about her magical pot.

A swarthy individual, who looked like he shared an inordinate amount of his mitochondrial DNA with a Neanderthal clan, ambled up to Meryl and I.

"Mambo, this is Joshua Benstein. Josh, This is Mambo Ramirez, an old classmate of mine. Mambo is a private investigator."

With crocodile smiles and mutual disdain, we shook hands. His knuckles were hairy.

By coincidence, I was somewhat familiar with Joshua Benstein. He was a media critic whose most successful book, *Giving Head To Hollywood*, an exposition of the movie *Head*, a joint effort by the twentieth century TV musical group the Monkees and the actor Jack Nickolson, who produced it. The result of this unholy narcissistic collaboration was an unintended warning about the dangers of drug abuse. The film was basically a stream-of-conscious psychedelic, nihilistic image fest – now annually shown in grammar schools across America to frighten children away from drugs – which had won numerous French film festival awards. I was aware of it, and Benstein's book, because it was one of Floyd's favorite movies.

Unnoticed by me, Floyd had inserted himself into our little conversational circle. Surprisingly, he and Benstein got along well, and immediately began engaging in a discussion about how heavy the Monkees' music actually was, with the sub-text of sixties symbolism in songs like *Last Train To Clarksville*. I noticed that Benstein had gotten the message about Floyd's chronic halitosis pretty quickly, and had discreetly taken a step back, out of the danger zone.

Meryl finally interrupted their discussion, saying to Benstein, "Mambo is an investigator. He's been telling me about some of his adventures. Do you remember the case in Tri-City, a while back, the monkey murders? Turns out that Mambo was deeply involved in that. And that case of illegal genetic manipulation up in Canada last year? Mambo, again. He single-handedly closed down a Russian Mafia operation. And killed one of their prime operatives. It's amazing he's still alive."

Floyd sniggered. I blushed. Well, if you've read my memoirs (*Run Naked Down The Long Silver Road*), you realize a grizzly bear helped a little with the Russian.

Looking down imperiously at the top of my helmet, Benstein eyed me warily. I had the feeling that he had already staked out Meryl's breasts as his own territory; in fact, I wouldn't have been surprised to find that he'd scent marked around her living quarters. Maybe I should do a little scent marking of my own.

Seemingly uninterested in my life and death adventures, Benstein returned to his spirited discussion of the Monkees with Floyd, giving a verbal dissertation on the hidden symbolism of *Pleasant Valley Sunday*, boring me to tears. Meryl seemed enraptured by their observations. I noted with some displeasure that Benstein positively leered at Meryl, grinning at her with his overly large teeth as he spoke. It was obvious his interest

in her wasn't intellectual.

"Say," I interjected to try to get in on the Monkee conversation and make use of the wealth of Kabbalistic symbolism I'd been prepping on all day. Meryl, Benstein and Floyd all turned toward me. "Do you realize that there are four Monkees. And that the Kabbalah says that four is the foundation of the Merkabah throne, the four beasts which . . ."

At that point the hostess cleared her throat loudly, then announced, "Will everyone please take a seat so our program can begin."

First up was Steve Wellington, former rock star and now speaker to the dead. His hair was long and ragged, and had enough split ends to give a sensitive tonsorial artist a month of guilt-ridden nightmares. It was also braided in a couple of places, with one braid culminating in a small feather and the other covered with African trade beads. His sagging cheeks were in a desperate battle with gravity, and losing, and his face had more lines in it than *War And Peace*; his fat lips were either darkened with some unnatural shade of lipstick or he had a serious case of vitamin deprivation. In short, if the look he was going for was that of an aging Indian transvestite – not that there's anything wrong with that – he had nailed it squarely on the head.

Standing in front of the room's spacious rock fireplace, flanked by large ceramic pi-dogs, Wellington delivered his theory that the link between the physical reality of UFO's, the nuts and bolts technology, and the metaphysical occurrences often associated with their appearance was due to the spirits of UFO alien crew members which were now trapped on earth.

Wellington then claimed that he had charted more than five hundred UFO crashes, prompting Floyd to lean over and whisper that aliens were apparently the Oriental drivers of outer space, then reflexively move his ankles away from me, showing he had something of a learning curve.

As a "sensitive", Wellington claimed he had channeled these rambunctious UFO spirits, who, like spirits everywhere, were chock full of general advice and unverifiable theories. Wellington was just getting warmed up, explaining why the aliens were apparently geniuses when it came to navigating the intricacies of spacetime, but cosmic dumbkoffs when it came to flying inside a planetary atmosphere, when, in the middle of a sentence, he suddenly fell silent. A hush dropped over the room like a wool blanket as Wellington's eyes rolled back in his head, leading the expectant audience to assume one of these chatty alien spirits was getting ready to phone home some profound platitude via Wellington's vocal chords. But before Wellington could open his mouth, a sound like what one imagines a hovering UFO might make, seemed to emanate from the fireplace. Then an eerie voice, also from the fireplace, said, "People of earth, cease all efforts at space exploration. You have been warned! Now, disburse and return to your dwellings and, uh, make out a generous check to the Dolphin Education and Communication fund."

Wellington's eyeballs reappeared quickly as he regarded the fireplace with a look of stark terror.

