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I WAS JUST PUTTING THE finished manuscript of *The Jazz Master* back in its box when my wife, Sandra, slipped into the study to let me know that the Abbotts had arrived for dinner. Sandra had typed up my final corrections in the living room a couple of hours earlier, and after one final perusal of the closing chapters, I was satisfied that the manuscript was ready to hand in to my editor on Monday. But I hadn't been counting on the surprise that was waiting for me that Saturday evening: a low-fidelity recording that would send me back to my desk the next morning to rewrite the last couple of paragraphs and hand them to Sandra for retyping.

Jim and Julie had just gotten back from India, where they had spent a month with their guru, who had recently been released from prison, and Sandra had wasted no time in inviting them over. She and Julie had gone to the same high school in rural Iowa—Julie, the youngest daughter of an Iowan corn magnate who presided over 985 acres of prime Midwestern flatland; Sandra, the only child of an Episcopalian minister; both of them fleeing to UC Berkeley disguised as college students, part of the late-fifties exodus of the adventurous and the disaffected from the heartland of America, young people bound for either coast in the spirited pursuit of freedom. They had been comrades for more than a quarter century, sharing a complicity that rivaled and in many ways outdid what they had with their husbands, and Sandra was dying to get a firsthand account of her best friend's most recent spiritual adventures.

I was curious as well, having known Julie as long as I had known Sandra. Each had had an arm around the other when they came up to talk to me after a gig at The Purple Onion during my last semester as an undergrad at UC Berkeley, when our quartet was just starting to make a name for itself. In fact, I had a little trouble telling them apart at first—same country-girl accent; same dirty blond hair and wide-eyed innocence, more feigned than real; same crisp new Levis and billowing light-colored T-shirts, tucked in at the waist. Two very winsome, very wholesome-seeming girls who

appeared hell-bent on leaving the Midwestern ingénue behind them. I didn't know Jim nearly as well but I liked his laid-back sense of humor and his placid, grounded demeanor. His floppy mop of sandy-brown hair seemed perfectly suited to a face and physique that made him look like he had won a contest for the boy next door, the kind you wouldn't think twice about trusting your sister with, and both Sandra and I agreed that she had hit the jackpot this time after a pair of dead-water hands — her first husband had been a drummer who took his heroin habit with him when he abandoned both jazz and Julie for the more alluring pastures of rock and roll, and the second had been worse, an uptight, glassy-eyed stoner with a penchant for verbal abuse that Julie had finally had the good sense to walk out on after he locked her out of the house one evening following an angry outburst and wouldn't let her in until the next morning.

We had given Zach, our soon-to-be-seventeen-year-old son, a special dispensation to spend the night at a friend's house, so it was just the four of us at the dining-room table with the good china and a four-course gourmet meal that Sandra had coaxed to perfection over three laborious hours in our tight but functional kitchen, featuring a veggie lasagna with fresh tomatoes, spinach, and basil from our garden. I put on a recent Michael Franks album, *Sleeping Gypsy*, while Julie helped Sandra serve the meal, and by the time David Sanborn's tasty sax coda on the opening track, "The Lady Wants To Know," was fading out, I was pouring olive oil and balsamic vinegar over a tossed green salad and listening to Sandra's breathless invocation of Jim and Julie's tales of adventure.

"Okay, you guys, give. What was it like meeting Baba? I've been dying to hear how it went."

Julie and Jim exchanged complicitous glances on their side of the table, each deferring to the other before Julie answered, a single tear welling in the corner of her eye. "I'm not sure where to begin," she said, "except that it was what I'd been waiting for my entire life. As if everything I'd been through these thirty-nine years were just a prelude. But Jim, why don't you start and I'll chime in, okay?"

"Okay, I'll start, but you have to tell them about the garland."

"Deal."

Jim took a sip of his sparkling black cherry spritzer and wiped his mouth with one of the satiny cloth napkins that only came out on special occasions, his eyes brightening as they transported him back to Patna, the ubercongested, uberchaotic capital of the Indian state of Bihar, a state famous for its lawlessness, its poverty, and its widespread corruption — and,

paradoxically, for its long and unequaled spiritual history, the ancient land of Magadh that had given birth to both Buddhism and Jainism. His guru, Anandamurti, had been a political prisoner in this city for more than seven years, and after his release his ashram in the relatively quiet neighborhood of Patliputra Colony had become a kind of yogic United Nations, receiving daily visitors from around the globe, a continuous train of spiritual pilgrims eager to have the darshan of this reclusive guru who was more famous in his native land for his revolutionary social ideals and the government reprisals they'd occasioned than he was for his spiritual teachings.

Despite the politicized setting, Jim's narrative was cosily familiar, full of the usual signs and symptoms associated with the Indian devotional tradition: devotees crying or moaning at the mere sight of their guru, their bodies jerking with sudden movements of the kundalini, some of them falling into trance with an audible thud. I had witnessed similar scenes during the visits that Sandra and I had paid to other Indian gurus who had made the pilgrimage to California, and I had grown to enjoy the carnival atmosphere, a garish departure from the sedate Zen scene that was my natural habitat. I could feel the electricity mount as he talked, a spiritual charge in that distant Indian air that reappeared in our dining room through the conduit of his words and his obvious though understated emotions. When he described his private audience with Anandamurti, whom his disciples called Baba—the familiar form of address for male gurus in India—the glow on his face and the tears that glistened about his eyes revived an old ache in my heart, a bittersweet consciousness of what I had lost when my own spiritual master surrendered his body to the void seven years earlier. The image of a relationship so personal, so intimate, so deeply rooted in the core of my being that no other relationship could begin to compare. The sense of being ferried across the ocean of samsara by my own true self clothed in the guise of a human being, his one hand firmly on the tiller, the other holding fast to mine.

Jim's story ended in grateful silence, adding the resonance it deserved. After a minute or so Julie took over the narration, her feathery voice freighted with emotion.

"I've never seen Jim happier than when he came out of Baba's room. He did some meditation and when he opened his eyes he told me that he'd gotten what he'd come to this life to get, that it didn't matter what happened from then on out, he could die the next day and it wouldn't make any difference. He'd sat on Baba's lap and after that nothing could touch him—that was his Everest and he'd reached the summit. I'll never

forget the look in his eyes. It made a huge impression on me, mostly because I was so glad for him, but also because I was struggling with my own feelings for Baba. But if I'm going to tell this story properly, I should start at the beginning.

“So as soon as we heard that Baba had been released, we started making plans to go to India. I was excited about it but I was also a little spooked. I had heard all these stories about how Baba could see our past, present, and future, how you couldn't hide anything from him, and I was worried that he would take one look at me and see how unspiritual I was. It was different for Jim. He had already given his heart and soul to Baba, years ago, but I was still trying to figure it all out. I wanted to see Baba but it was kind of like I didn't want to get too close either. Just in case. You know what I mean? But I hadn't counted on what being around Baba would do to me.

“The first day was pretty disorienting: the culture shock, the jet lag, seeing Baba that first time — it was like being on a roller coaster, it was all going so fast. But by the second day we started to get our bearings. Every morning, around nine or so, people would start gathering in front of Baba's house singing devotional songs and kirtan. Baba would come out about nine-thirty or ten and chat with everyone for a few minutes. Then he would get in his car and they would drive him to some scenic spot for his walk, and on the way back he would stop at the ashram for darshan. He'd go for another walk in the evening, so you had another chance to see him then. That was the daily routine. So that second morning we were waiting for Baba to come out, and there were these two European sisters there with garlands. When Baba came out he let them garland him and gave them his blessing, and for some reason, I don't know why, I became jealous. You know, why should they get his blessing and not me? So that afternoon I bought a garland from a flower shop near our hotel — the most beautiful, most expensive garland they had. I had only seen Baba in photos before then and I wasn't really sure what I felt, but somehow I knew that I had to give him that garland and get his blessing — almost like my spiritual life depended on it. So when we got to Baba's house that evening I started praying: ‘Baba, I know you are surrounded all the time by highly elevated souls, all these dedicated monks and great devotees and yogis. I know I'm nothing compared to them, but if you are my guru and I am your daughter then please accept my garland and give me your blessing.’ I even promised that I would try my best to become a worthy devotee if he would only answer my prayer — you would think I was the preacher's daughter,

not Sandra. I went on like that for at least twenty minutes, repeating the same prayer over and over again, until Baba came out and everyone started shouting. *Parampita Baba ki, Parampita Baba ki. Jay!* Baba stopped for a few minutes like he usually did. He said hello to a few people and took a couple of garlands from some Indian sisters, and then he walked right past me like I wasn't even there. Got in his car and drove away.

