

THE BOOK OF WANDS

SAMPLE
CHAPTERS

NEIL SLADE

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Author's Note:

This is a memoir and a recollection of some of the more notable events of my life from my youth to the present. Some of the names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals as needed. Although the chronology of some of the events has been slightly juggled in a few spots to aid comprehension, with minor exceptions the stories in this book are literal and accurately reflect true events.

The Book of Wands

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Chapter 29

Good Erfie

Every morning I drag myself out of bed, kick Erfie and Chloe outside down the wooden back steps into the yard for a few minutes, pull on my socks, shoes, pants, underwear, shirt, not necessarily in that order, grab an umbrella or a cane, and the three of us (not counting the inanimate objects) march two blocks down to our neighborhood coffee shop. We've done this every day like clockwork for years and years.

Chloe still hops down our steep steps just like a bunny rabbit, hop hop hop. But lately I've had to carry Erfie up and down the stairs as he's matured as he's been reluctant to navigate these by himself. I think there's as much to this in his doggie frame of mind as anything: Erfie plays me for a sucker, but I humor him. He deserves some pampering after so many years as a faithful companion. After all, he's the best dog in the entire universe for all time and space.

Well, okay, Chloe is too.

But Erfie is quite the character, and I don't think he lets on half as much as to his real capabilities. Just the other evening, he took a little tumble ears over paws back down the stairs when I let go of his leash as I was unlocking the front door and my hands were full of groceries.

I glanced down at him, six steep steps down to the first landing (the steps go up to the porch in two sections), and fortunately he was just fine.

I always noticed that when my dogs accidentally get bonked on the head or something like that, they're over it as quickly as it happened. Not me. I howl in desperate and exaggerated pain if I as much as stub my tow on an acorn. I'm a wimp. My dogs are superhuman non-complainers next to me.

Anyway, I rushed inside to put my groceries down then jettied back outside to carry him back up the steps like I usually do if my arms aren't full. But when I got back out, he was nowhere to be seen.

I thought that maybe he had become disoriented and headed further all the way back to the sidewalk. I jumped down there, first looking one way up the street, and failing to see him, turned around and searched the sidewalk in the opposite direction. I didn't see him anywhere.

I ran around the corner of my building to see if he had headed up the alley, but he wasn't there either. Then, my heart pounding, I looked in the street; he wasn't there either. I quickly ran down past the front of my house to see if he was hiding behind my neighbors shrubs.

He was gone.

Oh man. Now I was starting to get worried. I thought I had better run inside and get my flashlight, it was dark outside, and he could have gone anywhere.

I leaped up my stairs like an over-anxious gazelle, knowing that a dog wandering around alone at night is a disaster waiting to happen. As I ran inside not knowing what on earth had happened to my dog, the second I got two feet inside my front door, I saw Erfie standing right in the middle of the living room with a looking up at me, placidly enquiring as to what he was going to have for supper.

He had apparently immediately followed me and the groceries up the stairs without a pause from the very start without any problem at all. He had obviously gone up the steep stairs right into the house, apparently hiding in the blind spot two feet behind my ankles following the trail of delicious foodstuffs into the kitchen.

For months he had me fooled completely. The truth was that the stairs were no physical obstacle whatsoever, at least when food was leading the way.

While I'm on the subject, this reminds me of another missing Erfie incident.

Long ago I taught Chloe and Erfie to stay put when I let go of the leash. They were quick learners, and soon figured out that if I put down the leash and said “Stay!” they were not to budge an inch. In fact, before long I didn’t even have to say anything at all. If I simply let go of the leash, they stayed glued to the spot until I picked up the leash again or loudly commanded them to “Come Here!”

This lesson was something that I learned was an extremely important lesson in dog survival, after watching several of my pets madly dash away when I accidentally let go of my end of their tether. Fortunately this never ended in dogastrophe.

One of the earliest and most disturbing and permanently etched visions in my memory is a photograph I gazed upon as a six year old while browsing through my sister’s World Book Encyclopedia. Under the subject of emotions, in particular the emotion of “grief” was a captioned photo of a small boy kneeling over the still body of his ex-dog, crushed in the street by an automobile.

Unfortunately, during my adolescence I witnessed such a tragedy of a friend’s dear pet with my own eyes. When I finally adopted my own dogs, I was determined never to let this happen. Thus, I trained my mutts to stay put when I put down their strap.

One early evening I was taking Erfie and Chloe for a walk down my street, their leashes loosely held in my hand, a book in the other, and my portable music player supplying a soundtrack through headphones, hence blocking any sound of the real world around me, such as the pitter patter of eight tiny feet..

Let me illustrate the risks of multi-tasking to you here and now.

I am three blocks from home and thoroughly engrossed in my novel, barely lit by the twilight sunset. I am a world away. For a moment I come back to the here and now and glance down to where I expect to see both of my dogs gleefully trotting alongside me. To my utter horror, there is only Chloe behind

me. As I gaze at my hand, I realize I only have only one restraint in my grip, not two.

I look behind me all the way up the block, and Erfie is nowhere in sight. My heart drops down my pants leg and splatters onto the hard cement sidewalk.

I run full blast back towards home anticipating the worst. The visions of my friend's dog under the wheels of a car come flashing back in an instant.

Alas, fifty yards from my front door, there is Erfie, his leash plopped down limp next to him. He is sitting smack dab in the exact center of the intersection like one of those Japanese traffic cops in the bull's-eye center of the road.

He's just sitting there, doing exactly what I had taught him to do, not to move a muscle if I let go of the leash, and he is looking quite content.

"See, I did what you told me to."

Good dog.

You scared the living protoplasm outta' me.

These days, if I take a book with me on our walk, I staple the ends of their leashes to my knuckles.

But back to our usual morning stroll...

In the shiny red mailbox that hangs on the brick wall next to my front door I stash a long roll of disposable clear trash bags. As I leave, I tear off two, or in a particularly optimistic mode, three bags, and stuff them in my pocket-when I remember to, that is. Often, I am still half asleep for fifty yards out my door, and I get halfway into the street before I have to turn around hesitatingly to return for the forgotten bags. Alas, my guilty conscience commands me to, and I feel utterly compelled to do my neighborly doggie duty with the necessary and proper supplies at hand.

It is somewhat amusing that the mailbox now functions as a doggie toilet paper dispenser. I'm not sure if the mailman is in any manner disturbed

by this when he brings me my telephone bill, but likely not when he stuffs my mailbox full of junk mail.

We walk down the street, Chloe chewing, tossing, and playing with her end of the leash without fail, and myself, my cane or umbrella in hand, twirling it in a slightly more humanly manner

I learned years ago never to leave home with my dogs and without a long stout Wand of some sort. As good as a Wand is for Travel, it also doubles as a simpler and cruder deterrent against larger dogs who erroneously feel that my more diminutive pets would make a good snack for their aggressive appetites.

On the average, once a year I employ my cane or umbrella in a forthright application of little ambiguity, and rap an overly rambunctious and poorly disciplined Labrador or Golden Retriever squarely on the nose. This quickly lets them know that if Erfie and Chloe do not appear formidable enough, they are accompanied by a large ape carrying a long hard stick who certainly is to be taken more seriously.

I plead that I rarely employ my Wand in this manner with such brute force, but more commonly so in a deliberately conscientious fashion that rarely exceeds pointing it with sudden and alarming ferocity at an approaching adversary, which is usually enough to stop a saliva drooling potential combatant dead in it's tracks.

Over the years I've come to the unavoidable conclusion that invariably, people who have aggressive and/or obnoxious and poorly behaved animals as companions are poorly behaved animals themselves of parallel small discipline and guttural nature.

Alas, the shame of all of this is that it doesn't take much effort or time to teach a dog how to act well and kind. Most dogs, even rescue dogs from the worst of homes are more than willing and able to cooperate in changing previously badly acquired manners.