With Wellington speechless, and the audience buzzing excitedly among themselves, two bits of information suddenly collided at a synaptic intersection deep in my brain: one, the Dolphin Education and Communication fund just happened to be Floyd's favorite charity; two, he'd recently taken a course in ventriloquism. My keen deductive powers quickly reached a conclusion. I delivered a discreet but powerful kick to Floyd's good ankle.

"Ow!" Floyd shouted, showing that his learning curve was on the down slope of the Bell Curve of pain, and jumped up from his chair, prompting everyone to turn and look at him, expecting perhaps that a disembodied UFO spirit had suddenly leaped from the fireplace and into him.

The meeting broke up quickly after that, with Wellington visibly still shaking and glancing fearfully at the fireplace as he left. Others stood in groups enthusiastically discussing the alien's interest in dolphin communication and education, and affirming how they had suspected just such a dolphin-alien connection all along.

As we were at the door preparing to leave Meryl caught up with me.

“Mambo, I’ve thought this over carefully.” She had reverted to whispering again. “I know now that you’re somebody I can confide in, somebody I can trust. I’m worried that someone, perhaps prompted by a demonic force, or worse, the government, is trying to get at my Hopi ceremonial pot. I was wondering if I could employ you to provide some security for me?”

I quickly nodded ascent and promised to call her in the morning.

Now that we were alone, I turned to my cracked companion to chasten him for his impromptu feat of ventriloquism. “Floyd, why did you do that?”

“Uh, frankly, Chief, I like Dolphins. And I’m hungry.”

4

Even Cowgirls Get the Clues

The next morning I called Meryl and we agreed to meet at The Coo Coo Bird's Nest, a local coffee shop she had selected. This turned out to be one of those sheik places with ultra-modern decor – tiny round tables and a glaring color scheme apparently selected by a decorator in the last stages of macular degeneration. The decorations included framed posters of scantily clad athletic types and a center piece consisting of a Jolly Green Giant-sized plaster phallus surrounded by several coco de mers which were large enough to make a midwife blush.

After a brief pursual of the menu, and the prices, I ordered a glass of water. Meryl showed up on time, wearing lipstick red cowgirl boots and a fringed leather skirt with a matching vest – which was experiencing a tremendous amount of internal pressure. Her ensemble was topped by a small cowboy hat from which long dark braids extended down over the front of her shoulders; the combination of gargantuan breasts, braids and cowboy hat suggested that the theme of her ensemble was perhaps Brunhilde-goes-West.

The story Meryl told me was this. Saturday night she had some sort of group meet at her apartment. Sunday afternoon she went to her weekly psychic pet workshop meeting. She was only gone a couple of hours. When she returned home she found that someone had been inside her apartment: Her lingerie drawer had been disturbed – which made sense to me – pots and pans in the kitchen as well, shoe boxes opened, and so on. Her place had been tossed pretty well. On her bathroom mirror, scrawled in lipstick, was a message that said “The pot is cursed! Destroy it now or face doom!” It was signed with a Hopi sigil. Later, she found that one of her bedroom windows had been unlocked.

“Mambo,” she said, “I was only out of my apartment for a couple of hours. Somebody knew my schedule.”

“And,” I added, “had been in your apartment recently to unlock that window. Did you have any visitors last weekend, other than the group you mentioned?”

“No. Just some members of my Club Tantra group.”

“Club Tantra?”

“Yes. It's a group I found on craigslist. Club Tantra,” she explained, “keeps me pretty busy on the weekends. So don't have much time for socializing. Besides, right now, I'm the only female member, so you can imagine the strain that puts me under.”

“Strain? And just exactly what is this Club Tantra? Is it related to the Hopi?”

“No. It's about consciousness raising with an intimate partner, or multiple intimate partners. We seek to increase our level of *Prana*. This is the life-giving force that . . .”

“A sex club?”

“Well, it is about the achievement of extended orgasms; but remember, Tantra is not just about wild uninhibited sex with multiple partners, it’s only a medium for consciousness raising. But, of course, with your extensive knowledge of metaphysics, you probably understand that already.”

I understood all right. Meryl was some sort of cosmic whore – not that there’s anything wrong with that. Though I strived to remain objective in the presence of Meryl, her conversation generated a series of graphic images in my brain; consequently, my cheeks were flushed, both my pinky fingers were trembling spasmodically, my upper lip was covered in sweat and I had a foul taste like mangos gone bad in the back of my throat – in other words, all the classic signs of sexual arousal.

“Something wrong? Meryl asked. “You’re sweating.” Momentarily forgetting that I was drinking water, I pointed at my glass and in a raspy voice, said, “It’s the caffeine.” I cleared my throat, then pulled out my pad and a pen. “Can you list the guys in your Tantra group for me? Those you experienced “consciousness raising” with last weekend,” I clarified.

“Well, the Pagmire triplets; Dr. Swenson, of course – oh, he’s an older guy, a particle physicist, and is only interested in yodeling on my yoni – performing oral sex on me. Does that count?” I nodded, thinking, It probably counts a hell of a lot to Dr. Swenson. “And of course a couple of guys you met at the lecture the other night; Joshua Benstein, the critic, and Roger Johnson, who is in town a lot right now since bigfoot is out of season.”