"I was crushed. One moment I was on cloud nine and the next moment I was covered in mud. I was sure Baba had ignored me on purpose. Why should he accept a garland from me? Jukebox Julie? It was his way of telling me that I didn't belong there. Crazy thoughts, I know, but that's how I felt. Jim didn't even notice. He was running after Baba's car with everyone else. But one of the Indian sisters who was standing nearby put her arm around me and told me not to get discouraged—if Baba didn't take my garland today, he would take it tomorrow; I just had to be patient. There were a lot of people there but if I thought of him with devotion then he was bound to satisfy my desire. That sort of thing. And it did make me feel better. It was only one day, right? And there *were* a lot of people there. I just had to wait my turn. But the next morning the same thing happened, and the day after that and the day after that and the day after that. Every morning I bought a fresh garland for Baba, the best they had, and as soon as we got to Baba's house I would start reciting the same prayer: 'Baba, I know I'm not as spiritual as your other devotees but please accept my garland and give me your blessing.' And every time he went for his walk he would walk right past me like I was invisible. By the time Jim got his personal contact, ten days had gone by and I was sure Baba would never take my garland. Either he didn't know I was there and didn't care, or else he knew and I was too unspiritual for him. And nothing Jim could say or do could convince me otherwise. Finally I told Jim that I wanted to change our tickets and get the next flight back. By that time I wasn't depressed anymore—I was mad. I had been arguing with Baba in my mind that whole day. *Why should I stay here if you won't even look at me? If I'm not good enough for you, then I should just go.* Jim and I got into a big fight that night—at least I did, between the crying and the yelling. Jim just happened to be there, poor guy."

"That was some night," Jim said, shaking his head. "I had a hell of a time convincing her to stay. It was like trying to muzzle a rabid dog, if you'll forgive the metaphor. But eventually I got her to calm down, and the next morning she bought another garland and went back with me to Baba's house."

“I was still really mad but I figured I’d give Baba one last chance. We got there late that morning, with the fight and all, and there was a big crowd so there was no way to get close to Baba’s car. We ended up being all the way at the back. But when Baba came out, he went straight through the crowd and right up to me. I couldn’t believe it. He had this beautiful, mischievous smile on his face, and then he said, ‘So, little mother, this morning a little bird came and told me that you are angry with your Baba? Can this be true?’ I was so shocked I couldn’t even open my mouth. I just froze. Baba was right in front of me, with this incredibly loving smile and those beautiful eyes, and I couldn’t move, couldn’t talk, I couldn’t even blink. My mind just stopped.”

“It was so cool. Everybody was waiting for her to say something, but she was like a shining statue.”

“I was in shock. Literally. Finally Baba reached out, took the garland from my hands, and put it around his neck. Can you believe it? For ten days all I could think about was giving him this garland, and when I finally got my chance I was so blown away, he had to take it and put it around his own neck. Then he took it off, gave it back to me, and told me to keep it in my meditation room. That’s when the dam broke. I started crying like I’ve never cried before. Ever. All it took was one look from my guru, one smile, and it was all okay. All of it. Everything I’d ever gone through, every mistake I’d ever made, every bit of shame and guilt—he made it all okay with a single smile, just like that. By his grace. Then I gave the garland to Jim and knelt down and touched Baba’s feet.”

“Which you’re not supposed to do, not without permission. Baba’s personal assistant and his bodyguard went to pull her off, but Baba told them to let her be. When she got up, he put his palm on the crown of her head and started reciting some Sanskrit mantras. Then he turned to his personal assistant and said, ‘You know, Ramananda, some people think that those who are physically very close to me must be highly developed spiritualists, but this is not the case. No one is physically closer to me than my shoes. Do you think my shoes are very spiritually developed?’ ‘No, Baba.’ Then he patted Julie on the cheek and said, ‘Do you understand, little mother? Good. Keep this garland safe. It will help you with your meditation.’”

The first side of the record had long since finished by then. We had listened to Julie’s story in dead silence. I got up and flipped the record over to side two, still picturing her standing like a statue in front of her guru with a garland in her hands and tears in her eyes. When I returned to the table we were silent for several minutes, picking at our neglected lasagna

with our thoughts eight thousand miles away in Patna. After a few minutes Jim looked up from his plate and asked Julie to tell us the rest of the story. By this time the needle had moved on to track two, “Antonio’s Song,” and the chorus seemed to have been written especially for the occasion, underscoring our shared feeling of being spiritual beings on the shore of an infinite ocean, the chorus flowing seamlessly into João Donato’s lyrical piano solo, a river of diaphanous Bossa flooding the causeways of our souls.

*Sing the song, forgotten for so long
And let the music flow
Like light into a rainbow
We know the dance,
We have, still have the chance
To break these chains and flow
Like light into a rainbow*

“There’s more?” Sandra exclaimed, as Michael Franks’s gentle, hypnotic vocal eased into the second verse, her eyes wetter than anyone’s at the table.

“There is,” Jim said in a low voice, refilling his glass with black cherry spritzer and taking a long, measured sip. “After Baba’s car pulled away, a didi came up to Julie—one of the female monks—and told her that it was very unusual for Baba to call anyone ‘little mother.’ Usually he only calls women ‘mother’ if they are the same age as him or older. Otherwise he calls them ‘daughter.’ According to Didi, it had to have some special meaning—everything Baba says does—but since we didn’t know what it meant, we didn’t think much of it. Until Julie’s dream.”

Jim nodded at his wife for her to continue.

“That last evening in Patna, when Baba came back from his walk, he stopped and gave everyone a long, sweeping namaskar. When he came to us he held the namaskar for almost ten seconds. That was our goodbye. We had to leave for the airport at eight in the morning so it was the last time we were going to see him. It was very beautiful, very blissful, but I felt so sad that night when we went to bed. I couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing Baba again. It took me a long time to get to sleep. Then, early in the morning, I dreamed that I was sitting with Baba on his veranda under a canopy of stars. When he got up to go into the house I placed a garland around his neck. He took it off and gave it back to me, just like he’d done in real life, and patted me on the cheek. He said the same words he’d said to me then—‘keep this garland safe, little mother’—but then he

patted me on the stomach and said, ‘and take care of little Manisha.’ The vibration was so powerful it woke me up. It was barely four o’clock but I shook Jim awake and told him that I was pregnant with our daughter and that Baba had given her the name Manisha.”

Sandra went wide-eyed, the color draining out of her face. “You’re pregnant?” she exclaimed, the words exploding over the table.

“We haven’t been to the doctor yet but as soon as we got home I bought one of those new early pregnancy tests, you know, an e.p.t., the kind that only takes two hours to give a result?”

“Sure, I know,” said Sandra, her voice tremulous with emotion. “I’ve never used one but I know people who have. So? Did it come out positive?”

“As blue as my baby’s eyes. The test is supposed to be 97 percent accurate but I don’t need the test or the doctor. I have Baba’s blessing and that’s good enough for me. I’m going to have a daughter and her name is Manisha. She was conceived in Patna. I counted the days and I’m pretty sure it was the same day I gave Baba the garland.”

Sandra was crying now. She jumped up from her chair and rushed over to embrace Julie, who had gotten up from her chair at nearly the same instant and soon was crying just as loudly, both women bawling freely in a private cocoon of unabashed joy. I congratulated Jim with a sedate handshake, reaching over the table as I squirmed in my chair at this sudden display of feminine emotion. Jim was just as choked up as Sandra and Julie, I could tell, but he kept his eyes in check.

“Thanks,” he said, half slapping, half grabbing my hand. Then he winked and said, “No need for a hug, Dan. I think the girls got that covered. Unless you want to give Julie one?”

“Right, right, of course.”

It took a while to separate her from my wife but I was able to get in my hug and return to the dinner table, where we were finally able to finish the meal, topping it off with a dessert as ample and as nectarean as the occasion deserved: carob-honey ice cream from the Altadena dairy on top of a peach cobbler conjured from a recipe that Sandra’s great-grandmother had perfected at the dawn of the century.