Unfortunately, I can't say as much for the malleability of more common big brained hairless adult apes.

We arrive at the coffee shop within five minutes. Out front are two tall black wrought iron light posts that remain from the turn of the century with their original sculpted glass gas lamp fixtures. The shop itself has served coffee under various name changes for as long as I've lived in the neighborhood, nearly fourteen years, and was it here even some before that.

The place is unofficially known as The Garage, as the building was originally constructed as a gasoline fill up and service station fifty years ago. Besides the new colorful paint and the coffee shop sign, it still looks like a gas station from the outside. Now however, instead of filling you up with high octane and 10W30, they fill you up with high octane Columbian Supreme.

Also intact are the big two upward sliding garage bay doors. Unfortunately, the staff is inordinately fond of sliding up these big bay doors to cool down the place in the middle of November when they apparently think it's too hot for them behind the counter.

Of course it *was* exactly the perfect temperature for all of the patrons inside and in front of the counter. Even though a dozen people inside the place will suddenly begin putting their goose down ski parkas back on, it takes snowflakes landing on top of the espresso machine before the employees finally get the picture.

In the summer the big garage doors are a boon however, and you can't tell where the inside of the coffee shop ends and the outside begins. The squirrels as well as the brazen finches and sparrows that venture inside certainly haven't figured out the border yet. There's even one old gray neighborhood cat named George who has his own barstool at the counter, and he can be regularly seen sitting in his spot.

The business is a Russian franchise that can now be seen in various locations around town. The rumors that the place is run by a bunch of ex-KBG agents who jumped the Potemkin are totally unsubstantiated. They have done the best job of anyone so far of setting up a neighborhood coffee business under their own brand name, *Das Fog*. However, let it be said that the actual

management and owner of this particular location is a Yankee named Bill. God Bless America, rah rah rah.

It is quite appropriate that foreigners from the former Soviet bloc took over the back side of the business. It's not that they are actually any more sinister than the guys on our side, but that's historically been the general perception if you live on this side of the now lukewarm war. I'm just saying, it fits the model, the stereotype. Think: Espionage.

You see, The Garage is not what it seems.

It is not just an innocent little java joint, what that the casual visitor will likely comprehend when stopping in to purchase a hot latte to go.

Instead, truth be known, sitting at a table mere yards away munching on a nonfat bran muffin, might very well be someone who is quite capable of destroying your life as fast and as easily as slapping flat a pesky mosquito on one's forearm.

The Garage is a big bright porch light from 7 A.M to 7 P.M., and around it gathers a cornucopia cloud of moths and other flying creatures seven days a week. If you join this quietly fluttering swarm, at any time you may find yourself next to someone as innocent looking as your next door neighbor, but who may be quite capable of turning your life around 180 degrees, in any direction. And such a person could do this as easily as you watch them casually butter a toasted bagel sitting on top of a crisp white porcelain plate.

This little coffee shop is a neutral zone, a no man's land, a little garden where the opposing forces of north, south, east, west, and up and down have agreed to an unspoken truce during brunch. The praying mantis and the monarch butterfly convene here a civilized summit, quietly, over a cup of coffee with sugar and cream.

Alas, things are rarely what they appear to the uninitiated.

One particular summer morning I agreed to meet Bobby at Das Fog for a little caffeinated wake up. This was a few weeks before his trip to Nevada, and I thought we might tiptoe a bit more upon Wands before he left.

The episode with the umbrella had driven a further little wedge in his conventional perspective, and I was certain his trip away from home would be a good opportunity to build upon the momentum we had started. There's nothing like a break in the routine to build new ways of viewing the world.

Chloe, Erfie, and I took the regular walk down the street, past the long familiar houses on our street, past a couple of long familiar neighbors, and soon arrived at the point of rendezvous.

Erfie sniffed at the flower bed lining the patio outside the front door, and I patiently stood there and waited a few moments for him to do his thing. By this I mean that he was gathering information using his long and powerful shnozz to learn about what other visitors had been there over the preceding twenty-four hours. I suppose he was only interested in those visitors who used the flower bed for a bathroom and ignored those who did not. But you can never be completely certain what goes through a dog's mind.

Chloe had other things on her mind and didn't seem quite as entranced with the smells. She kept anxiously looking up at me as to ask, "What am I going to get to eat here?" Of this I am completely certain.

I glanced inside one of the big front windows and I could see Bobby and another friend already inside and sitting at a table. He was in there chatting with somebody I knew named Byron Gooseberry, who had apparently shown up that morning as well.

Byron was about thirty years old, twice the age of Bobby. I had met him a year earlier at the coffee shop. He was an attractive yet plump guy of my own modest stature that certainly wouldn't be a candidate for underwear modeling per his waistline.

Although we had not spent tons of time together, we had become good friends. We had gone to the park to throw a baseball around, talked politics and psychology, and he had even helped me clean out my basement on one occasion. It turned out that Byron lived only a block away from me, equidistant from the coffee shop, and it was easy to run into him in the neighborhood.

Bobby and Byron had met previously at my house on a couple of evenings when we had all gathered to watch a Hayao Miyazaki movie, a common point of interest for us all. Byron was an artistic type and a medical school dropout. His folks wanted him to become a doctor, but wanted to paint and write. And like a right brain dominant personality, he wasn't the most organized and disciplined person I knew. And he was a bit impulsive.

One time someone had smashed into the rear end of his car and he obtained an unexpected \$1,600 car insurance windfall. Rather than fix the relatively innocuous dent in his fender or save the money for a rainy day, he promptly blew it all on a spontaneous and gleeful road trip to Mexico.

On that occasion I found a box containing a big stack of notebooks filled with his sketches and poetry sitting on my porch with a note that read, "Please take care of these, I don't know when I'll be back."

Curiously, there was a Jar packed with notes in the box as well, with a note taped to it stating, "This contains some of my most prized possessions." Inside were a few scraps of paper with scribbles on it. I had seen that sort of thing before.

Maybe he understood Jars on the subconscious level. Later, he would fully come to witness what they were really for.

I wasn't sure why I was picked me to be the keeper of his verbal and graphic memories, but I suspect it was because he wanted me, a published author, to look at them and proclaim some sort of proclamation as to their worthiness or not. As if my opinion was worth any more than his own.

In any case, he was back in a week, as broke as before the dent had happened. Well, at least he then had some south of the border memories to write and draw pictures about. It was a pleasant diversion, but this didn't help his permanent financial prospects.

Inside Byron's skull, Van Gogh creative disorganization was continually warring with Bill Gates pragmatism. Alas, creative chaos was clearly victorious so far.

After giving the dogs a good chance to survey that morning's odors in the Das Fog's flower bed, I looped the dog's leashes up their usual spot right by the front door onto the patio rail. In this place they were happy to greet every single person who came by for breakfast and they easily gathered both frequent pats on their head and a good quantity of dog cookies.

Bobby and Byron were sitting at a little table by the wall. Bobby saw me and waved "Hi!" first. Byron had his back to me, but soon realized I had shown up, and he turned around and smiled, then waved as well.

At the counter that morning was Alex, a very pleasant red-headed girl who had been working there for many months. She approached and smiled. "Nile'eh?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks," I reply.

"One shot or two?"

"Um, two I think."

I had been coming to this place for so long they eventually named a unique drink after me. This is a regular cup of coffee with a small amount of steamed milk and a shot of espresso. It's not quite a latte or an eye-opener, so they named this one a Nile'eh, pronounced "Nile-aye", like latte.

I regularly joke with the staff here in a manner no other customer dares, and I think that's why I seemed to get such nice treatment. I offer a few moments of un-patron like entertainment and discussion each morning, where as most people just bore them to tears with a routinely order.

I've gotten more attention per the fact that I've been known to make my presence unequivocally known over such issues as "Why don't I get a free refill on *iced* coffee? How much does ice cost anyway?"