For now, the Pagmire triplets and Dr. Swenson were at the bottom of my list of suspects. As was Roger Johnson; after all, why would he try to steal a pot he’d sold her in the first place?

“Tell me a little more about this Benstein guy.” My spider senses were tingling. Benstein was swarthy, with his Neanderthal-sized teeth and furry eyebrows. And I didn’t like the way he smiled at Meryl. I needed information to get an angle on him. Being scientifically minded, I was enough of an expert in phrenology to know that Benstein’s skull was probably chock full of depressions of deceit and lumps of avarice and malevolence. I needed to take a closer look at him. I had Meryl fill me in on his character. Apparently, Benstein was a hedonist extrodinarie. He swung more than Tarzan on a twisted vine and was a bigger switch hitter than Mickey Mantle. So, how could this information help me to gain access to Benstein’s home? I thought for a minute while Meryl finished her latte, then it hit me. Benstein was a switch hitter. Therefore, I had the perfect secret weapon: Floyd Barton.

Meryl got up. “Well, I have to go, Mambo. Are you coming?” Good question, I thought. I remained in my seat, afraid I had erected a bigger tent than a troop of hyper active Eagle scouts.

I picked up my water. “I think maybe I’ll just sit here awhile and have another cup of coffee.”

Back at the trailer, I told Floyd my plan and he quickly agreed to help. “So, Chief, are you saying you want me to take one for the team?” I ignored his comment – something I seemed to be doing more and more often. A few minutes later Floyd called Benstein from my trailer. Benstein remembered him from the lecture, and, working on the pretext that he sought further discussion of the Monkees’ place in musical history, Floyd wheedled himself an invitation to Benstein’s home that evening.

“Odd choice of suspects,” Floyd observed as he hung up the phone.

“What?”

“I don’t mean anything, Chief. I’m not saying you’re jealous, or anything. I’m just saying it’s ironic that your suspects are all guys who’ve, ah, apparently had carnal knowledge of Meryl. Lots of carnal knowledge. Say,

if she were Catholic, would it be Cardinal knowledge? By the way, did you hear the one about the priest, the altar boy, and the Great Dane. . . “

My eyes seared into him as my volatile Spanish temper rose from the depths faster than a hungry Killer Whale after a lame seal pup.

Floyd, as always sensitive to my moods, detected this, and before my anger could breach the surface, quickly said, “Uh, I think I’ll just mosey on down to the bus stop for a while and smoke a cigarette. Okay? Bye.” Floyd haunted bus stops for blocks around. Dr. Zorba, after a year of intense work, had convinced Floyd that people watching was a better way of dealing with stress and conflict than stripping naked and running down the nearest public highway. (This approach was much improved over Floyd’s prior therapist, who tried to convince me that the only way to successfully manage my friend’s aberrant behavior was to surreptitiously spike everything in his refrigerator with massive doses of lithium – which he offered to furnish me gratis.)

With Floyd off vexing the patrons of the local transit system by staring at them from across the street, I had time to think about my conundrum. Now that my temper had cooled to a mild simmer, I asked myself, Is the source of my anger because I fear that Floyd is right? Well, certainly not. I had a relationship with Mona. Mind you, we didn’t see each other a lot because each of us had busy work schedules – at least Mona did, mine is what you might call more erratic – but we were committed to each other, sort of. I’ll admit that our adult relations were a little more formal and regimented than I liked, but a girl like Mona has standards that have to be met.

On the other hand, when it came to sex, Meryl apparently had no standards at all. For some reason, that was a comforting thought to me.

Yes, Meryl was a great big Amazonian goddess of lust. And, yes, since encountering her again my waking thoughts had been plagued by visions of her wearing nothing but a leather thong, combat boots, and a smile. But it wasn’t a simple matter of lust. I’m not that shallow. It was more like my subconscious mind was trying to give me therapeutic advice. As I saw it, my problem was that I had been remiss in sowing my wild oats. Maybe if I could go ahead and sow a few of them with Meryl – several bushels of them if I was lucky – I would emerge from the experience shorn of my Samson-like locks of hedonism, and thus be able to form a deeper level of commitment to Mona. Yes, I decided, in the long term, if I had a torrid and meaningless affair with Meryl, it would be of invaluable benefit to Mona.

With that settled, I made my plans for the evening’s investigative work.

At eight-thirty Floyd showed up at my trailer. I opened my door to find him dressed in a sailor suit, looking like an aging, pot-bellied version of the Cracker Jack boy.