After dinner we retired to the living room where I put on some Paul Winter and leaned back to enjoy more of Jim and Julie’s stories. Manisha, I discovered, meant “daughter of mankind.” It was also the name of the Hindu goddess of wisdom, and if it were true that Jim and Julie had a daughter on the way, then she had certainly picked an interesting family to be born into. Jim was a successful chiropractor who had begun practicing

TM as a teenager, a gentle, grounded, spiritually minded healthcare professional who had met Julie two and a half years ago, when some friends invited him to a Siddha Yoga satsang, and had since brought the kind of emotional and marital stability into her life that her soul had been crying out for for years without her mind ever heeding its voice. I remember telling Sandra when I first met him that I couldn't quite see what he saw in Julie. I loved the girl, always had—she was my wife's best friend, after all—but I could never get past the fragile, lost-soul aura that seemed to follow her like a wraith as she flitted from one new promise of salvation to another in search of the quick and easy road to enlightenment, and I couldn't help but wonder when Jim would come to his senses. Before or after it was too late? But that was unkind of me. Julie had the same angel inside of her that we all do. It just took the right partner and the right environment to let the angel loose, and two and a half years later, after following Jim down his chosen path, she had gone from being the prototypical New Age flake, a lovable kook with terrible taste in men and a deep-seated aversion to any kind of actual discipline, to being the kind of woman Jim deserved.

The right partner, and maybe, just maybe, the right guru.

In the twenty-two years since Elijah had shown me the hidden soul of jazz and opened my eyes to the Buddha's legacy, I had become familiar with a number of Indian gurus, for whom California had become a spiritual Mecca second in importance only to the Indian subcontinent, a junior holy land with scores of chic ashrams nestled in the hazy shadows of the California hills under the guidance of dark-skinned holy men in white or orange robes who found the Western enjoyment of material comforts no impediment to the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. I had read their books, both the philosophy and the stories, many of them laced with miraculous tales of spiritual powers and sudden transformations, and though I was a Zen guy through and through, with the Zen tradition's wariness of occult powers and devotional displays, and its emphasis on keeping it real—chop wood, carry water—I loved the stories and the music (regrettably almost entirely absent in Zen circles) and the overflowing exuberance I so often met with in the spiritual gatherings that I would attend from time to time with Sandra, who dabbled in Zen to keep me happy but who was basically a Hindu groupie at heart. A *bhakta*, as she liked to call herself. She dug jazz. That was, after all, what had drawn her to me in the first place. But her real love was kirtan—hand percussion and Sanskrit chants—and invariably when I got back from campus I

could hear the pulsating drone of *Om Namah Shivaya* or *Hare Krishna, Hare Rama* welcoming me through the screen door or an open window as I pulled the car into the driveway.

So as I settled back and listened to their entertaining and compelling stories, mostly of fellow disciples they had met on their trip whose experiences with Baba rivaled Jim and Julie's, stories that were nearly indistinguishable from the ones you heard in the other yoga groups that had inundated the Coast, I found the context especially intriguing: the same devotional fervor and kundalini mania surrounding a spiritual guru who had spent seven years as a political prisoner, nearly five and a half of those years on a protest fast—two cups of liquid a day—after the jail doctor, under orders from the Indian government, had allegedly tried to pack him off to nirvana with an overdose of barbiturates, an act that sparked no less than eight of his monastic disciples to commit self-immolation in protest over a four-year period. Sri Aurobindo had begun his career as a revolutionary, fighting for Indian independence, and he had attained some level of spiritual realization while meditating in a jail cell in Calcutta, but it had been seventy-five years since Aurobindo's jailhouse trance, and until Jim's guru started to garner headlines a few years back, I had never heard of an Indian guru crusading against government corruption or the evils of capitalism. Buddhist monks, yes—I remember the day I turned on the news in my Telegraph Hill apartment and saw photos of the Vietnamese monk, Thích Quang Đức, setting himself alight near the Presidential Palace in Saigon to protest the repressive policies of Diem's US-backed South Vietnamese government, a singular act of self-sacrifice that sent shock waves throughout the world, setting off a wave of dissidence that would lead to the toppling of Diem's government only five months later—but that kind of social commitment was not something I generally associated with the yogic crowd—certainly not in California where the public search for enlightenment seemed to take place in a warm, fuzzy cocoon that was inoculated against the noxious odors of the outside world. I had had a few discussions with Jim since he had taken up with Julie and made her a willing convert, curious as to what had drawn him to a guru who was better known for his confrontations with Indira Gandhi's totalitarian government than he was for his spiritual teachings, and I had been impressed by his down-to-earth commitment to social change and his insistence that the best yogis didn't shirk their social responsibilities, an attitude that resonated deeply with my Buddhist heart. Though we didn't get together often, I had grown to think of him as a comrade, a lifetime meditator who was just as concerned with galloping

injustice in whatever part of the world it rode as he was with his own enlightenment. He shared my awareness that injustice was just as much alive now as it had been in the sixties when an entire generation finally came to its senses. The war in Vietnam was over, thanks to the manifest ire of millions of voices, and the civil rights movement had put an end to institutionalized racism in a country barely a century removed from two hundred and fifty years of slavery, but life for most people on planet Earth bore little resemblance to the rarefied atmosphere of a Los Altos Hills ashram. Racism in the US had gone underground but not out of fashion, especially in the Deep South; the Vietcong had sent over two million South Vietnamese to reeducation camps where an estimated two hundred thousand had either been executed or had died from hard labor and poor conditions; and word was leaking out of mass ethnic cleansing in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge and the extermination of its Buddhist monks. The wobble of our precarious planet was still all too noticeable, even in California, and I had never forgotten Elijah's contention that the world would not lose its wobble as long as enlightened souls remained shut up in their monasteries and their ashrams. They would have to get their hands dirty if things were going to change, and I was glad to know that Jim and I were in complete accord.

It was nearly ten when Julie stifled an abortive yawn and told Jim that they should start thinking about heading back. They had a fifty-minute drive to Santa Cruz, where Jim had a thriving practice just off the boardwalk, and she needed to sleep for two these days. Jim was just getting up from the easy chair when he slapped himself on the forehead.

"I almost forgot, Dan. I have a present for you."

"Another one? I'm still reeling from the sandalwood Buddha you got us."

"And those batiks Julie picked out," Sandra added. "They're stunning."

"This is a different kind of present." Jim ambled over to his jacket, hanging from a peg by the front door, and pulled a cassette tape from one of the pockets. "We met this amazing musician while we were there," he said, as he handed me the tape, "an American monk fresh from the training center. Older guy. He was playing bamboo flute during the kirtans and bhajans. As soon as I heard him play I was glad I'd brought my cassette recorder. I knew you'd want to hear it. As near as I can tell, it seems to be a kind of mix between Indian classical and jazz. Great stuff. The other musicians are just okay, nothing special, but this guy you've got to hear. He's got both worlds going on at the same time, the Indian and the Western."

“Sounds interesting. I’ll give it a listen. Thanks.”

“Why don’t you put it on now, while Julie’s in the bathroom. She usually takes her time in there. I recorded five or six hours altogether and cut a selection for you last night. Most of it is pretty noisy, collective kirtan and bhajans, but the first six or seven minutes is a tune written by one of the Indian monks, Nityasatyananda, that I recorded in his room one evening. Just Nityasatyananda on harmonium and voice, and Krishna Murali, the American monk, on flute. It’s low fidelity but there aren’t a bunch of guys banging on drums and hand cymbals and singing out of tune like the rest of the tape, so you can really hear him play. Go ahead, put it on. We’ve got time. It’s all cued up. I bet I’ve listened to that track a couple of dozen times already, between the flight over and these last couple of days, and it never gets old. I may have a tin ear but he sounds to me like he’s right up there with the guys you write about in your books. The John Coltrane of Indian jazz, or close enough.”

“Okay. Now you’ve got my attention.”