It's hard to miss me. You see, I wasn't just a regular- I was an unusual regular. Fact be known, importantly, I was a decidedly *harmless* unusual regular.

This is an important distinction.

The coffee shop had its share of not so harmless unusual regulars, and they always got themselves banned quickly. You could be unusual as heck

around this place, and there were lots of those kinds of people. But as soon as you made trouble; BAMM, you instantly got banned by Marcus the manager, no ands ifs or buts.

Although I'm totally capable of becoming invisible when it's appropriate, I am also capable of making myself becoming unavoidable, like a gigantic goat. I just made sure that if I made a fuss, there was a good reason for it, and I could justify it, and I was reasonable about it. At least this is what I liked to think.

It didn't take much to tick off Marcus, so I always made sure that I didn't cross the line between saying my peace and disturbing the peace.

Some people around here didn't seem to get the difference.

That morning there was a big stack of Russian candy bars on the counter for sale including raspberry flavored bars, dark chocolate, hazelnut and others. They had just got in a big shipment of new milk chocolate bars that were neatly stacked on end in a cardboard display. On the label of each bar was the picture of a cute little cherubic infant with a colorful scarf around its cute little noggin.

I held one of the bars in my hand and examined it, then held it up to show the barista who was trying to fix my drink.

In a voice loud enough for most of the other patrons to hear I asked, "Do they use real baby bits in this bar or artificial baby bits?"

I suddenly heard the clank of my Nile'eh cup being dropped behind the espresso maker. The place suddenly quieted down a notch.

Moments later I saw Alex poke her head back up and glare at me. "Don't make me laugh in the middle of your drink," she instructed. "Good thing Marcus isn't here."

Marcus ran this place like a tight ship, which was quite an accomplishment considering the cast of characters who regularly inhabited the premises every day from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M. when the city forced The Garage to close it's doors.

Years ago the hours were extended as late as 10 P.M. But in a sneaky unannounced special hearing of the city council, the neighbors across the street managed to force the business to close shop no later than 7 P.M. every night.

The thing was, the neighbors knew something weird and strangely uncomfortable was going on, but because of the expert method by which the patrons operated- and I'll get into this shortly- nobody could actually pin anything on anybody. I am certain that not even the FBI would be capable of that level of detection. The customers were THAT good.

For all intents and purposes, this looked exactly like nothing more than a friendly coffee shop, and the customers looked exactly like normal customers. Unless you came around enough, or lived fifty yards away.

But just like the old neon sign that used to hang above the front door with an eerie halo-like glow given off by the buzzing pretzel twisted neon bulbs, if you hung around the place long enough, and stared long enough, and listened carefully and long enough, you started to sense another eerie halo given off by a good number of the people sitting around sipping dark steaming hot java.

You could feel something was different. You could sense something was not quite right.

But you only ever got inkling.

To see what was really going on, you needed a Wand.

I got my drink from Alex, dropped her a tip in the giant coffee tip mug, and walked over to the condiment cart by the front wall. I poured in a bit of half and half and grabbed a spoon and a couple packets of raw brown sugar. Then I headed over to my friends.

I went over and sat down next to Bobby and Byron.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Hey. Que pasa, how's your pasa?” I asked.

We all chuckled at the old George Carlin joke, although I was certain these young'uns had no idea about the origin of that particular line.

“Let’s go outside, E and C are here and it’s nice out,” I said.

My two friends stood up in apparent agreement with my suggestion.

“Where’s *their* coffee?” Bobby asked, straight as a pin.

“I told you, I won’t let them have more caffeine, they can’t get to sleep at night,” I answered without a blink.

“There’s decaf you know,” Bobby quickly replied, holding up his own cup.

I instantly rebuffed him, “Hey, there’s still caffeine in decaf, enough for a twenty pound dog to go bonkers.” I shook my head as if he should know better. “Sheesh.”

Byron looked at us like we were both crazy. He hadn’t really been around either one of us long enough to know how easily we slipped into this mode of completely absurd conversation. “What?” he said.

Bobby and I simply looked straight back at him as if we didn’t understand what the problem was.

“What what?” Bobby remarked.

“Huh?” I questioned.

This was a little game Bobby and I constantly played with each other, testing each other for quick smart response, trying to trip up the other first, like a staring contest. But we did it with conversation rather than unblinking eyelids. Anybody else listening in to our serious feigned banter would quickly think we were out of our minds. Byron got sucked into it without a pause.

Then he got it.

We had done it so convincingly and seamlessly from the get go, from the initial greeting of “Hey”, that he had been caught completely off guard.

“Funny. You guys are funny,” Byron chuckled. Bobby slapped him on the back as they both followed me to the door onto the patio.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I continued, and held the door open for them both.

Byron looked at Bobby and Bobby winked at him.

“Welcome to the club,” Bobby quietly and matter of factly said.

Erfie and Chloe immediately began wagging their tails as they saw us come outside. “Hey there guys!” Bobby exclaimed as he kneeled down and patted both on the back. Erfie automatically sat down and began scratching with his back foot as a reflex in the way that dogs always seem to do when you rub them the right way.

“Why do dogs do that?” Byron asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Why do people keep voting for Republicans and Democrats?” Bobby asked.

I shrugged my shoulders again.

“Hmmm, good question,” Byron replied.

“Come on guys,” I said as I unfastened their straps from the rail and led them over to a nice shady table in the shade off in a corner of the patio, away from the rest of the creatures.



Chapter 30

Byron Learns To Use A Spoon

That morning the sun was out with a nice gentle breeze blowing across the patio, all scattered under the dense foliage of the many trees bordering the front of the coffee shop. The usual crowd was in attendance, spread out among twenty or so tables. A dozen of these at random had a big open black and red patio umbrella poking up through a hole in the middle.

We all sat down around our own table, and the first thing I noticed was than Byron looked different. was something new going on with him, I could tell. But I couldn't tell exactly what it was. His hair looked ruffled, and more.

But even before anyone had the chance to utter a single word, a bird burst right past Byron's nose missing it only by about an inch.

"Man!!" Byron lurched back as an automatic reflex kicked in. "That was close. What *was* that?!"

"Haha!" laughed Bobby. "It's a bird," he said.

"No, I think it was a plane!" came back Byron.

"No, guys," I said calmly. "It's Superomen."

There was silence from my two friends. They were having to sort that one out.

"Superomen," I repeated. "An omen, it's an omen. You know... a bird, a plane... super..."

"Ahh, I get it," Bobby admitted nodding his head.

"Clever, clever," added Byron.

"Was that the bluebird of happiness flying by?" Bobby wondered out loud.

"Maybe. Maybe something else altogether, and only an inch away too," I said as I slurped from the edge of my cup.

“Ooooo,” Byron said.

Bobby jutted his index finger in the air, “The ornothoptoid of exceptional opportunity.”

I sat up in my chair and simply looked at him for his unexpected utterance.

Bobby responded silently in kind, with a smug facial expression and his empty palms facing up offering the obvious, “So, what else should you expect from me?”

The fact was, he was always full of surprises, especially for a young guy. “Mom said I was born forty,” I heard him say more than once. “Yeah, well, maybe,” I would always bat back.

Sparrows and finches were abundant and making their usual rounds from table to table looking for scraps of any kind. The birds were quite unabashedly tame. If you set your pastry or bagel on a table and got up to fetch a newspaper for a few seconds, you would return to find that the birds had invited themselves to what amounted to their own Thanksgiving feast off of your plate.

Our table was in my favorite spot in the shade of a dogwood tree on the fringe of the patio, where we could see all of the other action going on.

It was a typical early morning crowd, some reading a newspaper, some poking at their laptop computers, and many engaged in animated conversation to the accompaniment of dozens of birds chit chattering away. I easily recognized at least a half dozen of the regulars and several people also.

