

Karen



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Dedication:

For Karen



Section One – The long weekend

Part One

It was 3 pm on Friday 30th November. I was just stepping out into the street after the Write Stuff writer's workshop. I have been attending the sessions every Friday for more than three years and have, in fact, never missed a session in all that time. I should explain what it's about. Simply put, like minded people gather to write poetry or prose and share it with the group. We usually write three or four short pieces in one two hour session.

Anyway, I digress from the story. I was stepping out into the street when I bumped into Karen. She started talking immediately as if she had been waiting for me.

"I haven't been in the session today and it's all your fault."

I was a bit surprised at having bumped into her and by her seemingly pre-prepared ambush. As someone who never misses the session I felt somehow guilty that, although I didn't know why it was my fault, it must be if she said so, at least a bit anyway.

There was a pause, a bit like the phoney war in 1939 after the world went in to conflict.

"You said everyone already thinks we are an item. So, tell me, how can I be in the same session as you without feeling that they are all watching me and making up their own minds about what I must be thinking and analysing every word that I write? And I so much liked to attend the session. It's not just made for you, you know. And when you passed me the letter last time, everyone saw you do it."

She waved the letter in my face without realising that she was now displaying it even more brazenly than I had, for everyone to see, although there was in fact no one around. For the benefit of my readers, I now present the offending letter for your eyes only.

Dear Karen,

Why am I writing this? Probably because I am a writer and have the bad habit of writing too much. Seriously, it's because we don't really have the opportunity to talk at the writing sessions and so I thought a letter might be a good idea.

Everyone at the writing session thinks we are an item already and so it might be a good idea to get to know each other better, just in case. My details are: (I have omitted my address and telephone number in this account)

Anyway, text me or phone me and we can meet. I live at the other end of the road where we attend the writing workshop and so you could come to my flat if you like, or I could come to yours if you prefer. We are no longer teenagers and so don't need to be shy or too reserved.

Let me know. Harry.

Well, I thought the letter was pretty succinct and to the point. There was no reference to romance or any such matter; after all we didn't know much about each other.

"I'm sorry, Karen," I began, and then ran out of words.

We walked along the road away from the workshop and towards my flat, at the end of the same road.

"Ok," I began again, "but do you want to us to get to know each other better or not? Is there something there or isn't there? Did you feel the same as I did when we met for the first time?"

She walked along silently, but I knew there had been a spark. It started spitting a bit with rain and so I asked her if she wanted to come in for a cup of tea, or something, and also to pursue our 'getting to know each other' process.

She stopped at the car park entrance to the flats and looked up at me from under her coat hood. When I said she looked up, it's because she's only about five feet tall, slim, with long black curly hair, Indian, well spoken, and from London. Actually the only one

description of the last several ones I have given, led her to look up at me; the one about being five feet tall.

Since her original outburst, outside the workshop, she had become strangely silent, and didn't say much at all. So we stood at the entrance to the flats and just looked at each other. I tried to look respectable and honest, just in case that might lead to a next step. In the end it was the rain that decided it for us both. It started to come down hard and that convinced her.

As we walked up the stairs to my flat, my mind went into overdrive. I thought about if I had left the flat in a mess, whether she would want tea or coffee, and if there were enough eggs for breakfast if she stayed the night. Just before I began fantasising about how she might be in bed, we arrived at my front door and that brought me back to the present. After all, all we had done so far was walk along the street together. We hadn't even held hands.

I took her coat and invited her to settle down on my sofa. "Would you like a drink?" I asked. "I've got; tea, coffee, pineapple juice, apple juice, orange juice, tomato juice, or a nice bottle of Australian Chardonnay." I realised I was trying too hard but it was too late now. She thought about it and then said she'd like a cup of tea and a glass of wine. Strange combination or what?

We had relaxed a bit by the time the tea had been drunk. Incidentally, I had also decided on tea and wine, just to make it seem normal. And so it was on to the wine. I was quite nervous and could easily have drunk the whole bottle myself in five minutes flat, to calm me down, but in polite company you have to behave yourself, don't you?