I walked over to the mahogany cabinet that housed the stereo system that I had assembled with such care over the past few years and slipped the tape into the Nakamichi deck. There were a couple of pops, a cough, and a quick burst of static, then the sound of a harmonium playing a simple diatonic figure, the recording quality surprisingly tolerable considering that it had been recorded with a twelve-dollar mic and an old Norelco Carry-Corder. The singer scatted the melody for a few bars and then began singing the verse. Behind him the mournful breath of a bamboo flute began to alter the atmosphere, filling it with longing and melancholy, a feeling so poignant, so rooted, I was sure I knew exactly what the lyrics meant to convey despite not understanding a single word or even recognizing the language. His phrasing echoed the singer’s but with more weight, as if it were the earth beneath the singer’s feet, adding firmness to his steps, a welcomed resistance that channeled my emotions toward a place that lay beyond the music, at the other end of the horizon.

While I stood there in thrall, Julie came out of the bathroom and wrapped an arm around Sandra, who was carrying the last of the finger foods to the kitchen. “Oh . . . Krishna Murali and Nityasatyananda,” I heard her say in a hushed voice that seemed to carry overtones of awe. Then she added something that didn’t register, for by then I was no longer in the room. The singing had stopped and the flute had begun to play a solo over the simple barrel-tone arpeggios of a four-chord minor progression. I was lifted up and carried away, as if the flautist had sat me

gently down on a feathery carpet of sound and called down a mountain breeze to carry the carpet up and into the night sky, the sudden sense of vastness that invaded my senses banishing all sense of time or place. Until that moment my ears had contradicted my mind, unwilling to believe that the unseen flautist with his uncanny, haunting tone wasn't Indian, a weightier version of Hariprasad Chaurasia, but whoever was playing that spellbinding solo was stateless, as if the cosmic breath itself was blowing through a bamboo reed, recreating the world in its own universal image. It was jazz and Indian classical rolled together into one, the clouds over the Himalayas, heavy and majestic, and the mist over San Francisco, a damp evanescence perfumed with the scents of the city, but it was also the rice fields of Japan, the primal pulse of deepest Africa, the syncopated soul of Latin America, and more—the future and the past of a musical imagination both human and transcendent, molding human thought into something seemingly born of a higher race. And then I heard it: the echo of a voice I had listened to in rapture so many years before in a small suburban cottage looking out on an exquisite Japanese garden presided over by a three-foot stone Buddha.

It was Elijah.

I couldn't tell you how I knew. It wasn't the notes, it wasn't the feeling, it wasn't even that sense of unpredictable, unconscious perfection that I had come to associate with *jazuzen*. It was just certainty in its starkest, most primeval incarnation, a sudden leap across time and space to reconnect with a music that seemed to spring from within me rather than from without, like the voice of my conscience.

It was Elijah.

I sunk down on the sofa and listened to the final few minutes of the song with my eyes closed, heedless of the murmur of voices behind me. Letting the vibration of that faraway bamboo reed seep into me, absorbing it into my cells, into my blood and bones and sinews. I should have been surprised but I wasn't. Somehow I had always known, somewhere deep inside, that our paths would cross again one day. At the very least that his music would one day reach my ears—on vinyl or on tape, if not in person. That kind of music doesn't just disappear. It's like a river that empties into the sea and then evaporates and falls from the clouds to keep on flowing. If I kept my ears open the waters of that river were sure to return. And now they had. It had been a long wait, but by the time I got up to shut off the cassette, it seemed as if no time had elapsed at all. Twenty-two years reduced to a single moment, the space between one note and the

next, enough to let the music breathe, to accommodate the silence that it needed to be fully comprehended. He may have been on the other side of the globe but it was as if he were just down the block, the sound of his saxophone floating in through an open window. Seven thousand miles or seven hundred feet, two minutes or two decades—in the end it didn't make much difference.

I could feel Sandra's eyes on me, but before I answered her unspoken question I had a question of my own. "Jim, was this American monk a black guy, six foot four maybe, early fifties, with a southern accent?"

Jim was sitting on the arm of the easy chair, where he had perched himself to take stock of my reaction to the music. He appeared startled by my question but his voice only reflected a cautious curiosity. "I don't know about the accent," he said, "it was pretty hard to place—like the music, a little Indian, a little American jazz. He'd been in India a long time, though, so maybe it's changed. But now that you mention it, I do remember him saying something about being from Mississippi or Alabama or somewhere down there."

"Alabama."

"Right, Alabama. Big guy, black, early fifties, just like you said. So how is it you know this? Last time I checked, you weren't clairvoyant."

"There's no mistaking music like that. I'd know his playing anywhere. Flute, saxophone, doesn't matter."

"So this guy's pretty well known then? How about that. Some old jazz guy from the fifties who's resurfaced in India, I'll bet. Anybody I might have heard of?"

"I doubt it," I said, shaking my head.

"Elijah." Sandra was standing with Julie by the kitchen counter but her voice cut across the intervening space with the clear overtones of the quintessential "aha" moment. Julie followed with an exact echo a split second later.

Jim looked over at them, doubly surprised. "And who is Elijah?" he asked.

I glanced over at Sandra and she picked up the cue.

"Elijah was Dan's mentor when he was an undergrad. The guy that turned him onto Zen. I never met him—he left the Bay Area for Asia a couple of years before Julie and I met Dan—but his sax lessons are legendary in this house. Zen and the art of jazz saxophone. Dan wouldn't be Dan without him—or so I've been hearing for the past nineteen years."

Julie clapped a hand on Sandra's shoulder. "Ain't that the truth, girl. You know, I never was entirely sure this guy was real. Maybe that's why

it didn't cross my mind. He told us that he had practiced Zen for many years and that his main instrument was the sax. So Krishna Murali is your Elijah?"

"It seems so."

"Wow. We left India three days ago and the trip just keeps getting better. We met our guru, conceived a child, and now we've found your long-lost Elijah after all these years. You owe me one, you know? Well, and Jim, of course. He made the recordings."

"That he did."

"So do I get that hug now?" Jim said with a laugh that spread across the room until we had all picked it up.

After we said goodbye to the Abbotts, Sandra helped me with the washing up. Normally that was my job but she was too excited to go to bed, and the conversation was still going strong when the last of the soapy water drained from the sink. Serendipity was the topic, the marvelous dance of karma that had done its two-step in our living room that night, proof that there were no accidents in this world.

"So," she said, when I rinsed the last plate and handed it to her to dry, "do you want me to go ahead and book the tickets?"

"Tickets?" I said, baffled by the seeming lack of context.

"To India, dummy. And don't tell me you haven't been planning to go there from the moment you realized it was Elijah playing that badass flute. I know you too well, baby."

That she did. That was both the downside and the upside of nineteen years of cohabitation—thankfully more up than down. I couldn't put anything over on her, but most of the time there was very little need to.

"So when do you have to hand in grades?"

"They're due on the nineteenth but my last final is Thursday. The fourteenth. If I get everything done ahead of time I can hand them in the same day."

"So we leave on the fifteenth then?"

"We?" I said, cocking my head and raising an eyebrow.

Sandra laughed, a good old-fashioned belly laugh, and then raised an admonishing finger. "Don't go all Groucho Marx on me, brother. You know damn well you're not getting on that plane without me."

I knew it, and the smile she elicited gave it away.

"We're going to have to stash the kid," she said, her voice dropping now into semi-serious mode.

“Do you think your parents will take him?”

“They’ll take him. They know what I’ll do to them if they don’t. So that’s settled, then. I’ll make the arrangements. I’ll talk to Zach tomorrow and to my parents and give the travel agent a ring. And if I’m not mistaken, you’re going to have to rewrite the ending of your book, which means I’ll have a bit more typing to do.”

A book that now looked like it was about to gain a sequel.