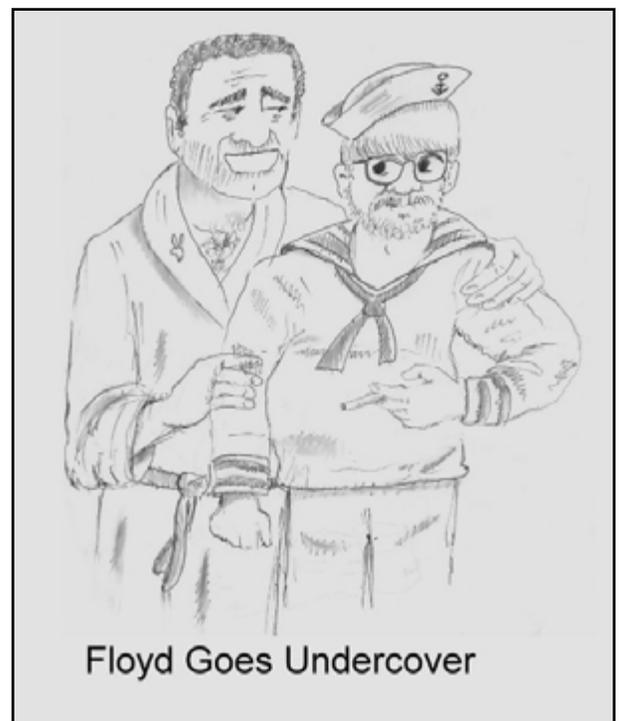
“Floyd, where did you get that uniform?”

“Oh, it’s just something I had laying around.”

“Laying around?”

“Well, Chief, you never know when a nautical motif might come in handy.”

Right, I thought: join the Navy, visit strange ports. I went over his instructions several times. I would drive him over to Benstein’s, then, on some pretext, like a trip to the bath-



room, he would surreptitiously unlock the front door, then distract Benstein with conversation – or whatever – while I snuck in and looked for evidence.

“Floyd, are you sure you can pull this off?”

“Chief, before the evening is over I’m sure I’ll pull something off.”

Again, I thought it best to ignore his remark. “It might help to tell him you’re interested in Tantra,” I said.

“Tantra? You mean a black chic is going to be in on this?” I frowned, but didn’t bother explaining. I did feel some guilt at using Floyd as faux rough trade, but I wasn’t worried about encouraging his moral turpitude; in keeping with his nautical theme, I’d have to say that Floyd’s ship, the S.S. Moral Turpitude, had hit an iceberg long ago.

Monkee See, Monkee Poo

After dropping Floyd off in front of Benstein's, I parked the car around the corner – on what appeared to be a level section of the street – then doubled back to begin my surveillance. So as to not draw undue attention to myself in this quiet neighborhood, I had made some changes in my appearance. I'd ditched my trench coat, put clip-on shades over my glasses, switched my black bicycle helmet for a more colorful model, and donned a large black theatrical moustache – apparently a left over from a high school production that involved Cossacks – that I'd picked up at a yard sale. The crowning glory to my disguise was a clipboard. If anyone chanced to question me, my cover story was that I was a pre-census worker (since the official census was not coming around for another year or so). If the questions persisted, I would utter the magic phrase "I'm from the government." Since "from the government" was synonymous with a host of negative modifying words and phrases, like inefficiency, massive waste, criminal ineptitude, duplication of services, and sloth, nobody would bat an eye. Fifteen minutes later I casually made my way to Benstein's door. I carefully turned the knob. It was unlocked. Good boy, Floyd.

Once inside I froze like Eskimo scat and listened. I heard muffled voices coming from the back bedroom.

My first order of business was to search for a wall safe. I went around the room carefully shifting pictures to see if they covered a recessed wall safe. Nothing. Next I systematically rummaged through a decorative antique secretary that sat in a corner; but its drawers, nooks and crannies yielded nothing. I glanced at his magazines and the spines of his books. But nothing indicated an interest in archaeology, much less Hopi culture. This conclusively proved one thing: Benstein was well practiced in deceit.

I heard something that sounded like a combination of a violin E string breaking and a metal rasp being pulled across a chalkboard. I looked down at my feet to see a long-haired orange and white cat looking up at me. Once I made eye contact, it squinted its eyes beseechingly and gave vent to another loud raspy meow.

A muffled voice from behind the closed bedroom door to my left said, "Wait a minute. Tippy Toes? Is that you? Daddy will feed you in a minute."

I stepped into Benstein's den with Tippy Toes close at my heels. The place was a homage to the Monkees. In addition to several expensively framed Monkee posters, his collection contained a decorative array of wool caps once worn by Monkee Michael Nesmith and a mounted pair of Mickey Dolenz's favorite drumsticks. The latter appeared barely used. On a hunch, realizing how important the Monkees were to Benstein, I shifted the plaque with the drumsticks, looking for a wall safe. The plaque slipped off its hanger. Fortunately, I caught it before it fell to the floor.

"Wait a minute," Benstein's muffled voice said from the next room. "Did you hear something?" Thinking quickly, and knowing a thing or two about how cats operated, I faked the sound of a cat coughing up a hairball.

“Tippy Toes? You okay, baby?”

Maybe he wasn't? Tippy Toes was licking a large black swatch of hair on the floor. It looked as if he had up-chucked either a hairball or a partially digested mouse. But something about this particular hairball looked familiar. Feeling my upper lip, and finding only my thin red, natural moustache, I quickly rescued my Cossack soup strainer from the feline before he could finish wolfing it down.

To complete the ruse, I issued a couple of contented meows, which were apparently convincing; Benstein made no further enquiries, and the cat came over and started nuzzling my ankle. I leaned down close to its ears, made an anti-cat face, and hissed, “Shoo!” It looked up at me and mewed again. Its breath reeked of Albacore tuna.