"There are two ways we can get to know each other better," I offered. "One is to talk about everything under the sun, including all our previous histories, both good and bad, happy and sad. The other way is to declare year zero."

"So, what is year zero then?" She asked exactly as I had expected her to.

"Well, year zero became famous in the 1970s, in Cambodia. The government decided to start again as if it was a new beginning and declared that they would start the dating system at zero. It didn't

last long because no one else in the world agreed. It can work between us though, because we aren't asking anyone else. It's just between me and you. In effect, it means that we start our relationship as a blank piece of paper. We don't need to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. We can be as light as a feather. We don't have to trawl through the past. So, which one do you want?"

I had presented the offer to her that really left no choice and she fell into line but with reservations.

"Year zero sounds good," she began, "but we can't ignore everything that has happened in the past. All our likes and dislikes and stuff like that are based on our previous experiences."

"You're right," I agreed, "but with year zero we can bring matters up as and when necessary, and because we are starting anew, they are like remembering a past life; important yes, but they are only a memory."

With that bit of wizardry on my part she relaxed immediately and I watched with interest as she unfolded like a flower in the morning sun, even though it was now almost evening.

Part Two

We were in the supermarket because I had invited her to stay for an evening meal. There was lots of food at home, but she said she was a vegetarian and so I told her we needed supplies. The rain had let off a bit and the supermarket was only a few minutes walk away. I got a trolley because I decided I must get the ingredients for a proper evening meal and potentially for a good breakfast as well.

I asked her to select whatever she fancied and I shopped for breakfast, although I didn't tell her that. I got eggs, mushrooms, spring onions, cheese, tomatoes, cottage cheese and wholemeal bread in case I was called on to cook my signature breakfast dish; after all I do tell everyone that I am the second best omelette maker in the world. And, I do wonder whether girls like me for me, or like me for my breakfast the next morning. The number of times I have thought about that. I also remembered to get an extra couple of bottles of wine to supplement my stash at home. By the

way, the reason why I say I'm the second best omelette maker in the world is because no one would believe it if I said I was the best one, would they?

Part Three

Although I am a good cook, I wanted her to contribute to the evening meal so that she would feel more involved and an equal partner in this venture. As most women are, she was practical and matter of fact in her cooking, and was soon buzzing along, stopping only occasionally to ask me where I kept this or that ingredient. I opened a new bottle of wine and poured us both a glass without asking her first. She accepted it and the evening proper had begun. I have a radio in the kitchen and asked her what she wanted to listen to. Karen said she had nothing in mind and so I tuned into a Hindi station that usually played songs from old films. We were soon smiling along to the classic tunes, and I even ventured to hum a line or two. I didn't think she was ready yet for my bursting into song and so suppressed my instinct to do so.

"So, tell me about your life," she asked.

"Year zero," I declared, and then went on to tell her of the last four or five years which I was comfortable about. "...and so, in conclusion, I am a Zenman, a Tantric and a writer. Don't worry about the Zen or the Tantra, but we can share the writing."

"And what about you," I asked, not really wanting a long winded answer. She simply replied year zero and we left it at that. In any case, I didn't want to know about previous relationships, broken marriages and all that. All I wanted was to relax with her this evening and see where it led.

Part Four

I always wake up early, and as I turned in the bed I felt her body next to mine. It took only a split second for everything to fall into place and then I was up to speed. Her face was only inches from mine and she looked lovely, with her hair spread all over the pillow, and her soft breathing with a hint of a nasal snore.

I slid out of bed and put the kettle on. In the living room, I lined up the three bottles of wine, two empty and a third half full, and switched on the TV. I was in automatic mode; that's what I do every morning, and it wasn't until I had a cup of tea in my hand and the early morning news telling me the day's headlines that I realised this was not a day like all the others. In the bedroom there was a girl in my bed. We had made love, what, on the first date!