“You guys want to walk around?” I asked the dogs.

This was a rhetorical question, as letting them roam around was the standard practice. Erfie and Chloe were welcome regular guests roaming around the patio with complete free will, visiting everybody on their own treasure hunt for crumbs.

Just about everyone was happy to see the twin Westies poke their noses under the tables. And I wasn’t worried about problems. We had a vibe and a

reputation going for us that no one dared trod on. If they did, they never came back.

One time a big drooling boxer with a stiff standing mane on his spine came loose from his strap that his owner had poorly fastened around one of the lamp posts out front. The dog made the mistake of mistaking my own pets several yards away for a morning tidbit and worked its way loose. It made a beeline for my dogs, and within seconds had picked a fight with them in order to proclaim himself Canine King of Coffee Bean Hill.

My friends and I were on top of things faster than you can say Irresponsible Other Pet Owner.

My friend Jarvis Troglobite had grabbed Ernie and Chloe and lifted them out of harms way in an instant while I simultaneously and instantly picked up this snarling sixty-pound mongrel by the scruff of his neck, all four paws helplessly dangling in the air.

He instantly turned into a sniveling and whimpering blob of short-haired dog flesh as I marched him to the front door of the coffee shop, opened it wide and yelled inside, “WHO’S DOG IS THIS?!”

Don’t mess with the Westies was the motto on that day.

This morning was considerably less confrontational, and the only other dog on the patio was a rich old lady’s Yorkshire terrier about the size of a bag of peanuts by the name of Cookie, who had a big bark but a tiny bite.

“Stay out of the parking lot,” I reminded my own dogs.

Bobby started the conversation. “You know, people think that birds chirping is them singing a happy tune.”

Byron whistled.

Bobby finished his thought, “But nearly all of the time, it’s really territorial signaling of a very aggressive nature.”

“I think I’ve heard that somewhere,” I said.

“I actually got an A in biology last semester,” Bobby proudly added.

“So what are they saying?” asked Byron. “It sounds happy enough to me.”

“That’s because you don’t speak bird talk. You hear that one?” Bobby cupped his hand up to one ear. “He’s saying, ‘Hey all you mothers, this is my branch and my tree, and unless you’re a hot little two legged chickadee, stay offa’ my bush.’ ”

Bobby then whistled for a second himself, then grabbed his own throat by both hands, choking and shaking his own head in wonderfully comic fashion. “Ackckckckckk!!” he barely squeezed out, then his head fell limp to the side as he stuck his tongue out.

Coincidentally or not, at that very moment two birds dive bombed onto the concrete patio nearly at our feet, flapping their wings wildly and making a fuss. They then took off like two fighter jets engaged in a dogfight.

“What’d I tell ya.” Bobby said.

“Good timing,” I added.

I then looked over at Byron, whom I hadn’t seen in about four months.

“Byron, what’s going on? You look... different,” I suggested. “Did you get a haircut or something? Did you have a beard?”

“I’ve lost some weight,” he admitted.”

“Oh yeah. But there’s something else,” I was sure about it.

“Actually, yeah, I did get a trim, what do you think?” He turned his head sideways, and put his hand next to his head like a fashion model. He was hamming it up. “This girl I met did it, what do you think?”

It actually didn’t look that great. It wasn’t completely even on both sides, but I just nodded to be agreeable.

“This girl I met cuts hair.”

“Oh...” Bobby and I said in unison.

I turned to Bobby immediately and asked him, “What goes up the chimney?”

“Smoke,” he instantly replied. We then linked our pinkies together and again in perfect unison said, “PEANUT BUTTER!”

Byron looked at us like we were completely out of our skulls. “What was that?!”

“Good luck charm, don’t you know?” answered Bobby. Whenever you said the same thing together at the same time.”

Byron just shook his head then said, “Anyway, I met this girl here and she’s finishing up at hairdresser college. She also does Astro-Smell Therapy.”

“Astra- what?” stammered Bobby blinking his eyes.

“Astro, not astra. Astro-Smell Therapy. It’s the science of Planetary Influence together with the science of what you smell. Haven’t you ever heard of it?”

Bobby and I just shook our heads side to side. “I don’t get it,” Bobby added.

“Well, the orbit of the planets have a direct influence on your life, that’s plain astrology. But by combining this with the correct smells of your Zodiac sign, it like, supercharges the effect.”

“Oh.” I said.

“Sure,” continued Byron. “Think about it. The time you’re born in the year has a direct smell associated with it just like the position of the planets. So, say if you’re born in the spring, not only does the orbit of say, Venus play a part, but so does the blooming flowers. What you smell is every bit as important as what horoscope sign you are.”

“Oh yeah, I believe that, for sure.” said Bobby a little too enthusiastically. I wasn’t sure I believed he was being entirely sincere.

“Anyway, this girl I met, her name is May, she prescribed some things I should start smelling in my life that will help me achieve my goals and help me get my life together.”

Bobby and I just shook our heads some more.

“Oh yeah, well I believe that,” I said. “I mean, your brain definitely is affected by what you smell, I learned that a long time ago at the brain lab.”

I actually was being honest because I knew that the brain was certainly affected in both a positive and negative way by odors. However, I wasn’t too

keen on the concept that it had a lot to do with the date your mother announced your arrival on Earth.

I certainly was keen on the idea that people are a little apt to believe anything they're told, especially when it comes from a pretty face. People just tend to see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. They don't really THINK.

For example, if you passed Byron on the street and taking a look at him with your two eyes, you would have absolutely no clue that there might be something going on in his life beyond the typical, beyond the expected TV tube stereotype that we generally have in mind as we look at a fit looking young adult.

Like many people, you could sit down at a table with him and chat over a cup of coffee, and have absolutely no idea- unless he specifically told you- that his life might bear little resemblance to your own.

You would look at this young and outwardly reasonably fit individual, and you would assume that here was a guy who got up each morning and went to work behind a desk somewhere, or drove a cab, or that perhaps he was a student in school studying accounting or another reasonably common vocation.

You would assume that he ate three square meals a day and probably slept seven or eight hours a night. You might think that he got together with his buddies every weekend to drink a couple of beers to watch a football game.

You might imagine that he went to the movies once in a while, that he liked to go on bicycle rides, and maybe camping trips. And like other people you know, you would assume that the chances were good that he spent Christmas with friends or relatives and every year ate a plateful of turkey dinner with cranberry sauce.

Any of these things could be true. But any of them could equally be as far from the truth as your grandmother is from the orbit of Mars.

The truth was that Byron, or anybody else for that matter could be anything and anybody. Anything he or anyone else told you could be an absolute fiction or not.

If you were like most people, you would have absolutely no way of knowing WHAT was really WHAT from the surface appearance of things. You couldn't know if the story they were telling you was reality or a fantasy in their own mind only, or a mixture of both.

Most people only see a thin little screen onto which is projected a paper thin slice of reality, like a Hollywood movie which everyone has bought into believing is real.

We are looking at the thin sugar frosting coating the real donut, and we have nary got a clue what the filling is like inside.

We are content to look at a Paper Mache mask sitting on the face of reality.

This happens far more than people will admit, or even know.

Nearly all of the time this is sugar coated mask is constructed by what people tell us what reality is. Or that the screen image we perceive is something we erroneously create ourselves based on thin expectations and previous experience.

Or because it's conveniently more comfortable than the truth.

Our perception of this thin superficial layer hitting our senses could be, and frequently is, completely wrong.

Often enough it is fatally wrong.

Add up enough people running around reacting to the sugar coated mask, like circus clowns on unicycles juggling bowling pins back and forth and you get a society in formidable disarray and chaos. You get a world hanging on by a thread, resembling a bobbing yoyo on the hand of an amused Greek god, rather more than a civilized modern planet.