I waited, stroking the now purring cat to keep it quiet. After an apprehensive couple of minutes, I finally heard the muffled sounds of obscene laughter and debauchery from the bedroom next door, including someone shouting “Quick, hoist the anchor, Matey!”

I sat at Benstein's computer terminal for a while, to see what I could find, but the still purring cat decided to lay on the keyboards, making research a tad difficult.

I rose. Looking around Benstein's office, the half-closed blinds causing it to be covered in somber stripes of light and dark, I reflected on the seedy life of a professional critic, filled with demanding cats, memories of sixties boy bands, and Floyd in a sailor suit. Maybe my job just made me cynical.

I went to the kitchen, a now excited Tippy Toes cutting figure eights in and out of my legs, found his box of dry food and topped off his bowl. I left him contentedly chowing down then let myself out the front door. I had found no smoking gun at Benstein's.

Later that evening I picked Floyd up at the corner nearest Benstein's house, where we had arranged to meet. His sailor hat was askew, and he had a slightly demented smile on his face, otherwise he looked the same as when I had dropped him off. I knew it couldn't be easy being a plaything for someone else's depraved libido – at least I assumed that to be the case. Floyd was staring out the window, smoking, his features placid and unreadable, as usual.

“Are you . . . okay, Floyd?”

He continued to gaze out the window for a spell, then finally said, “Chief, I feel like I just passed a fossilized pinecone.”

When would I learn keep my big mouth shut.

My phone rang. It was Meryl.

“Mambo,” she whispered frantically, “can you get over to my place right away? I just got home from my weekly outreach program for seniors-without-sexual-partners, and I think someone is in my apartment!”

“What? Can you speak up?”

“I was about to go in my apartment,” she said, slightly louder, “and I thought I saw someone moving around inside.”

“Give me your address. I'll be right over. And whatever you do, don't go in your apartment until I get there.”

She gave me her address, then said, “Hurry. And don't worry; the spirits of the Hopi elders will protect me.”

“Meryl, don't . . . “ But she had hung up.

We were almost to Meryl's place when a large black dog ran in front of my car.

6

Jumping Jack Flashback

I shook my head vigorously as I came out of my flashback.

On the way back to the trailer park I stopped at a payphone and made an anonymous call to the police. When Floyd headed for his trailer, he appeared his usual stoic self; when you sailed the mental waters Floyd did, it took a pretty big wave to capsize your ship.

Unable to sleep, I spent a great deal of the night thinking about the case. Maybe the pot was just a ruse? Maybe it had nothing to do with Meryl's death. The other big factor in Meryl's life seemed to be her Tantra group. I got on my computer and did some research on Tantra. In addition to the emphasis on sex, I discovered, death played a pretty big part in Tantric cults. However, since Meryl's body had not been chopped into pieces and left on a rocky hillside for birds to eat, as was the Himalayan Tantric practice, I decided it was not a promising lead. About three o'clock I finally managed to drift off to sleep.

I got up early the next morning to see what the news had to say about Meryl's death. As I was waiting for the news to come on, Floyd called – though he could have just as easily walked over since his trailer is only about fifty feet from mine – and told me he had something I needed to look at right away.

“Floyd, Meryl is dead and I'm trying to find out why. Once I know why, then I can figure out who. I don't have time for your frivolity at the moment.”

“But, Chief, I think this may have something to do with her death.”

Floyd was rarely insistent about anything. I decided it wouldn't hurt to humor him this once; then he could go to Mickey D's and use his EBT card to pick us up some coffee and bagels. (Floyd, like many of our fellow citizens, had chosen to float through life by sucking the marrow from the American dream; hence, he was a compulsive beneficiary of every government program Washington's fevered imagination had come up with.)

I heard the news music cue up and turned my attention back to the TV.

“In local news, Meryl Shepherd, a local high school teacher, was found murdered last night at Spring Waters apartments,” the newscaster said. “Ms. Shepherd was a popular teacher and well liked by everyone at Christian Slater High School. However, authorities said that there were rumors that Ms. Shepherd was heavily involved in occult practices. Inside sources at the police department confided to a WPPA news reporter that the circumstances surrounding her death are very mysterious, and that so far the CSI team is utterly baffled. Meanwhile, in the Middle East . . .”

I heard my front door open. Floyd was standing there, cigarette dangling from his lips. Since smoking was

forbidden in my trailer, he perched in the open doorway, patiently sucking on his cancer stick.

“Look at this, Chief.” He held up a large pottery shard. “It’s from Meryl’s.”

I took it; one side was blank, the other had one of the Hopi ant people painted on it. It was a grisly souvenir from Meryl’s apartment.

“Jesus, Floyd! Do you realize what you’ve done? You’ve disturbed a crime scene, for God’s sake. A crime scene is no place for you to go souvenir hunting. And if you think that . . . “

Floyd pulled his infrared goggles from around his neck and thrust them at me.

“I don’t have time for your games, Floyd.”

“Chief,” he insisted, “I think you’d better look at the inside of the pot.”

Figuring the faster I pacified Floyd, the faster I’d have my coffee and bagel and get back to the serious business of solving Meryl’s murder, I placed the infrared goggles over my eyes and looked at the inside of the pottery shard. Invisible to the naked eye, but clearly seen with the infrared goggles on, Made In China was stamped on the inside in large crisp lettering. “Made in China?” I exclaimed.