It began dawning on me that now there was something else besides tea and news to work on. And she was Indian! Now, for those of you who don't know, Indians of my generation very rarely have one night stands with other Indians. One night stands are fine with anyone else, but Indians expect commitment like that to lead on to other things. And then I remembered something she had said:

"I've been living on my own for four years now and I'm not sure I could live with someone else."

This meant that if she accepted me, which she did last night, she would be thinking this morning of a life together. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up and a chill went down my spine. We knew nothing of each other and yet there was an implication of mega proportions. You see, it's got something to do with arranged marriages. When you are old enough to get married, someone arranges it all for you, there's none of this, do I love her, and does she love me business. Love and stuff like that comes later.

I didn't know anything about her. Let's play year zero! So much for that little play; year zero might mean forever! I stopped myself from thinking too much and decided to slow down. I didn't know if she had been married before, had children, or anything. But then again, she didn't know about me either. This called for a drink, and so, at 5.45 am I poured myself a glass of wine from the half empty bottle and drank it down in one.

I took her a cup of tea at seven thirty. I always do this with girls in my bed because I am always the first to get up and seven thirty is almost lunchtime in my world. I kissed her gently and when that didn't work, I started to work my fingers down her neck. Instinct brought her round before I could get to her breasts. She held my hand in hers, looked at me glassy eyed, and then I saw the creasing up of her features as she realised where she was. She became self conscious then and tried to cover up.

"A cup of tea." I pointed to the bedside table.

She sat up and quietly accepted it. There were no words. At least I had been able to rationalise all this on my own, in the living room. I expected that she was doing exactly the same as me, but had to do it with me watching. I wanted to leave her to her own thoughts but she did look really appetising and what I really wanted to do was have sex with her right now. I couldn't pull myself away until she asked what time it was. That broke the spell and then I did manage to get out of the bedroom and leave her to her own thoughts.

Part Five

"I haven't got anything to wear except the outdoor clothes I came in," she said in a matter of fact way.

I pointed to my two rails of clothes. "Wear anything you like. One of my t-shirts will come down to your knees, and there are some track suit bottoms. They have a drawstring so really, there is a whole wardrobe for you." She looked at me unconvinced. "Look, you get sorted, there's loads of hot water for a bath, and then I'll make us breakfast."

I am the grand master at breakfast for girlfriends, and so I cooked mushroom omelettes, with cottage cheese, wholemeal toast and hot mugs of tea. She might only be small but she ate like a trooper about to go to war, and was a wonder to watch as she shovelled everything in sight almost impossibly into so small a belly. We didn't talk at all over breakfast, I imagine both of us for the same reason; because we are Indians and there was the huge question of what next, sitting like an elephant in the room and squashing us into the crevices of the walls.

After breakfast, Karen was transformed and looked bright and cheerful. She looked around the living room from her seat on the sofa, seemingly assessing everything; stocktaking perhaps? I sat next to her and held her hand.

"I'd better get dressed and get on my way," she said.

I looked at her and thought about where there was to go? Then I said: "and where will you go? Where is there to go?"

"I do have my own flat, you know."

"No. I don't mean that. I mean where is there to go? I'm happy, and so are you. And the things you are going to mull over in your flat are in regard to me. And the thinking I will do will be about you. So, doesn't it make sense that we do our thinking in one place, together, and where necessary, apart, in separate rooms?"

"Well, just because we slept together last night doesn't mean that the world has changed forever. I still have a flat to go back to, and I need to do some shopping and open the mail. And I haven't got any more clothes here, just yesterday's."

"I don't think you understand," I said. "We have changed, both of us. And you can't answer the questions you have without asking me for information, and it's the same for me. OK, let's just try for the next half an hour or so, and then decide if I'm right or not."

She sat, looking at me, waiting for me to start. I really didn't think she had got the gist of my position. It is simple really. Why do we have to walk away to the familiarity of our own environments, and then toss and turn trying to solve matters when we are precisely as far away from the object of our questions as possible? Wouldn't it be easier if we simply stopped, listed our questions as far as we could, and then asked for answers from the person directly?