Almost without exception, you can't really know what is what unless you have some other un-common resources, some other tools besides your regular eyes and ears, which are so easily tricked.

"Dude, I think you need to eat some more food," Bobby said, holding out the top half of his toasted bagel. "Here you want half of this?"

"No I'm good," Byron smiled back. "Really, I had oatmeal this morning."

I took another small gingerly slurp of my yet steaming hot Nile'eh.

"Hey look!" Bobby suddenly announced. "Look at that chick!" Bobby was eyeing a customer that was walking up the sidewalk to the front door of the shop. "Woooo hoooo! Hubba hubba!"

"Cute," I interjected.

Bobby turned to us in confidence, "I'd sure bet she'd be fun to talk to," Bobby confided.

"Really? You think so? Are you sure?" I asked as she disappeared inside the place. "Here, let me show you something," I said picking up my Coffee Spoon. I held it over the table, right in the middle between the three of us. "What do you see?" I asked as I slowly rotated the Spoon upright with my thumb and forefinger.

Bobby and Byron stretched their necks forward a bit and looked carefully at the bowl of the Spoon.

Bobby squinted his eyes, then took the Spoon from me. He slowly brought it up to his face, breathed on it, then carefully stuck it to the tip of his nose, and sat up straight.

The Spoon stuck there.

"Haha!" Byron laughed. "Let me try!" He did, but to no avail, and despite several attempts the Spoon kept dropping onto the patio.

Bobby sat back in his chair and laughed, "Your nose is too skinny! Let Neil try, he's got a fat nose."

I grabbed the Spoon from Byron and tried it myself. I could only get it to stick for a second or two. “Too greasy,” I suggested.

I picked up the Spoon and wiped it off with the middle of my shirt. “Okay, this is serious, I’m not kidding, come on.” I held it in the middle of the table again. “Now, what do you *see*?”

Bobby and Byron stopped giggling and began to think about it, you could see it in their eyes. They knew me well enough that I had something on my mind.

“It’s shiny,” said Byron.

“What else?” I asked.

“Um... Like kind of a mirror,” observed Bobby.

“Very good,” I said.

Bobby and Byron high fived each other, “Dude!” said Bobby.

“Keep looking,” I insisted. “What else do you see?”

Both of them began to inch closer and closer until their eyes were mere inches away from the Spoon.

Byron asked, “Can I see it for a minute?” I handed him the Spoon, and he held it at an angle as he also tilted his head.

Then he looked up at the sky and noted the sun. He began to try and reflect the sunlight hitting the Spoon onto the table, like a magnifying glass.

“You’re getting colder,” I directed.

“Lemme see,” said Bobby holding his hand out. Byron passed him the Spoon, and Bobby held it in front of himself for a few seconds. Then he reached around and began scratching his back with it.

“Idiot,” I said. Byron and I had a good chuckle while Bobby kept scratching.

“What?” Bobby protested. He then brought the Spoon around to look at it again, and he stared at it quite intently from the rounded side. “Hey, I can see myself in it!” he exclaimed suddenly.

I smiled slightly.

“Let me see...” Byron took the Spoon from Bobby and began staring at himself in the dull reflection on the back of the bowl.

Bobby got up from the table quickly, “I’m getting my own,” and he disappeared back into the coffee shop. Byron continued to look at his reflection, tilting the Spoon one way then another, moving the Spoon closer and then farther away, and wiping it on his shirt tails to make it shine more.

“This is a mediocre Spoon, as far as Spoons go,” I said. “Everybody uses this one. You really need your own.” Byron shifted his eyes over to me trying to contemplate my meaning, but quickly went back to concentrating on his Spoon.

Bobby soon returned to our table with his own Spoon and held it up in front of his own face. It was huge, the size of a cooking ladle.

“Where you get that?!” I exclaimed. “That thing is huge!”

“I just asked them if they had a big Spoon I could borrow for a trick you were doing,” he replied as he scooted his chair up closer to the table.

I shook my head. Bobby had a way of delivering the unexpected – routinely.

“Let me see that,” I asked, and then examined his find.

“Now that’s what I call a Spoon,” said Byron.

“Ah, but size isn’t everything,” I said. “Sometimes big gets in the way.”

They both looked at me for a second, and I’m sure they thought I meant something else that I really didn’t mean, and that they missed a deliberately good hint. They then went back to admiring their own reflections.

“I wish I had a silver Spoon, these are kinda’ dull,” Bobby said.

“Yeah, you’re right. A silver Spoon has certain other properties,” I agreed. “My girlfriend gave me some silver Spoons, and they work really well. But these will work good enough for starters.”

Byron suddenly flipped his Spoon around and looked at himself in the convex side. “Whoa! Look at that!” He flipped the Spoon around from one side to the other.

“What?” Bobby said, as he flipped his own Spoon around to the soup side. “Hey, wow!”

“I’m upside down,” Byron nearly yelled. “That’s SO WEIRD!”

I watched as Bobby and Byron manipulated their Spoons every which way seeing how their reflections changed and didn’t change depending on how they held the Spoon, and where they held it.

“That’s rad,” Bobby went on. “It’s so weird how you’re right side up on this side, then you flip it over and you’re just the opposite. I never noticed that before in my life.”

“How long have you been using Spoons?” I asked.

“Actually, my father won’t let me touch Spoons in our house. He says it’s against our religion,” Bobby answered.

Byron looked at me, and I just smirked a little and shook my head.

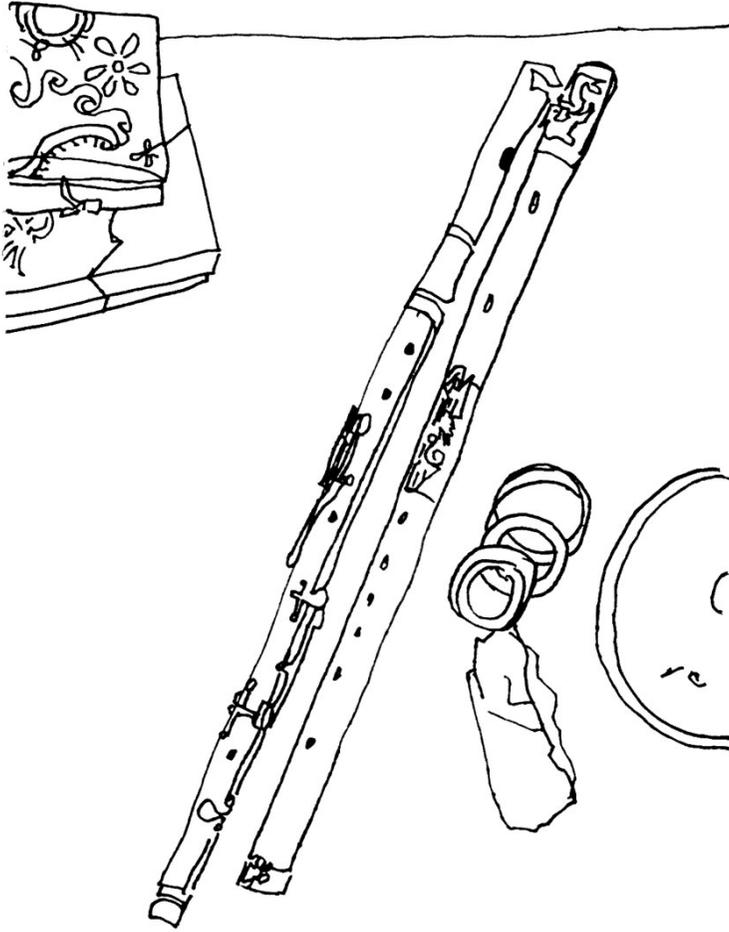
“This one’s too big, let’s trade,” Bobby said as he held out his Spoon to swap with Byron. They traded Spoons for a few moments, but Byron quickly offered the big Spoon back to Bobby.