2

SANDRA'S PARENTS AGREED TO take Zach without any arm-twisting involved. Instead of asking them to house-sit for his final week of school, Sandra made arrangements for him to get out a week early—Los Altos High let out for Christmas break six days after my last final at San Jose State and they had recently retired to Marin County, a lot closer than Iowa but too far for Zach to drive, assuming the judge didn't suspend his license at his upcoming hearing, which he very likely would, not that I would have considered turning my car over to him for the thirty-three days we'd be gone. Not after the ignominy of having to pick him up at the Redwood City police station two weeks earlier after he got busted in my car with two joints and a blood alcohol concentration of 0.09%, a breath and a prayer away from a drunk-driving citation. Perhaps ignominy is an overstatement. Irritation and one hell of an inconvenience is a lot closer to the truth. But I played it up for all it was worth, both when I went to the station to get him and for a good number of days afterward (I found him on the offender's bench, his gangly body, two inches taller than his dad's, scrunched up in a classic pantomime of despair, his scraggly blond locks framing a freckled face ashen with fright and shame that made him look anything but the enigmatic rock star he aspired to be). It just seemed like the right thing to do. A little shame and fear seemed like healthful medicine that with some good playacting on our part might just impart a life lesson that would keep him from making some of the same mistakes we'd made, mistakes he thankfully knew nothing about. In a way, we were almost glad. It was less than a gram of marijuana and a couple of beers, one misdemeanor and a close escape, but he was scared stiff by the flashing lights and the prospect of going up before a judge, and that boded well for the future. We had seen what hard drugs could do, up close and personal—you couldn't escape them in the jazz world when I came of age; the best you could do was to keep your eyes on your instrument and do your damndest to resist the tide. If we could see him into adulthood

with only a taste for recreational weed and some crumpled beer cans in the trash, carefully hidden under yesterday's newspaper, we would place an offering before the image of the Buddha and the pictures of Suzuki-roshi and other saints that we kept on the altar in our bedroom and hand him over to their care.

My own resistance had started breaking down a few weeks before Elijah left for Japan. Diana, like most of the beat poets, considered marijuana the creative artist's drug of choice. The ultimate insight enhancer, she used to call it. Once she moved into my Berkeley loft, the clouds of cannabis that could be seen rising from any gathering of hipsters in those days moved in with her. Even then I somehow managed to stay away from anything more than a contact high until the day Elijah informed me he was leaving. Looking back, I'm still not quite sure how I pulled that off. By the time I fell in with Diana and her beat comrades, marijuana had gone from being a symbol of rebellion to being an integral component of the new worldview, a way of processing reality that buzzed its way to clarity, banishing the unsightly phantom of middle-class conformity behind a curtained haze of perfumed smoke. It was so much a part of the local zeitgeist that often Diana didn't even seem to be aware of its presence. I would come back from school to find her sitting on the mattress bent over a sheaf of half-scribbled poems with a joint smoldering next to her in an ashtray. Every so often she would reach out for it without removing her eyes from her papers, unconsciously flick off the accumulated ash, and take a toke, like someone absorbed in a book might reach unconsciously for a glass of water, only subliminally aware of their thirst. The poem was everything to her—or the conversation or the book or the music. The cannabis was just a form of sustenance for the creative mind that went unnoticed except when its absence felt. And I, in my naiveté, imported from the Valley, had somehow managed to remain only subliminally aware of it as well until Diana came back that night and caught me stretched out on the bed, staring at the ceiling as I tried to come to grips with my angst over Elijah's pronouncement that he had decided to leave for Japan in three weeks' time, the first leg in his search for the unknown guru who had invaded his dreams.

We spent most of the night talking, what I at first saw as a calamity slowing undergoing an alchemical transformation in the cauldron of our conversation, until she helped me to see what any Zen addict should have seen at first glance: that this was just another turning in the road to realization. At some point she picked up a lit joint from the ashtray, took

a drag, and then turned it around and handed it butt first to me. Between the turbulence of my emotions and the quotidian quality of its presence, I don't think I had even noticed it was there. As far as I remember, this was the first time she had ever offered me a joint — or if not, it had been so long that I'd forgotten. There was no questioning look in her eyes, nothing in her expression to indicate that there was anything unusual in her gesture. Perhaps it was just a reflex on her part as she chewed on the words that were passing back and forth between us, contorting them to extract their meaning. And with just as little reflection on my part, I accepted the offer and took a long drag that brought forth a violent fit of coughing. Diana laughed uproariously as she slapped me on the back, and I found the situation equally ridiculous, which somehow made me feel a whole lot better, as if I had just gotten rid of some stored-up tension that needed to be coughed out, like a wad of phlegm. The second drag went down a little easier, and by the time we drifted off to sleep, the cannabis-induced bend in reality had helped me to recover my fledgling Zen perspective on the transitory nature of all earthly phenomena.

The high had worn off by the time I made it to Elijah's that morning to begin my apprenticeship as a Zen gardener, but not the memory. I knew instinctively not to mention it — indeed, I had a guilty taste in my mouth all morning as I dirtied my hands with potting soil and followed Elijah's careful instructions. Though I had finally discovered what Diana had meant when she'd called pot an insight enhancer, there was something very un-Zen-like about the experience that lingered as I worked, a subtle lack of clarity that I found disturbing, a persistent fog that hung like a curtain between me and the here and now. Perhaps there were also some thin filaments of shame woven into the fog, knowing that Elijah wouldn't approve.

Sobered by what I took to be a fortuitous lesson on what and what not to put into my body, I had no trouble abstaining until we put Elijah on his ship, and for some time afterward. But without the anchor of Elijah's daily company, my resolution began to drift from its mooring and the lesson was soon forgotten. By the beginning of the spring semester, I had fallen almost unawares into a habit that would last the better part of a decade: a daily helping of the shadow satori that certain chemicals can induce in a receptive mind. I still did my zazen every morning, Diana and I both. There was a whole crew of us who did — poets, musicians, activists, creatives of every cloth and color. But those were the dues we paid to keep our membership cards active in the Bay Area enlightenment

club. The payoff came when we lit up a joint and put on a record or picked up an instrument or attended a poetry reading or just sat around and talked about art and the world, expanding our minds almost effortlessly with the help of the prodigal gifts of nature, filling them with insights that only came grudgingly when we closed our eyes and tried to still the chatter of our minds.

Diana left for New York just before Christmas, 1958, shortly before the beginning of my final semester at Berkeley, and I met Sandra three months later. By then the informal trio that we had cobbled together in my freshman year had evolved into a quartet, and I had moved over to the piano to make way for the best alto saxophonist in our graduating class, sweet-toned Tadeo Fujiwara, a Japanese import who had worshiped at a Shinto shrine as a boy growing up in the suburbs of Tokyo, until his cousin, the pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi, introduced him to what would become his true religion: jazz improvisation. Tadeo wasn't much interested in Zen, though he loved the mythic flair of the stories I would tell him, but he heard something in my playing that reminded him of home, and by the time I met Sandra we had become a biracial version of Paul Desmond and Dave Brubeck, a hit both on campus and off. Weekends would invariably find us trading choruses in one of the smaller venues that were so abundant in those days in San Francisco — dimly lit, smoke-filled caverns for the most part that paid little, if anything, but allowed us to gain a following — and it was in one of those caverns that Sandra walked into my life, arm in arm with her pal Julie, a pair of nubile jazz groupies looking for any kind of liberation they could get. Sandra was ready to try anything, and once I graduated she dropped out of school to follow me on a wild and woolly ride down the carnival rapids of the San Francisco jazz scene. We moved into a cozy little one-bedroom in the shadow of Telegraph Hill with no furniture other than a queen-size mattress, a rickety kitchen table with unmatched chairs, and the Baldwin upright that my parents had bought me as a graduation present, and we spent the next two years high as a kite on everything short of heroin, including my introduction to LSD through the offices of Ken Kesey, who scored a small vial of the colorless and odorless liquid heaven for me from the CIA-run mind-control experiments that he had volunteered for at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital. We were hip, happy, and seriously deluded, convinced that our chemically induced visions were signs of spiritual growth and that the band would be the next big thing in jazz, a conviction that owed more to our artificially altered senses than to the music.