"Right, I'll start," I said. "Was it just a one night stand?"

Karen: What sort of question is that? You do know that there were two of us there and the question is more complicated than a simple yes/no answer.

Harry: OK. Was it just a one night stand for you, as far as you can make sense of it right now?

Karen: I don't know. She paused. No, it wasn't a one night stand.

Harry: If it wasn't a one night stand, what was it?

Karen: Well, for one, we have met before a few times and there was an attraction. And for two, I'm still here. I didn't slink off at dawn. We have had breakfast together. And we will probably meet again.

We both fell into silence.

"You are strange," she said after a while. "Most people just get on with it. You know, yes we made love, but life goes on. People don't ask so many questions or analyse."

"You can ask me questions as well, you know. Go on, ask me some and see if that helps your thought processes."

She shrugged her shoulders but the silence weighed heavily on her and so she had to ask.

Karen: So, was it a one night stand for you?

Harry: No. I've never had a one night stand.

Karen: So what was it? For you?

Harry: I knew from the first time I saw you that there was some chemistry between us. One night doesn't satisfy my feelings. There is always more, layers and layers to every person.

Karen: So, what do you want us to do now?

Harry: At least spend the weekend together. Find out more than just a bottle of wine and fumbled drunken sex.

She looked away, out of the window. I got up and went to put the kettle on.

I have always been disappointed when people let good physical and emotional experiences simply disappear in the cold light of day, turn a golden sun soaked experience into a cold December morning. I've always been intense in most things I do. I don't like, and cannot, simply be turned on and off like a switch. Just because we are expected to return to the humdrum of the everyday, we allow ourselves just a glimpse of something different, something that gives us ecstasy and happiness. Why should it be just fleeting? How can you put emotions into a box? Can we measure our pleasures in

hours and minutes? And I return to the question; where is there to go? Where can we go? Aren't we free enough to shake off the shackles that bind us to the everyday, to decide to stay in bed for a whole weekend, or just relax into each other as if there were nothing else? And as far as the rest of the world is concerned, we don't matter to anyone else. And so, why do we insist on being there for the world to see us? If we didn't emerge from our homes for weeks, no one would really care, would they, and after a few days we ourselves wouldn't think it was a big deal that we disappeared for days on end. When we step outside again, everything is still the same, isn't it?

These were my thoughts, and after making a cup of tea for us both I went back and told her, word for word, what I thought. She listened and was impressed, or so I thought. But she did keep sitting there and we did keep holding hands, and we did.

At about eleven she said; "But, I still need to get some clothes and stuff. I can't wear oversized men's clothes all weekend."

Although I wanted her to stay with me and I wanted us to be two Robinson Crusoes, shipwrecked and abandoned on our own in my flat, reality and women's needs made me accept the compromise of her requirement for more 'stuff' as she had put it. I proposed that she go in a taxi, get her 'stuff' and return here, but for the experience to be as good as possible I asked her to come back as soon as she could. It crossed my mind that she might not return at all, make an apologetic phone call and cry off. I had to trust her and in any case I wouldn't want her to return under duress; for me it had to be genuine.

I also had another reason to be content with her decision to be away for a while. The problem with Saturday was that I always watch and listen to the football matches from 12.15 when Football Focus begins, until almost seven thirty in the evening when the commentary of the late kick off ends. And today, the late kick off was Reading at home against my team, Manchester United. Love or no love, seduction or not, I wasn't going to miss that match, oh no!

And so, I timed it that she booked a taxi for 12.10, just five minutes before Football Focus started.

Part Six

When she shut the door behind her and left, the first feelings I had were of loneliness. Now, I'm never usually lonely especially on Saturdays, during the football season. Today though, no matter how much I tried to enjoy the football previews, my mind kept wandering to the subject of Karen. It is really strange, isn't it, that a small change to routine can throw everything off course. I'm not saying that Karen is only a small change to my routine, but if you think about all the things that make up the whole person, it puts it into perspective. After all, she has only stayed one night, although she has been on my mind for several weeks.