“Nah, I’ll get another little one,” and Bobby headed back inside, returning quickly with a normal Teaspoon, sitting back down with it.

“Where’s the dogs?” I asked. I glanced over and saw Erfie and Chloe on the far side of the patio and got up to get them. “Be right back.”

As I returned to the table, Byron and Bobby looked just like two kids that had just discovered how much fun a cardboard box could be. I looped the end of the dog’s leashes under the table leg, and the sat down quite content that they had done sufficient crumb exploring for the moment.

“Okay, what else do you see?” I suggested. “You’re barely getting warm.”



Chapter 32

Halos

I sat across the little table from Bobby and Byron, and took a deep breath. I wasn't sure how they would react. "Well, here goes nothing," I said silently to myself.

"Those Spoons are Wands," I said out loud, in a serious tone. "So far you really have no idea of the power of that Wand in your hand."

"Haha, you mean like hocus pocus?" Byron smiled and opened his eyes wide. He was certainly sure that I was just being absurdly serious, in the way that he had seen me and Bobby jest.

"No," I responded quietly. "Hocus Pocus is something you read in a fairy tale book. A Wand, a real Wand can... no, *will* change your life."

My two friends suddenly became as serious as I was at that moment. Maybe I was starting to scare them now. They had thought I was sane. Maybe they had another idea now.

They at least seemed to have sensed that I wasn't fooling around, that I was in fact talking about something real, and something very important. At least to *me*. They both became very quiet.

"Can I ask you something?" Bobby uttered respectfully, and in a reverent tone worthy of addressing his teacher and elder.

"Sure. What?" I replied, listening carefully.

"Can I have some of whatever it is you're smoking?"

Bobby and Byron cracked up. This kind of reaction is exactly what I would expect of people if I mention Wands to them. That's why I usually *don't* ever mention it.

Although I was going out on a limb with Byron, Bobby already knew better. He was making a joke of it because here he was in the company of someone else who would clearly think this *was* a joke.

“Okay, really, I’m serious here.” I looked at them both and sized them up. “Oh never mind, forget it.” I dismissed the discussion with a flick of my hand.

“No no,” they both immediately chimed in. “Tell us, we want to know.”

I didn’t know if I was going to get through explaining Spoons to them, and even if I did, how much of it would actually sink in. Bobby had seen what an Umbrella could do, but that was easily forgotten and dismissed until he had more experience.

Okay, I thought I would give it a crack. After all, I really didn’t care if these two thought I was crazy. Frankly, I don’t care if anyone thinks I’m crazy. But my intuition was winking at me behind my forehead. Previous good luck with Bobby indicated that I might actually get somewhere with them both.

“Alright... listen. Look around you. What do you see? What’s going on?” I asked.

Byron and Bobby twisted around in their chairs and began to survey the coffee shop. They each took a good look, moving their gaze fairly quickly over the customers sitting outside, from table to table.

After a few seconds Byron answered first, “People drinking coffee.”

“Your dogs sniffing that lady’s legs over there,” Bobby added.

I looked to where Bobby was referring. “It’s okay, I know her,” I said. “Is that it?”

“Yeah,” Bobby said. “Just a bunch of people drinking coffee and reading the paper. That’s it.”

“*That’s* it?” I asked.

Bobby and Byron took another quick glance around

“I think this is a trick question,” Byron uttered.

I responded, “I just wanted to know what you were looking at. You’re looking, but you’re not seeing anything. You’re just looking. There’s a difference.”

They both squinted at me with a puzzled look.

Then we heard a noise. Someone at a table at the other end of the patio made a large “Whoo whoo!!!!” sound and grabbed our attention.

A young man about college age stood up away from his table at the far end of the patio, a good distance away. He began doing the most incomprehensible things with his body. First he began hopping up and down in place, and then spun around in a circle while making wavy motions with his arms, and then he sat down again as if nothing happened. Then he repeated the entire series of actions, and ended it by simply picking up his paper and continued reading it.

Even more strange, no one else sitting immediately around him seemed to notice. No one near him as much as glanced at what he had been doing.

“What was that?!” Bobby exclaimed in a startled whisper.

Byron just sat there completely perplexed.

“Here, take your Spoons,” I said holding up a Spoon in each hand, one for each of them. “You can’t really see that guy because you’re looking straight at him. Cover him up with the Spoon and look again.”

Bobby and Byron took their Spoons, and turned around in their chairs again, this time holding the Spoon up in front of their faces.

“For now, just close one eye, so the guy is completely covered up by the Spoon,” I instructed. “It’s a simple way to start.”

And suddenly, as if on cue, this fellow stood up again and went through the whole weird dance and hooting all over again. “Keep him covered up!” I insisted.

“You guys- you’re missing the real show. You’re distracted by the puppets. The real characters are pulling the strings from the side.”

The body posture of my two friends indicated that they were really concentrating. Bobby had both hands on his Spoon and was working hard to keep it over the distant figure of this character.

“Hey wait!” Byron suddenly yelled. “I see these flashes of light around the guy! What is that?!” He dropped his Spoon down.

“Put your Spoon back up!” I insisted. “Don’t look directly at him. Look at his Halo.”

Sure enough, a few moments later, this young man started the whole charade all over again, even more exaggerated than before.

“Oh man, I see it too! What is that? Where’s that light coming from.” Bobby then let his Spoon down and was staring directly at this character.

“Bobby! Put your Spoon up!” I yelled.

Bobby quickly brought the Spoon back up. “Oh yeah, what are those lights around him? What IS that?”

I just sat there, waiting for these guys to figure it out. I was really enjoying this.

“That is SO WEIRD.” Byron said.

“What the fark...” Bobby said to himself.

The dancing man sat down calmly.

“CUT!” We heard someone yell out from the far side of the patio. Seconds later, two people walked out in a line from that side of the building, which bordered on the alley.

The first person was carrying a large board about three feet by four feet square, and it was coated with silver foil on one side.

The person behind him was balancing a long yellow pole about nine feet long. On the far end of the pole was a furry gray thing which had a long cord dangling from it.

“What the...?” Bobby said.

Byron let out that sputtered sound of comical disbelief when you purse your lips and vibrate them with a burst. “What is THAT?”

“It’s a dead rat on a stick!” Bobby proclaimed.

I laughed, because I knew exactly what it was, but had never heard described so well.

Then the third person came out from the side of the building.

He was carrying a large video camera on a tripod.

“It’s a movie!” they both exclaimed with sudden realization.

I smiled, because I had seen the setup as I approached the coffee shop on my way in that morning from the east side. Bobby and Byron came from the opposite side of the shop, and this whole scene had not been visible to them from their western approach to the building.

The flickering and reflecting lights they had seen was the result of the camera assistant reflecting and focusing the natural sunlight using the silver foil covered sheet from off camera. The furry rat on a stick was a wind sock to dampen noise covering a microphone on a pole.

I tried to explain, “The problem both you had was that you were so busy looking at the guy you didn’t see the forest for the trees, as they say. To understand who that guy really was and what he was actually doing, which was acting for the camera, you had to see his Halo: The energy around him. That’s what a Spoon does for you. It lets you see the Halo.”

“Halo?” said Bobby and Byron in unison.

“Like a saint?” asked Bobby.

“Yeah, like in those old paintings?” Byron said as he made a circle around Bobby’s head with his hand. Bobby flicked Byron’s hand away like an errant mosquito.

“Kind of,” I answered. “But you are not necessarily going to see holy people everywhere. A Spoon, when you use it as a Wand helps you to see the energy that comes off of people, off everybody, and trust me, you’re not going to run into too many saints around here. Not this place. Haha.”

I held up a Spoon in front of my face to demonstrate. “Here’s how it works: Whenever you want to see the true nature of someone, you block them with a Spoon, then you look at what surrounds them. Try it, but try not to be too obvious. If people see you’re looking at them, they’ll immediately falsify their Halo. They’ll know you’re looking at them and they’ll put up a false front. Just do it so nobody notices. Byron, you go first.”