Floyd said, “You realize what that means, Chief?”

“Sure. That the Chinese immigrated to America and were here before the Hopi? . . .”

Floyd shook his head.

“That the Hopi were indigenous to China? . . . “

Again he shook his head.

“That the Hopi were the first to invent infrared ink?”

Floyd patiently shook his head once more. The wheels in my brain had almost ground to a halt. After a few moments, due to the pressure of my trained ratiocination, they began to turn once again, “Because . . . “

Floyd exhaled a Vesuvius-sized plum of smoke, then said, “The pot was made in China?”

“I was getting to that,” I said, somewhat angrily. “Let me finish my sentences, Floyd, before jumping in. Jeez!”

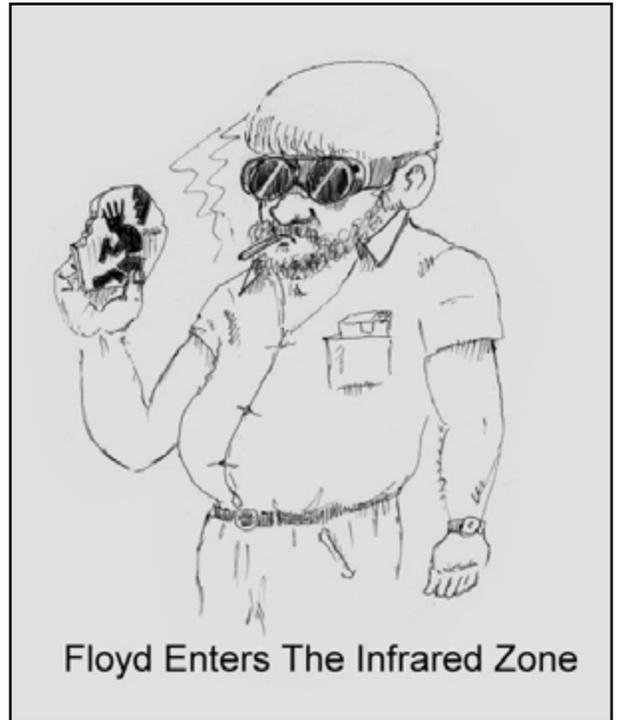
“Sorry, Chief,” Floyd mumbled, then turned his head away from me, “. . . but even Helen Keller could see that.”

“What?!”

“Uh, nothing, Chief.”

“Don’t think I didn’t hear that, Floyd. Do you want me to have a long talk with Dr. Zorba? You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“No, Chief.”



“Don’t look now, Floyd, but I think I see your already meager social skills are atrophying.”

“Yes, Chief.” He flicked his cigarette into the yard then lowered his head. He was sufficiently humbled.

Good. In spite of his interference, and the fact that I was suffering from sleep deprivation, I had not only found the location of Meryl’s precious Hopi pot, but determined that it was a phony. I suspected that this was somehow a significant factor in her murder. Since Roger Johnson had furnished her with the pot, I definitely needed to pay him a visit. Did he have any idea that he was passing phony pots for his wife?

Someone obviously thought the pot was an original, and valuable, and had been trying to steal it from Meryl. Perhaps that same person, I conjectured, had made overtures to Johnson about acquiring a Hopi sacred pot, then decided that taking poor trusting Meryl’s was the cheaper route.

Meryl had told me about Johnson’s website. I went to his homepage, www.wildaboutbigfoot.com, found a contact number, and called.

“Mr. Johnson? My name is Mambo Ramirez. You and I have a mutual friend – had a mutual friend, that is: Meryl Shepherd. You might remember me. I was at the lecture with her the other night.”

There was a long interval of silence. He was undoubtedly still in shock over her death.

“Mr. Johnson?”

“You the short guy, with the helmet? The one hanging around her like a salivating horndog?” I wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or not.

“Uh, yes.”

“Just what do you want?” he said rather curtly.

I decided to get right to it. “Well, Meryl took me into her confidence about the pot.”

Protracted silence again. As taciturn as a Spaghetti-Western hero, Johnson apparently wasn’t a morning person.

“Mr. Johnson?”

“What do you know about the pot?”

“I have some information about it that I think you’ll be interested in.”

“You’ve got some balls, calling me like this. How much is it going to cost me?”

“Pardon?”

“The information about the pot. How much?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“You don’t want to talk on the phone? Good idea. Ten tonight. Come alone.”

“Do you mind if I bring along my friend, Floyd? He already knows all about the pot.”

“Shit! Have you told anyone else?”

“No.”

“Your partner, he’s the one with the thick glasses and the bad haircut? Kind of ugly.”

I glanced at Floyd. “Uh, yeah.”

“Okay. Good idea. Bring him along. You sure no one else knows?”

I assured him that since I was a professional investigator, I was in the habit of keeping client’s confidences to myself.

He gave me his address then clicked off without so much as a friendly valediction. He was definitely not a morning person.