That's when the long hand of karma dropped from the sky, determined to knock the delusion out of me. The bottom dropped out of our band when Tadeo informed us that he had to go back to Japan to take care of his mother, who had taken gravely ill, ending our two-year run in the psychedelic skies of jazz fantasyland. In theory, Red Horver, our bass player, was the bottom, but everyone knew that it was Tadeo they came to listen to. With him we were a jazz band on the rise, a quartet of hip Berkeley grads barely into their twenties nurtured on the milk of West Coast Cool. Three native Californians and a Japanese jazz savant with a scruffy goatee, wire-rimmed glasses, and an elegant, Desmond-like air of professorial lyricism, who reached their high-water mark when the dean of San Francisco music writers, Ralph Gleason, mentioned us in the Arts & Entertainment section of the Sunday *Chronicle* after catching our Friday-night set at the Jazz Workshop—"with several sparkling originals mixed in among the usual standards, it shouldn't be long before some farsighted young music exec signs them to a record deal"—an article I framed and hung on the wall of our living room, right beside the picture of Elijah in his coal-black kimono that Diana had taken with a borrowed Pentax on the eve of his departure. It was a sure sign that we had arrived, our entrance into the cathedral of jazz history all but assured, the first step of an ascending staircase that would soon lead us into the antechamber of artistic immortality. But I had failed to notice the laughter in Elijah's eyes highlighted against the somber hues of his kimono, his amused recognition of the gauntlet that destiny was assiduously preparing for a young man who had forgotten to leave his ego at the door. Without Tadeo we were just three struggling kids trying to break into the game. I was the talented saxophonist's sidekick, proud of the way my piano solos challenged him to reach beyond the clouds, but even I wasn't foolish enough to think that I could headline the band without it sinking faster than a lead buoy, not when the last real taste of the *jazuzen* magic that I had experienced under Elijah's tutelage had vanished several years earlier in a cloud of cannabis-scented smoke.

One month later, with the world, both public and private, falling apart around me, two weeks after the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, a shocking revelation that called into question everything we thought we knew about the fresh-faced golden boy in the White House who was supposed to put America back on the road to sanity, I walked into Sokoji and the world turned on its axis, carrying me back to a place whose existence I had almost completely forgotten, the vacated silence that lay unattended in the innermost chambers of my heart.

Sokoji was an old wooden synagogue, three stories high, with faux Moorish towers, a Romanesque facade, and three arched doorways whose only indication that it was a Zen temple was a small wooden sign that read: Sokoji, Soto Zen Center, 1881 Bush Street. It was a building I had passed countless times, both by car and on foot, on my way back and forth between the Fillmore and North Beach, without ever having entered. Back when I was still under Elijah's influence I was a Rinzai guy bone and marrow—if there was no koan, it was not for me—and once the drugs and the jazz life got hold of me it wouldn't have mattered even if it had been a Rinzai temple. People had been talking about the priest who had replaced Hodo Tobase since his arrival two years earlier, everyone from Watts to Whalen to McClure urging me to check him out, part of their ongoing efforts to keep me from losing complete control of my life. I had even passed him once in the entrance to the American Academy of Asian Studies, a fleeting glance that left me curious, but not curious enough to pay him a visit. But with my inner and outer worlds both spinning wildly out of orbit, I finally retreated to the one mooring that had survived the disarray that had become my life: my memories of Zen. By then I wasn't really sitting anymore. Oh, there were sporadic fits of zazen, when my conscience somehow made itself heard through the drug-induced fog, that I somehow managed to fit in every once in a while between the gigs and the parties and the coffeehouse wanderings, short stints that helped keep intact my self-image as a Zen artist trundling down the enlightenment trail, but the discipline I had once been so proud of had long since abandoned me—or I, it—leaving only a child's watercolor of talking Zen that charmed my friends and sometimes even had me fooled. But the memories were intact, along with Elijah's exploding laughter and the intensity of his gaze, tugging at my ankles and loath to let me go. And so, late one afternoon, I wandered out into a misting rain without an umbrella, leaving Sandra in a happy haze at Hyphen House on Buchanan, telling her only that I needed some air and would be back to get her before the witching hour. Off I went, trudging the two blocks to Sokoji with my jacket pulled tight around me, to listen to Shunryu Suzuki expound the dharma in the hope that an authentic Japanese Soto master could right whatever was listing in my soul.

The lobby was empty when I arrived, so I climbed the stairs to the second floor and pushed open the double doors to the zendo, a large, rectangular hall illuminated by cylindrical paper lanterns and covered with two-inch-thick tatami mats. At the far end of the hall was a raised platform and a

wide altar flanked by flower vases where candles illuminated a two-foot statue of the bodhisattva Kannon. A diminutive shaven-headed monk in his late fifties dressed in flowing Buddhist robes was standing near the altar with a formidable-looking stick in his hand, as thick as a blind man's cane, scrutinizing the two dozen people in the front of the hall who were sitting on zafus—the traditional round, black cushions filled with ceiba fibers—practicing *zazen* with their legs crossed and their hands in their laps. He motioned me to an empty cushion and then came over and stood in front of me as I sat down and rocked back and forth to find my center of balance, the smile on his face as winsome and as innocent as a child's. He nodded briefly as I placed my hands on my lap and rested my half-closed eyes on the floor in front of me, apparently satisfied with my posture, then took up his post again near the altar with the stick held out in front of him like a grinning samurai with his sword, motionless but alert.

After several minutes of what had by then become an unfamiliar practice, my mind wheeling in clumsy circles, I noticed him descend from the platform and slide over behind one of the women to my left, a frowzy, dark-haired girl in her late thirties. He rested the stick for a brief moment on her right shoulder. She folded her palms together in the greeting the Japanese called *gassho*, then bent over a little to the left and Roshi whacked her twice between her right shoulder blade and her spine, two loud thwacks that echoed like cannon shots in the silence of the hall, forcing me into a sudden state of heightened awareness. Then she bent to the other side and Roshi graced her with two more blows, so loud that I winced in empathy. Moments later he was back near the altar with his stick held high, motionless once again. I could sense the heightened stillness in the room as we sunk deeper into our cushions, blanketed by the watchful intensity of his gaze. For the first time since I'd entered the hall I heard the traffic out on Bush street, a muted, intermittent hum that rose and fell with the fortunes of the traffic light on the corner. I could feel my breathing playing against that hum like a second voice in an unnamed fugue while my thoughts skittered and bucked, chafing at the restraints of posture and breath.

It had been a long time since I had sat with any kind of real clarity, a long time since the unadorned landscapes of the mind had meant more to me than the phantasmagorical images conjured into being by the latest pharmacopeia, and my heightened sense of the here and now soon dulled into the usual torpid languor that characterized my chemically unaided hours. But this time the dullness didn't last. My mind had barely begun its

wanderings when I felt Roshi's stick on my shoulder, a startling apparition among the clouds that had crept across my mental sky. For a second I panicked, but then I remembered what to do. I folded my hands, bent to the side, and felt the sudden invigorating shock of a Zen master's blow. For a moment I wanted to laugh, but there was decorum to be observed. After a second blow I bent to the other side and received two more thwacks, less painful than I'd imagined, remembering old Tokusan and his thirty blows, the ones Elijah had never given me. In my case it was only four, but at that moment four seemed like the perfect number, a nice symmetrical welcome to the club. The four grew to eight some ten minutes later when Roshi noticed my backsliding ways and snuck up behind me a second time to startle the torpor out of me.

When the forty-minute zazen period ended—I had only arrived a couple of minutes late—we got up to the clanging of the bronze bell on the altar and began a set of three ritual bows, deep formal prostrations that ended with our knees and foreheads on the ground and our arms stretched out in front of us, palms upward—lifting up the Buddha, as I would later discover. Someone handed me a card with a long series of unintelligible syllables printed in green on a yellow background and I joined in as best I could for the chanting of the *Heart Sutra* while Suzuki-roshi sat in front of the altar, thumping a hollow wooden drum with a mallet and ringing a pair of bowl-shaped bells, one low-pitched, one high, with no apparent melodic intent whatsoever. When the chanting ended we had another session of bowing and then returned to our zafus to listen to Roshi give his dharma talk.

What I remember most about his talk was the warmth and simplicity he exuded. There were no fireworks, no enigmatic Zen stories that made me rack my brain trying to catch hold of the elusive wisdom they contained, just some simple words about the importance of zazen and a total lack of pretension. His English was heavily accented and somewhat choppy, like the backwash at the Berkeley marina, but his smile was constant, and the calm, measured pace seemed to lull my mind into quietness. A scant twenty minutes later it was over, far too short but somehow just enough, and Roshi was getting to his feet, his smile like a beacon suffusing the lamplit room with a gentle light. He went over to the entrance doors and bowed to each person in turn as they filed out, his unassuming smile underscoring the complete and unwavering attention he gave us as we returned his bow. I made sure I was the last to leave the hall, hoping to have a private word. After I straightened from my bow I asked him if we could talk—if not then,

then sometime during the week. “I sit for zazen every morning at 5:45 and every evening at 5:30,” he replied, “except for days with a four or a nine in it. You come.” Then another bow and I was headed down the stairs and out into the street, the gentle rocking of his smile following me all the way back to Hyphen House like unseen waves on a darkened beach.