Byron slowly took his Spoon and began humming to himself and tapping his Spoon on the table first, then slowly and very inconspicuously

raised it in front of his face. “Dum de dum dum dum...” They he shut one eye and gazed at a pretty young lady a few tables across the patio.

“Hey,” I whispered, “Keep both eyes open this time. That’s how you really do it. Slowly move the Spoon, but don’t look at the Spoon or directly at the person. You should sense something around the head and body that you didn’t notice before.”

Byron held up the Spoon with one arm, resting his elbow on top of the back of his other arm and hand folded across his body. Anyone looking at him never would have guessed that he was doing anything out of the ordinary.

Except then he let out a big burst of air, and dropped his Spoon on the concrete. “Oops,” he uttered.

I bent down and picked up his Spoon and handed it back. “Don’t forget to breathe,” I reminded him. “Try again, slowly. Pick somebody else though, don’t be obvious.”

He first stirred his coffee, the licked the Spoon and very casually started again, slowly waving the Spoon about a foot in front of his face. “I’m not seeing anything. What am I supposed to see?”

“Are you focusing on the person?”

“Yeah.”

“Well don’t. Look everywhere but directly at them. Try not to see them. See what is floating around them.”

As Byron worked intently at working his Spoon, I knew he needed a little nudge. I placed my palms down flat on the table top, my fingers pointing in his direction, and I gave him a “jump”, like a battery booster cable. I knew it was doubtful that he could manage completely on his own, and so I thought it wouldn’t hurt this time to jump start his first Spoon session.

Wands take practice, there’s no way around it. If you’re lucky enough to have an experienced Traveler at your side when you first start out, it helps.

Just then a fellow about my own age wearing one of those floppy our door wide brimmed fishing hat came walking by our table and stopped to talk.

“Hi Neil .”

“Hi Myron,” I replied.

Bobby and Byron looked up.

“Myron, this is Byron.”

Myron held out his hand, “Hi, I’m Myron.”

“Yes, I’m Byron.”

“I know.”

“I’m Bobby.”

“Hi, Bobby, I’m Myron.”

“Hi, Myron, I’m Bobby.”

“I’m Neil ,” I said offering my hand to Bobby.

“Hi Neil , I’m Bobby.”

“Bobby, Myron, Myron, Byron, Byron, Bobby, Bobby, Neil ...” I said.

Myron’s hat looked maybe one size too large for him. He was also firmly holding a large soft leather zippered file folder under his arm. “Hey, did you see that picture of the Turkish UFO with the two aliens in the front?” he suddenly offered.

“No I didn’t,” I answered plainly, as if this was a question I was used to hearing.

Myron immediately brought the folder in front of himself, “I think I’ve got a copy of it here, let me see.” He unzipped the folder and started shuffling through all of the papers inside.

Byron and Bobby signaled at each other with their eyes, with slightly muted expressions of questioning apprehension.

“Myron’s interested in UFOs and stuff,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” said Bobby.

“Yeah,” I responded matter of fact. “Did I ever tell you about my friend Stan? He got picked up a bunch of times by somebody.”

“I think I’ve got a picture here somewhere,” Myron said as he continued to flip through all the papers in his folder, some of them now falling onto the patio.

Bobby knelt down to pick up a couple of the sheets and handed them back to Myron.

“Thanks,” Myron said. “Well, I thought I had a picture in here, I was at the library, and you should see this, some guy in Turkey worked at this warehouse and he had a tripod so it’s a good picture...”

“Yeah, really?” I said.

“You know, they almost never have a tripod. You would think with all the people taking pictures and videos these days more people would have a tripod...”

“You would think.” I said.

“You can see these two people in front. I mean the aliens, you can see them standing right in front, it’s like they’re in a picture window, in the windshield in the front of the vehicle. It looks like a boomerang...”

“A boomerang?” Bobby remarked.

“Well, I don’t seem to have it,” Myron shook his head, the straps from his bush hat wiggling under his chin.

“You can show me another time,” I said.

Myron began to zip up his folder. “Did you know that polar bears are disappearing? The latest survey showed that in ten years there won’t be any more polar bears left in the wild because of climate change, except in zoos.”

“I’ve heard something like that,” I answered, again as if I had heard that question several times before.

Myron looked at Byron and Bobby. Bobby and Byron just stared at Myron.

“Well, listen, I gotta go. Nice to meet you guys,” Myron said

“Wow, interesting guy.” Bobby said once Myron was out of earshot.

Byron went back to his Spoon and continued for a few more moments. “Wait... I’m kind of seeing some wavy stuff, like heat off a road. Whoa, this is weird! I didn’t expect this.” He scrunched his eyebrows, and was obviously seeing something unexpected.

He dropped his hand and looked straight at me. “Wait a second... Did you put something in my coffee?”

“Lemme try, I want to do it!” Bobby insisted, as he grabbed his Spoon and began to bring it up in front of his face.

“Hey, wait, I’m not done yet!” Byron said as he grabbed Bobby’s wrist.

“Hey guys, please no fighting, don’t draw attention, you’ll blow it.” I said under my breath. “Let Byron do it for a few more minutes, you’ll get your chance, Ace.”

Byron began softly whistling to himself in a caricatured way that someone does who’s trying not to be noticed. A couple of people looked at him, then went back to their own business. He rested his elbow on the table top and started the process again, this time focusing on an elderly gentleman on the edge of the patio. As he did this, his mouth slowly began to open as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

He whispered just loud enough for us to hear, “Oh man, there are these jagged lines coming out from that guy. It’s like silver and green and...What the heck is that?!”

“What?” Bobby said. “I gotta see this,” as he quickly brought up his Spoon, first looking over his shoulder away from it, then slowly turning and looking at the old man while moving his Spoon slowly from side to side like a metronome.

“Sheeeeeesh, I see it! What is that? What are those lines?”

I let a few seconds pass first.

“He’s murdered some people,” I calmly said.

Bobby dropped his Spoon onto the glass table top as Byron spun around and blinked at me in disbelief. “What?!!” they both said together.

“You learn to interpret the Halos after a while,” I said.

Bobby leaned in really close to me and spoke in an undertone. “Are you telling me that guy murdered somebody? That old guy? He looks like my grandfather!”

I chuckled slightly. “What, you think murderers have signs around their necks? You think they have horns growing out of their heads? You think they’re so uncommon that you’ve never sat next to one on the bus?” I smiled. “Killers are all around you my little katydid. Let me show you something... give me your Spoon.”

I took Bobby’s Spoon from him. “Now, if you hold this Spoon in between you and that guy with the curved side away from you, what do you see instead of his head on his body?”

Bobby cocked his head to the side while he looked. “Me, it’s my head.”

“That’s right. That’s the part of you that’s like that guy. It’s all those parts of you, those personality traits, those quirks, those things that you have in common with him. Move the Spoon around, hold it over everybody at this coffee shop for a second. Go ahead.” I handed the Spoon back to Bobby.

He moved it around and as he did I said, “See, any time you look at somebody, you can say to yourself, ‘That’s me, that’s me doing that.’ And when you see somebody do something that doesn’t make any sense, you just ask yourself, ‘Why did I do that?’ That’s YOU.”

Byron motioned towards a girl who was patching up her lipstick across the way. “So Bobby, why are you wearing lipstick this morning?”

Bobby just smiled.

“Now flip the Spoon around so the curved side is facing you,” I suggested. “Now your upside down head is on that guy, right?”

“Right.”

“Sometimes you look at someone and you tell yourself, ‘That’s me, standing on my head, doing something that makes no sense whatsoever. Why am I doing THAT? That’s insane. That’s somebody who looks just like you doing something you would never think of doing in a million years.’ But that’s YOU too.”