At the appointed time, I drove slowly past Johnson’s address, looking for a place to park. His house proved to be a modest ranch style, shrouded by trees that were decades overdue for a pruning; even in the faint light provided by the moon I could tell that the paint was flaking and could see roof shingles with the edges curling up – due to the overhanging tree limbs. The place was a dump; apparently, bigfoot hunting was not as high a paying profession as you would expect. The house was also located at the low end of the street, which portended drainage problems. Yes, I read my *Architectural Digest* diligently.

The street was lined with vehicles. I found an open space at the high end of the street and parked. I seemed to be vexed by hilly terrain lately. There were no lights on at Johnson’s house, making me wonder if he had forgotten our meeting? Or perhaps it was something more sinister? A killer was on the loose. Precautions were needed. I popped open the pocket of my car and withdrew my Colt Electo 45 stun gun – I’d recently had the bad wiring in the battery case fixed – but in withdrawing it I forgot the cardinal rule of gun handling: Never pick up a gun while your finger is on the trigger. There was a zzzzzt sound.

Floyd jumped like he had been goosed by a circus clown wielding a piece of rebar. “Ouch, Chief. That almost hurt.” Frustrated, I threw the Colt back into car pocket and slammed the door. I made a mental note to myself to see about a refund from the Hip Hop Electronics Repair Shop later. (This is why I always save receipts.) For now, I’d have to rely on my wits to protect us.

As we got to Johnson’s house, I noticed two suitcases and a large bag sitting in the driveway behind a car with an open trunk. A large furry ape-like head and an equally furry arm were hanging out of the bag. Floyd stepped closer, then pointed at the bag. “Holy shit, Chief! Look. He’s captured and skinned bigfoot.”

I was just about to remonstrate him and explain that it was just a cheap Halloween costume – I could see a zipper – when a tall figure stepped from out of the shadows. I recognized Johnson from the lecture, but more so from the picture on his website, where he was all done up in Banana Republic’s finest, right down to the pith helmet, and fashionably attired to go trotting off to harass bigfoot.

“Do you know where Meryl’s pot is?” Johnson said without preamble.

“Meryl’s sacred Hopi pot?” I answered, somewhat stupidly.

“The very one. Put your hands up.” He brought his right hand out of his pocket and pointed a stick at me. Then I realized that sticks don’t reflect moonlight very well. It was a gun. A big one. “And don’t make any sudden moves. I’d hate to wake the neighbors up. A forty-four magnum is pretty loud.”

“But I’m just here to tell you that Meryl’s pot is worthless. It’s a fake.”

“Duh, no, shit Sherlock.”

He wasn’t surprised, but I didn’t think that justified the use of sarcasm.

“I’ve been trying to find out where Meryl hid it for two weeks,” he said. “I need that pot back, pronto. I tossed her place but couldn’t find it, nor a safety deposit box key, or anything that could clue me in on where she

stashed it. Do you have it?"

"Chief, maybe you'd better tell him," Floyd said.

"Be quiet, Floyd. Let me handle this."

"If you get me that pot, no one else will get hurt. I'll simply tie you guys up, and by the time you're found I'll be on a plane, headed to Colombia, South America to join my wife."

As a type, criminals are amazingly voluble when they've got a captive audience. Johnson was no exception. He recounted his scam – which I'd suspected all along. Because of his wife's good repute in the metaphysical community, it was easy to convince people that he could furnish them with a valuable Hopi relic. And since each purchase was illegal, they would keep the deals to themselves. Then he would steal the pots back and destroy them, with no one being the wiser. Since the victims couldn't call the police, it was almost a foolproof scam. Until Meryl.

"I was making a last ditch effort to retrieve her pot," Johnson said.. Unfortunately, she came home early, found me rummaging through her things and a struggle ensued. When she fell and cracked her skull on the edge of a metal futon, I beat it. Pegye and I had already figured it was time to reset our business in South America. She's going to start another pottery scam, and I," he paused and looked at the bag of bigfoot, "will solicit donations so I can continue to hunt for bigfoot, who just, coincidentally, will be making a series of appearances in the Amazon."

"Bigfoot is in the Amazon!" Floyd said.

Johnson wisely ignored him. "Now," he said, raising his gun and pointing it right between my eyes. "Where is that pot! It's got to be destroyed"

I was no fool. Our only hope of staying alive was to hold out the promise of the pot to Johnson until I could think of some way for us to escape.

I was just about to pitch him on the idea that Meryl had given me clues to it's location and send him on a scavenger hunt when Floyd chimed in, "Oh, is that all? It's already destroyed. See." Then the idiot withdrew the shard from his pocket and held it out for Johnson to inspect.

If we somehow survived this, I decided, I would definitely kill Floyd – and bury him in his sailor's uniform, with full military honors.

Johnson starred at it, incredulous. "Where was it?"

"It was sitting on Meryl's coffee table, filled with flowers," Floyd offered enthusiastically. "Mambo knocked it over and broke it."

Johnson took the shard from Floyd and pocketed it. "Hidden in plain sight? That was actually pretty smart of her. I'm glad that's settled. Now, turn around," Johnson gesticulated with his gun, "both of you!"

"Turn around?" Floyd said quietly, seemingly unfazed by our imminent demise. "Well, Chief, I guess we're going to get it in the end. That's getting to be a habit with me."