The next morning I lurched out of bed after smothering the alarm and headed to the bathroom to throw cold water in my face. Sandra was still sprawled out cold with both arms wrapped around her pillow and no visible sign of daylight in the half-open window. It was more or less the hour that I normally went to bed but it seemed different on the other end of a night’s sleep—calmer, crisper, more alive somehow, though part of that may have been due to the absence of the subliminal buzz that usually accompanied me to bed in the hour before dawn. Within minutes I was out of the apartment and easing the car down Lombard with the top down, the chill, fifty-degree, early May air whipping in my face, dispelling the last vestiges of drowsiness with a vigor that coffee couldn’t begin to match. At 5:40 sharp I was seated on my zafu, neatly centered in the middle of a tatami, swaying gently toward the center of my being while Suzuki-roshi lit a stick of incense in front of the statue on the altar, joined his hands together, and bowed. He then rang the bronze bell to signal the beginning of the zazen period, its rich overtones reverberating in the high-ceilinged hall. I looked at Roshi’s solemn figure as he picked up his stick and fixed his gaze on the eight or nine students that had assembled in front of him; then I glanced at the statue of Kannon, perceiver of the world’s sounds, an epithet that Kerouac had aptly bestowed on Elijah, and I knew in that moment that I was home. The torch had been passed from one teacher to another, just as Elijah had said it would be.

That was the day the first Freedom Riders piled into a Greyhound bus in Washington, D.C. and headed south. I know because I bought a paper before I headed home that morning—not because I was in the habit of reading the morning news but because I wanted something official to commemorate the date, something I could keep in the years to come to remind me of the significance of that day. The small article about the Freedom Riders that appeared on page two gave no indication of the seismic wave of change they would set in motion, of the ugliness that their bravery would unleash in the Deep South, an ugliness that would rightly shame the US in the eyes of the world. I doubt the riders themselves could have guessed at what awaited them—the firebombs; the stench of the burning bus while an angry mob held the doors shut, intent on burning them alive; the baseball bats and

iron pipes and chains the mob used to beat them when they managed to escape, only to be arrested shortly thereafter by complicit Southern police; the filthy jail cells from which they tormented their jailers with songs of freedom. The parallels between their efforts and my own life would not be lost on me in the days and weeks to come as I followed their saga with tears in my eyes, first with Sandra and our friends, then with the entire nation, and soon with the rest of the world, admiring their bravery and fearing for their safety, until we began to realize that the world would not be the same any longer due to their courage and their example, the world of Jim Crow that would soon come crashing to the ground, revealing the full extent of the hatred and inhumanity that had propped it up for generations. My own journey toward freedom would not be nearly so dramatic or so consequential, but their example was a great inspiration as I began my struggle toward spiritual sobriety, drawing strength from their sacrifice, from the knowledge that anything truly worthwhile was worth fighting for, no matter what the consequences. Many were the times I envied those northern whites who had joined them, seizing on the chance to make something real of their lives, writing themselves into the narrative of our times with indelible ink, but by then I had an unplanned and growing responsibility that would keep me bound to the Bay Area, far from the front lines of the civil rights movement. My chance to stand up and make my voice heard would come a few years later, after the crudely staged farce in the Gulf of Tonkin when the US government's secret war in Southeast Asia finally became public. But to my eyes, the civil rights movement and the war were two sides of the same coin: American injustice and inhumanity at home and abroad.

When I entered the apartment, paper in hand, Sandra, in panties and halter top, was bent over the toilet with the bathroom door open, throwing up whatever little food she had eaten the night before. "Bad hangover?" I asked, when she lifted her head from the toilet and gave me a weak grin, her slack, bedraggled locks falling over her shoulders like a wet mop. "Not really," she said, rather laconically. "I think I may be pregnant." She sounded neither elated nor scared, just tired. Like she usually sounded during the first half hour or so of sluggish somnolence before a shower and a cup of coffee returned her to the land of the wakeful. I, on the other hand, was stunned into garrulousness. "Pregnant? How can you be pregnant? We've been careful, haven't we?"

Sandra stifled a yawn as she went over to the sink and turned on the tap. "Not careful enough, it seems," she said flatly as she squeezed some toothpaste onto her brush.

“Does that mean you’re late? Being nauseous doesn’t necessarily mean anything, you know. How long has it been since your last period?”

Sandra held up her left index finger to put me on pause while she concentrated, bleary-eyed, on the task of washing the unpleasant taste from her mouth. I stood by with my thoughts racing while she spit into the sink and squinted into the mirror. Then she came over and pushed me gently out of the bathroom.

“Two months. Now let me take a shower. Go put on some music, something not too frenetic. And coffee.”

The crack of the bathroom door shutting was like a sharper version of the gong that had signaled the beginning of zazen that morning, an ungentle reminder to catch hold of the reins of my mind, which at that moment had turned as frenetic as the music that Sandra didn’t want to hear. I sat down on the throw carpet in front of the stereo, crossed my legs, and started to watch my breath. The sound of the shower was like the traffic out on Bush street, a calming counterpoint to my ragged breathing. As soon as my thoughts began to settle, I put on the first un-frenetic music that caught my eye—a reel-to-reel mix of my favorite jazz ballads—and went into the kitchen to begin the coffee-brewing ceremony, trying to focus my attention on the ritual movements while the controlled lyricism of Coltrane’s masterful tenor on “Naima” filled the room with a fragrance far more overpowering than the one that soon began to waft from the simmering coffee grounds.

Sandra took her time. I didn’t need to be clairvoyant to see the steaming mist fill the bathroom and cloud the mirror while she let the hot water roll down her back, turning our tiny bathroom into a full-service sauna. When she finally appeared in the kitchen half an hour later in her satiny sky-blue robe and matching slippers, I handed her a mug of fresh coffee and she sipped it in silence for several minutes with her eyes half closed, completing the ritual that she followed faithfully each morning like a monk rising for matins. When she finished her coffee she opened her eyes, full of the hesitant question that I knew would be there, and said, “So, what do you think?” Thus began a summit that started in the kitchen over breakfast and ended in the bedroom with the remains of a late lunch scattered on the floor beside the mattress: pasta and salad that we prepared together, as much to give our jaws a break from the marathon conversation as to appease our hunger. Not incidentally, it might have been the first time in a year or more that we had made it that far without lighting up a joint.

It took us the first four hours of a six-hour marathon to work through the tangled ramifications of an ineffective or forgotten condom — Sandra was one of the first women of her generation to go off the pill, one of the first to actually research what it might be doing to her body. Two hours to work through our feelings enough to realize that we both wanted this child, despite the fears and the challenges — to the point where we would have been crushed had the obligatory trip to the doctor that still awaited us returned a negative verdict — and another two hours to get a handle on what that would actually entail. Fortunately, neither of us needed convincing that sea changes were needed if we were going to give our kid a plausible chance in a world that wasn't even sure of its own survival. This brought me back to Suzuki-roshi and the Zen revival that I could feel stirring within me — not the talking Zen that Sandra had always found so entertaining, but the Zen-on-the-seat-of-your-pants that she only knew about in tales, a way of life that had revolutionized my world and which I had somehow, inexplicably, lost sight of. That morning after zazen and chanting I had taken tea with Roshi and a handful of his students in the kitchen behind the zendo. Once again his simplicity had overwhelmed me — the centeredness he exuded when he talked, the easy tranquility that enveloped him, the breath of freedom that gusted from his eyes whenever they fell on mine — and the exuberance I had brought home with me eventually took possession of my vocal cords. Sandra's eyes were curious, admiring, at times perplexed and at others entertained, as she listened to me shift back and forth between the re-encounter with the path that I had experienced in Roshi's presence and my memories of Elijah.

"You know, I really like to get high," she said at one point when I waxed a little overenthusiastic about the rigorous discipline involved in the training of a Zen adept.

"I know, I do too," I said, rather sheepishly, realizing that I had raced so far ahead of myself I'd left both of us behind. "I'm not saying that you shouldn't. I was speaking more for me. I'd like to stop. Eventually. If I can. I think it's time I started working toward being high and not getting high, and in the long run the drugs are an obstacle, not an aid. The sooner I get it together, the better it will be for all of us ... all three of us."