Bobby was manipulating the Spoon this way and that, looking at people right side up, then turning his head practically upside down. He was putting on a fairly comical show for us at our table with the Spoon.

“Give me another Spoon,” he said, then putting two Spoons back to back, he began to rap them against his thigh and tapped out a little rhythm.

Byron applauded daintily. “I didn’t know you were so talented.”

“That’s good,” I added. “But the point is,” and I casually nodded at the old murderer sipping a cappuccino, “You are in everyone you see, no matter whom they are or what they do. You’re like them, and you’re unlike them. It just depends what side of the Spoon you are holding up.”

Bobby looked around the coffee shop and said, “Why aren’t I seeing anything without the Spoon, what happened to the lines?”

“They’re there,” I said. “Go ahead, try again. Hey look, there’s that girl you saw walking in, the one you thought was so interesting. Look, she’s sitting with that guy over there. Check out the girl.”

Bobby twisted around a little bit. “Oh yeah!”

“Yeah. Slowly. Take a drink first, don’t be obvious. Women are sensitive; they easily know when you’re checking them out.”

Bobby held the overly large colorfully decorated Das Fog coffee cup and then stirred the still hot contents with his Spoon.

“Oh yeah, that’s good,” I said. “Heat helps the Spoon. If you don’t have coffee, you can put it in your pocket, or even better, down your pants first,” I suggested.

“Are you serious?” Bobby asked.

I winked. “Sure am.”

Bobby then took a sip of his drink, then held the cup in one hand. With the other hand he slowly brought the Spoon up in front of his face, in between himself and the couple sitting under a big red and black umbrella a dozen yards away. They continued to chat and hold hands, and didn’t notice a thing.

Bobby sat there, apparently hypnotized by what he saw. “Whoa, I can’t believe this.” He put down the Spoon and continued to look, and clearly didn’t

see anything when he was directly looking at the girl. Then he raised the Spoon again and slowly manipulated it to obscure his direct vision. “Whoa...”

“Don’t stare,” I said without moving my lips.

“What? What do you see?” Byron pleaded under his breath.

“Corkscrews. I see corkscrews coming out of the top of that girls head! And out her butt!”

“What?!?” Byron could barely contain himself.

I couldn’t help myself. I snorted a good laughing snort.

Bobby turned around and looked at me, irritated. “What are you laughing at? I’m not kidding!”

I leaned forward and said with as sincerity as I could muster, and I meant it, even though it probably didn’t look that way after my reaction. “I believe you!”

“So what’s it mean? Why’s she got corkscrews?”

“I gotta see this,” Byron said as he aimed his own Spoon in that direction.

“She’s a pathological liar,” I said. “She’s been feeding that guy lines for years. He thinks she’s an angel, but she’s leading him like a bull with a ring through the nose. She’s screwy. Dangerously so.”

Bobby sat back in his chair and looked at me with his resistance dropped. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“Nope.” I took a sip of my own coffee.

“That’s freaky,” Bobby said. “That’s really scary. That guy is smiling, and he’s getting drilled full of holes.”

“Let me look now,” Byron said as he held up his Spoon towards the pretty young woman. “Oh man...huh!!!!!!!!” he exclaimed.

We continued this way for a good fifteen minutes, going from table to table. Byron and Bobby saw lines of energy, waves, blobs, blotches, amoebas, loops, lassos, ropes, wires, and wings- manipulated, tied, thrown, exploding and caressed.

“Clouds, I see like misty colored clouds floating off that guy over there...” Byron observed.

“Nice guy, positive energy. He works with kids.”

“Kids?”

“Yeah. Colored clouds. Gray clouds would mean he would be helping old people. I didn’t say this was just a lunatic asylum here. It’s actually an interesting mix of folks.

“Lightning inside balloons flying away from that chick, like flash bulbs going off, what’s that?” Bobby asked.

“Occasional temper, but it’s nothing. She’s honest, tells it like it is. Pops peoples illusions. Good energy.”

Byron was focusing on a very well dressed man with a briefcase and a foamy drink. “Wow, I can smell that! I can smell what I’m seeing... that dude stinks, it’s like worms, oh god, it’s like... it looks like...” Byron cringed, looking at a middle aged fellow in a three piece suit.

“Selfish, totally selfish, never grew up. Emotionally a two year old. Still wearing diapers. A big baby, demands to be the center of the universe.” I said, holding my nose.

“You know guys,” I said, “You’re with me, so you’re seeing things the way I do with Spoons this first time. It’ll change when you’re on your own. It might not even work at all for a while.

“You mean we’re being Hip-No-Tized?” asked Bobby.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” I answered “Usually you’ve got to figure your own method or it won’t work at all. Any Wand demands you make it your own in your own way. You can’t go on imitating somebody else, or the juice will just stop. That’s how it works.”

“Okay, yeah, sure,” said Bobby.

“Uh huh,” agreed Byron.

After a while it seemed to be sinking in, that they could see the deeper layers that existed, the layers that sat parallel to the surface glimmer and gloss of which most people never ventured to look past. Right here beyond the

casual appearance of people simply gathering to chat over a cup of Joe existed a neutral No Man's Land inhabited by creatures from every spectrum across the humanoid galaxy. Creatures in human costumes who would engage each morning to either a cosmic shoot out or a playful handshake.

At last we had covered most everyone on the patio, including the team involved in the movie shoot at the far end. My two friends were very quiet. They had seen much more than they ever expected.

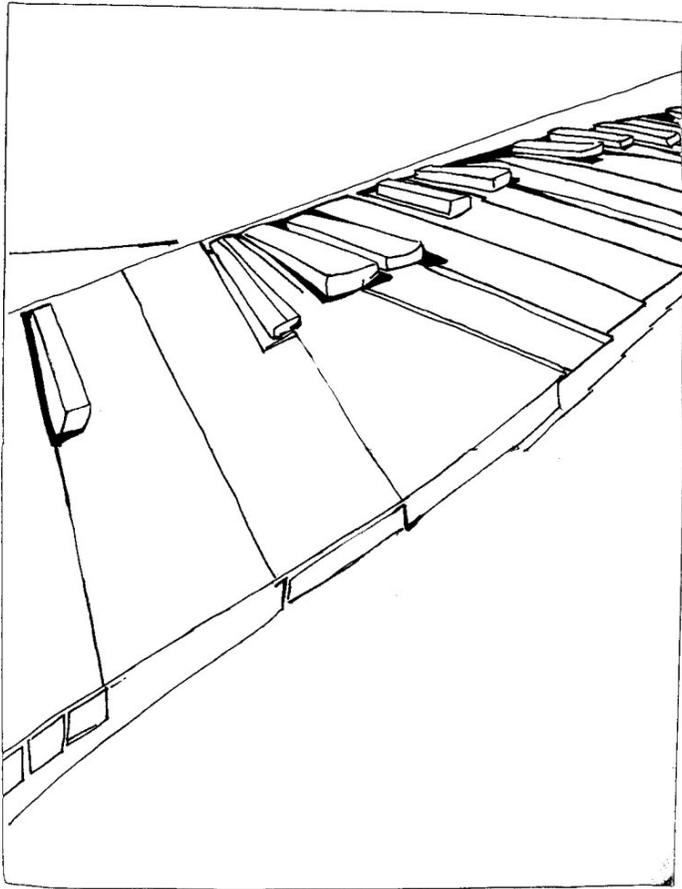
"That was amazing," Byron quietly spoke. "It's like a freaking zoo here."

Bobby said, "People are like birds, you know."

"Yeah?" I answered.

He went on, quite contemplatively. "If you don't really pay attention, it just sounds like 'chirp chirp chirp'. Meaningless babble. But when you really look and see what else is going on, it's pretty deep. There's a lot more going on. Underneath, there's a lot more."

"Yes," I said. "There is lot more going on."



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