Anyway, Football Focus came and went and I can honestly say, I can't remember any of it. I put on BBC2 for the snooker, muted the sound and turned the radio on, for live coverage of West Ham versus Chelsea, the lunchtime kick off. Life is a lot like football, although you can also compare it to other things as well. All the football teams start the season with no points, but also they are not equal. Some teams have cost hundreds of millions to build and they will expect to win trophies, whilst others have just been promoted and will be happy just to survive the season without being sent straight back down. And, during the season there will be ups and downs, just like in life. I reflected that at the moment I was definitely on the up. However, the managers say that one win doesn't make a season, which is true, but you can enjoy the moment, can't you? Like this match, with West Ham, the newly promoted club beating Chelsea 3-1. Sweet!

My phone rang. It was Janet. I'm having a book of poetry published and Janet is contributing the artwork. She just wanted to remind me of our meeting next week to finalise the publication. I told her I would never forget that meeting and noted that this part of my life was also a win. I told her to prepare for fame and fortune and go out and get a posh frock. She was none the wiser until I reminded her of my fantasy of us both collecting an OBE for our outstanding work, the least society could do to recognise our immense talent.

The three o'clock kick offs were just getting under way, and I had a bit of a wobble regarding Karen. She had been gone now for almost three hours, and although women always take time with outfits and the like, I wondered if she was going to come back. Deep inside I knew she would, but the mind can get a bit anxious over little

things. On the positive side, it meant I could carry on with my football fest, although I had hardly registered anything at all. This was the highlight of my weekend, but apparently not this week.

Karen appeared at my flat at exactly 3.45pm, just as the half time whistles were blowing and for once I wasn't interested in the football. She came in breezily, with an overnight case and a carrier bag. She walked straight into the bedroom, put her case down and returned holding the carrier bag up high:

"I did some shopping," she said. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No," I replied

"Chiabatta loaf and a British cheese board," she declared.

So we had a buffet, more like a picnic, but indoors. I added ham and meaty stuff to my sandwiches, whilst Karen produced a jar of olives; very upmarket! We did also have some wine, one of us more than the other, I must confess.

The way she behaved, made me think she had made her mind up about us because she was more relaxed and felt part of the flat rather than a guest. Maybe going back to her flat and being in her familiar surroundings had helped her to work things out. There was one thing amongst everything else that bothered me though. We were both Indian but I wasn't sure how Indian she was. It often happens that people look very liberated and free outwardly, but sometimes underneath, they are as traditional as their parents or even more traditional than them; subconsciously seeking out the arranged marriage contract that may have failed them the first time around. I hadn't asked her though, whether she had been married before. There was one way to find out:

"Karen, I want to ask you a question that breaks the Year Zero rule."

She stopped mid bite and looked at me suspiciously.

"Have you been married before?" There, I had done it, and her answer would certainly give me clues to how Indian she was.

"Year zero," she replied and carried on eating.

It was clear that she wasn't going to say and so I decided that bigger questions would have to wait. So, I just enjoyed the moment and took another slug of wine and a slice of ham.

Part Seven

It was dark outside and the rain, which had been spitting nearly all day, was now lashing against the window. We had simply sat together on the sofa, she lightly napping, and me trying to follow the Reading match against Manchester United on the radio, the volume of which was so low, I could hardly hear anything. Anyway, Manchester United won 4-3 with all the goals coming in the first 35 minutes; another win for me. I was beginning to think I was on a winning streak especially with Karen folded into me and with her hair spread across my chest.

After waking up and blinking into the moment, Karen broke the Year Zero rule and said:

"I was married before."

The sudden admission left me silenced for a few seconds and then I told her that I had also been married before. As it turned out, we had both had arranged marriages and now my theories could begin to flourish. I knew instantly that this was leading to a long term relationship or more, and the only way to stop it, if we wanted to, would be to stop thinking like Indians, immediately! I could feel her brain whirring away as well, thinking the same as me because that was all we were capable of thinking like.

"How Indian are you?" I asked her.