Sandra didn't look convinced but she did look relieved, and after that she was more amenable to my garbled explanation of the inner clarity I had once achieved before the winds of karma had blown me off course. If we did have a kid coming, I told her, that was the kind of father he or she deserved. Same kind of mother, too, I thought, but I let the implication go unstated.

I wouldn't smoke my final joint until a Summer of Love get-together in Golden Gate Park with Diana and a circle of beat artists who had by then become the ancestors and the muses of the hippie generation, a fitting coda since it had been Diana who had first placed a lit marijuana cigarette in my mouth. Sandra would follow suit a couple of years later, though she and I would continue to drop acid once a year for another seven years, a private ritual that we observed for the express purpose of seeing how much spiritual progress we had made in a year's time, a feat of inner perception for which the prism of lysergic acid and its derivatives seemed uniquely suited—which is undoubtedly why so many of us in those days thought that the revolution was a foregone conclusion if we could only get enough of the establishment to turn on. But from the day the first Freedom Riders boarded their bus we made a concerted effort to live a healthier, more spiritual life, and that conversation became the basis for the one we had with Zach some seventeen and a half years later.

We decided we would let Zach stew in his room for a few days before we sat him down to pass sentence, long enough to let the guilt and the tension and the uncertainty turn the soil to render it ripe for planting. As part of our courtroom strategy we decided that Sandra should do the heavy lifting, with an occasional glare and a loaded word or two from me to accent the beat. I wouldn't have had it any other way. Sandra had earned my trust and my confidence in these nineteen years under a single roof, maturing over time into exactly the woman I would have chosen for myself had I had the wisdom back then to actually know what was good for me. At first the attraction had been purely physical with a bit of that Iowan innocence thrown in for leavening, at least from my side. Or so it seemed. I knew all about karma, I even bent her ear in those first few encounters with the unseen chain of cause and effect and the doctrine of mutual interdependence, but for some reason I neglected to apply my own philosophy to myself. She was above-average cute, a compact, five-foot-six, slack-haired blond with delicate, golden freckles that looked like they had been painted by Renoir and the understated curves of a two-year-old feline, the kind of girl who seems to live in eternal summer. That was cause enough for me to extend my arms and accept the karmic shackles, seeing that Diana had sailed off for New York in a Greyhound clipper, casting off from the bus terminal in San Francisco to leave me high and dry in the terraformed California desert. But it didn't take long for me to discover that Sandra was more than a pleasant diversion, that

there were far deeper reasons why we were together that had little to do with her nubile country-girl charms. There were lessons we were meant to learn together, lessons that might have been delayed for both of us had we turned our backs on the designs of karma (not that that is ever really possible) and gone our separate ways.

Sandra was goodwilled in the morning and grew downright cheerful as the day lengthened—an annoying constant when the day's equation put me at odds with the world, but a true balm in the long run, a healthful addiction that became especially noticeable whenever I was forced to go without. And contrary to the popular take on sunny dispositions, she welcomed setbacks without waffling, as if they were board games to provide her with entertainment. She wasn't musical—no amount of coaching could ever get her to sing in tune for more than a bar or two—or artistic in anything beyond the art of cooking, but she loved art of any kind, and while she lacked Diana's depths and her perpetual inventiveness she loved conversation enough to eventually become rather good at it. The world has always sparked wonder in Sandra, and wonder is the mother of curiosity, which may have killed the cat but has saved many a human soul from the twin afflictions of apathy and tedium. Her flaws, which I had counted on at first to derail any longterm prospects, were all on the outside: a fair bit of vanity about her looks; an aversion to being alone (solitude was the one thing that could drive her to melancholy); a weakness for supermarket sweets, bad fiction, sappy movies, and no-talent leading men manufactured by the film industry; and a total disregard for time that has only somewhat diminished with the years. Inside she was all goodness, and goodness is the ultimate trump card when the hand you're dealt seems destined for failure. Just as importantly, she was quick to see my flaws and was never shy about pointing them out, an uncomfortable character trait that I first pegged as a major defect, right there at the top of my list, until I grudgingly realized that it was actually an unconscious and unrecognized virtue, the flawless design of karma. What better place for a mirror than lying in your bed beside you night after night, showing with pristine clarity exactly what you need to work on?

That was the lady I turned loose on Zach when we escorted him to my study, a sweet, smiling terror who was implacable when it came to her only son. Zach had gotten pretty adept at tuning me out when it suited his purposes, which since puberty seemed to be most of the time, but he couldn't resist his mother. That kind of goodness will wear you down in the long run. Sandra and I had talked for six hours straight the day of

the Freedom Riders with a short break for lunch, but it took little more than an hour for her to reduce Zach to abject tears and a promise that he was going to “straighten up and fly right,” a world-war-two pop-song cliché, one among the many Sandra employed, that made my hair bristle but which seemed to get the message across. Her core argument, carefully constructed over the previous days, centered around what we had seen drugs do to so many of our friends back in the late fifties and sixties.

“You mean, like Julie?” Zach said.

“She was one of the lucky ones,” was Sandra’s well-rehearsed reply. “Some of them didn’t make it, Zach. Too many. You haven’t seen a friend choke on his own vomit after an overdose and have to rush him to the hospital. You haven’t seen that look in the doctor’s eyes when he comes out of the emergency room to tell you that your friend has just died, that look that says that I know you were doing drugs together and if it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t have a twenty-five-year-old corpse on my hands. You haven’t seen that, Zach, and I hope you never do. Believe me, it’s something you will never, ever get off your conscience. Yeah, Julie was one of the lucky ones.”

Of course she was really talking about us, who either got wise or got lucky—either way, we got out. Zach didn’t know about our past (or if he somehow suspected, he didn’t let on), but the sincerity in my wife’s voice was unmistakable. Rehearsed or not, it was no line, and Zach knew it. When he finally got out the “but it was only marijuana and a couple of beers” that we knew was coming, it sounded weak and ineffectual. Sandra had already broken him down by then, and a couple of firsthand stories about what marijuana and booze had done to undermine the initiative and erode the talents of some of the brightest minds of our generation finished him off. That summoned the tears, which was our cue for the coup de grâce, which I delivered backed by the weight of an enforced silence that had slowly built to a crescendo while Sandra talked:

“Zach, we’re your parents, and as long as we’re alive we are going to do everything we can to bring out the enormous potential that we’ve seen in you since you were knee high to a grasshopper. Try to understand, Zach. We want to give you the best possible chance to make not just a good life for yourself but a great life. That’s all we care about. You’re too talented, too intelligent, you have way too much going for you to give in to peer pressure. The great ones never do. Why should you settle for anything less?”

Two weeks later, no longer grounded but with his license suspended for six months, Zach waylaid the tail end of a family dinner with his announcement that he wanted to go to India with us. He knew it would

mean missing another ten days of school at the beginning of the spring term but he had already talked it over with his teachers and they would send his coursework with him. It took a minute or two for this to register. Sandra and I kept looking at each other, waiting for the other to say something while we got a chance to recover from our shock. Zach was a good kid, despite the occasional teenage fiascos, and a lifelong vegetarian — we had gone all-in on healthy, ethical eating in preparation for his birth, and by his teenage years he was proud of never having eaten meat — but he had never shown the slightest interest in spirituality, despite hanging around Zen Center as a kid and being towed by his mother to an eclectic mix of yogic satsangs. I don't quite remember when we had given up hope that he would one day become a Zen sage or a great yogi and began settling for the ordinary good person with a kind heart — with luck, maybe even an asset to his race — *if* we could somehow help him through the shoals of the mid-seventies California youth culture, a sizable if. Probably by the time he was eleven or twelve and began calling me on why I was getting so uptight over his room being a mess or getting a note from his principal about misbehaving in school if meditation was supposed to make you all peaceful and full of light (kids can be merciless teachers sometimes). All in all, the surprise was warranted but in the end I made an admirable recovery. “Well, as long as you've got your schoolwork in order, I don't see why not,” I said, and then promptly changed the subject. Sandra and I saved our elation for later, when we went to bed. He knew we weren't going as tourists but as spiritual pilgrims and he still wanted to come of his own volition. That was an encouraging sign. Maybe the seeds we had planted were going to sprout after all. All it had taken were a few tears to water the soil and the first real fright of his life.