"Shut up, Floyd." I would shortly be trotting up the stairway to heaven toward the pearly gates of eternity, and the last thing I would hear on earth was one of Floyd's bad quips. It just wasn't fair.

From somewhere behind us a voice piped up: "This is the police. Put your gun down and put your hands above your head! We've got you covered. You're under arrest!"

"What?" Johnson's head jerked around. Seeing nothing, he turned back to us, confused, his gun hand shak-

ing and panic showing on his face.

“Drop that gun!” the mystery voice spoke again. “Or we’ll release the dogs.” Johnson looked over his shoulder again, but quickly turned back to us. A police dog barked. It was an odd sounding police dog – it literally went “bark, bark, bark!”

Johnson looked at Floyd and grinned. “Gotcha. You were at the lecture. The voice from the fireplace. I never did believe in that metaphysical crap. Not bad. But you should work on not moving your lips. And dog impressions. Now, turn around. ”

Floyd and I complied. I cringed; however, always scientifically minded, I idly wondered how many feet per second my helmet would slow a forty-four caliber bullet before it passed through my brain. Apparently noticing that my breathing had turned into panic driven hyperventilation, Johnson said, “Jesus, dude, don’t stroke out! I just want you to walk down the driveway. You’re both going to get in the trunk of my car. I’ll collect your cell phones, then . . . ”

From behind us came a series of loud blaming sounds – like a moose rolling down a hill in a barrel. Johnson fell momentarily silent, then said, “Nice try, but you won’t fool me a . . . ”

I heard a loud thump-a-thump-thump, followed by a high decibel scream. I whirled around in time to see my car sliding to a stop just short of where Floyd and I were waiting to catch the cross-town bus to eternity. Johnson was nowhere in sight! I scanned the moonlit terrain . . . then finally noticed a pair of badly twisted legs protruding from beneath the rear end of my car. Roger Johnson was dead! Instead of a house dropping on him, like the first bad witch in the Wizard of Oz, my little Cancun Express had been the instrument of his demise. No ruby slippers for him.

Fate, it appeared, had intervened on our behalf. Or maybe something else? Perhaps Meryl was up there watching over us from heaven, and had used newly issued telekinetic powers to bring destruction upon her killer? Then I remembered my emergency brick.

“Uh, Floyd, did you remember to . . . never mind.”

As I looked at Johnson’s mangled legs I thought of Meryl and grew angrier and angrier. He had received a relatively quick death by being mangled and crushed, so he had escaped justice, really. That just wasn’t fair. I finally vented my frustration at this injustice by giving one of his shins a vicious kick – and immediately heard an agonized moan from beneath my car. Oops. He wasn’t quite dead. The leg I had kicked was now twitching spasmodically. Kicking a leg with a compound fracture has that effect, I guess.

“Uh, Floyd, I guess you’d better get on the phone and call 911. Floyd?” I heard the muffled stamp of feet running down the street. Floyd, always wary of legal complications, had wisely taken a bush bond. I looked around, but didn’t see his clothes piled up anywhere. This was a marked improvement in his behavior. Maybe his therapy was helping.

Then I noticed the empty bag in Johnson’s driveway. The bigfoot suit was gone. Oh, well, back to the drawing board for Dr. Zorba.

I guess Floyd figured he’d take the heat for not putting my emergency brick under the rear wheels. If I didn’t stop him he’d run all the way back to our trailer park – and that wouldn’t be easy in a bigfoot suit. I started to call him back and tell him this would be chalked up to an accident pure and simple, and that if Johnson survived he’d maybe have a lawsuit against the car company – though it would be hard to sue from prison and even harder to collect from the drug cartel that was said to own Cancun Motors. But that would be Johnson’s problem, not mine or Floyd’s. In the long run, it would serve no purpose to call Floyd back. Besides – putting a positive slant on things – some poor apostate might happen to look out his living room window, see my quirky friend lumbering down the street in an oversized monkey suit, and get a much needed boost

for his lagging faith.

As for me, I had my miracle. The case was solved. And who knew. Maybe my subconscious mind had foreseen Johnson getting the drop on us while standing at what amounted to the bottom of a gravitational well, and by delegating an important task to Floyd it had anticipated both his ineptitude and the inevitable unfolding of events? Indeed, as Meryl had so sagely suggested, maybe there are no accidents?

Well, I decided, whether it was a misplaced brick or telekinetic powers from beyond, or the savvy actions of my subconscious, somewhere in the Great Beyond Meryl had to be smiling. I got my phone out. There was a great deal of anguished pleading coming from beneath my car, now. Johnson was definitely alive, and not happy.

Overhead I noticed Orion's two most prominent stars, like the shiny tips on a cosmic bustier, beaming down on me. Perhaps they were symbolic of the heavenly journey Meryl was now on. I said a silent goodbye to her. I would never peer through half-closed blinds again without thinking of her.

The wind had picked up, causing the surrounding trees tops to sway lazily, unconcerned about the human drama that had played out below them. In the distance, a dog was howling like a crackhead blowing a twenty dollar, pawn shop saxophone.

Sometimes this was a lonely job. Sometimes it was a thankless job. At all times it was a low paying job. But it's my job. I'm Mambo.