She wrinkled her features, confused by my question. Actually, it is all she could have done because she didn't know my definition of Indian. I explained my thinking to her.

"Basically, it's all about upbringing, when we are all brainwashed into thinking like our parents. That happens to children from any background because we cannot help but learn from those around us. The problem is that our parents were from India; my ancestors were peasant farmers, and they can only think in that way. But we are

not peasant farmers. We can be anything we want to be but our thinking is still dominated by the peasant farmer mentality. That is why we both fell into arranged marriages without questioning the system.

"In the village, you can not meet or talk to the girls, mainly because of custom, but also because that relationship has no future. If you keep marrying girls from your own village, eventually you get inbred families. And, because you are a farmer, there is no need to travel elsewhere; your work is in the fields. So, when you are of marriageable age, your family finds a suitable partner from another village and you get married. It makes a lot of sense in the Indian village. And, you can apply the same logic to most of our other beliefs. The problem is that we don't live in a village in India. We are educated, we are mobile, and we are living in a multifarious society. We can make decisions for ourselves but are equipped with a set of values that are not really relevant. We are like dinosaurs living in the modern world."

I had gone into one of my diatribes and left Karen simply listening open mouthed and wondering what had led me to this. It was, after all, supposed to be a love filled Saturday night.

"You really are a very strange person. You have to analyse everything and you think so much."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said. And then I asked again:

"You don't have to say anything now, but think about it and let me know; How Indian are you?"

And we left it at that.

Part Eight

Sunday morning was very similar to yesterday morning for me. I woke up early, slipped out of bed and made tea, and turned on the news, all on automatic pilot. This morning though, I was much more relaxed. Karen had stayed the night again, and that sort of cemented the deal. I knew now that it wasn't a one night stand. There were still huge gaps of information though, and caused by me. By applying the Year Zero principle, I had shot myself in the

foot and knew nothing about her. She seemed to be happy not knowing about me which I found strange because women usually want to know everything. I took her a cup of tea at 7.30 and had decided that she was also going to get sex as well. In the end she didn't get to drink her tea at all and I had got my way; always a good start to the day, I think.

Breakfast wasn't that elaborate this morning because Karen wasn't the ravenous trooper she had been yesterday. And I had a treat for her in any case. I know of a café, run by a Syrian woman, that I like to think is my own secret hideaway that no one else knows about. Obviously, other people do know about it otherwise it would have gone bust, but I like to think of it as my secret place. It's hidden away down an alley, off a side street in town. So I took Karen there for brunch, another posh activity, like olives.

I picked up a Sunday paper on the way, out of habit rather than any desire to read it at the table. We ordered some sweet cakes, I don't know their proper name, and small cups of strong Turkish coffee, served together with glasses of water. I have never known the proper protocol in drinking the coffee and water, or which to drink first. Karen followed my lead and so too is now a confused coffee drinker.

Back at my flat, Karen attended to the lunch, evaluating all the leftover vegetables and other ingredients. I observed her even closer now, watching how she fell in to the role of wife, as defined by the peasant farmer code. It hadn't occurred to her that she was in my flat, not hers, or that I might want to help her with lunch. I must say, it was a very happy situation for me; being waited on by a modern woman who couldn't help but fall into a traditional role, a role that she had been impregnated with from childhood.

"I suppose I'm quite Indian." Karen was beginning to analyse my question. "In fact, I must be a lot Indian because I grew up in an Indian family. But I don't see what that's got to do with us."

"It has everything to do with us," I explained. "You see, when I first saw you at the writer's workshop, the same triggers that are in you were also set off in me. Why didn't I want to have a relationship with the other women in the room? Why was it with you? It is simply because at a sub-conscious level I was looking for an Indian girl, and you were looking for an Indian man. Despite your failed

marriage to an Indian man, the pain and the consequences of being single at your age, you are still drawn to the Indian man again because you have been filled with all that expectation since childhood. You can not do otherwise because the strength of your past drives you on inevitably.

"I have noticed in myself that I still act very much to the peasant farmer code as well, and my immediate attraction to you is because you ticked all the boxes. But, whose boxes were ticked; mine, or the boxes of family, society, and upbringing?"

We were quiet then, in order for Karen to begin digesting this information which was new to her. And then I dropped the bombshell:

"We could get married as soon as possible and would probably be happy enough. We've been together for two days, this is the third, and you're thinking it is impossible to make decisions like these so quickly, but just think and tell me; how long were you with your husband before you got married to him?"

"I wasn't. It was an arranged marriage. I did meet him in the family home first and we had photographs and a few telephone conversations."

"When I met my wife," I explained, "I saw her once in a tea shop in the Panjab before we were engaged. I didn't take any time at all to make my decision because it wasn't anything to do with me, was it? The system tells us that. I was married for over 20 years, and have three children. We were happy in the sense that we were fulfilling the process.

"And so, look at you, here, now. You have already fallen into your traditional role. Who cooked the lunch and who cleared it all away afterwards? And whose flat are you in? Mine. And yet, some of the domains of this flat already belong to you, as is expected.

"In Fact all of your life, and mine, have so far been run to the system, on time and properly."

Karen was a bit confused, I think, both at these revelations and the speed and directness of my delivery. "I'm not sure I understand the bit about the 'system' as you put it."

"Well, let me tell you about me, and then you can apply it to yourself and see if it rings true. I did everything that was expected of me. I went to school and got good grades. There was never a discussion about going to college, and then university. It was expected. I left education, and after a few years of not doing a lot, I got a job, got married, and we presented the family with a first born son just as expected. We had a further two children. I bought the obligatory house, detached, and we had two cars in the driveway. I had a business, and a job, and we were pretty perfect and as expected. Now, think about yourself.

"But, just before you do, remember why you are now a failure in the eyes of the system. I woke up and realised that I was still a child at 36 years old; I was still basically doing as I was told. I was declared a failure because I got divorced and sought out my own, my real life. You are a failure because you are divorced as well and because you couldn't deliver the first born child in line with the expectations of the system."

I got up and wandered away to the kitchen; she was going to need a lot of time to digest all these revelations and information.

Part Nine

It was deep into the evening before Karen and I could talk properly again; there had been too much intensity.

"We could just go to bed and make love," I offered. You will notice that I said love and not sex. Women tend not to have sex, but prefer love. Men on the other hand have sex. It is the same; perhaps two sides of the same coin.

"I'm confused," she admitted. "But a lot of what you have said makes sense to me. You know, about the system. Do you really think we could get married?"

"Of course, but only if we're Indians. Really, we are at least two personalities; we have the Indian side and the British side to our make up. If we both switch into Indian mode there is no reason why we shouldn't get married at once. After all, we know much more

about each other than we did when we had our first marriages; and we've had lots of sex and know that's a fit too. The problem comes if we accidentally or purposely switch to our British side. That tells us that marriage is a big deal that you have to be certain about before taking such a huge plunge. Of course, they are wrong, because so many of those marriages fail as well. So, if you are in Indian mode we are already fully committed to each other, aren't we?"

"I don't want to believe that we are just automatons, that there's nothing else to us." Karen was showing me a different side and I could feel her wrestling with all the stuff we had been talking about.

We had a 'sort of' evening meal and then went to bed. I was tired in my mind but the body was still fresh and so it was the most intense of nights; we made love (had sex) several times and each time I woke up I wanted more.

Part Ten

I woke up exhausted on Monday morning, mainly because of the sex, but also my mind was tired. If there was a lot for Karen to take in, it also had an effect on me. I went through my early morning ritual of tea and news. I looked around the living room and thought of all the little simplicities of my life; the poems, my plants and the simple pleasures of football and beer. If this relationship went any further we would be in new curtains territory. That's when you get the inexorable invasion of the other person, who wants to move things around, and add bits of stuff, here and there, and probably deny me some of my most precious stuff; drink less, get a job, turn off the football and turn on Coronation Street!

When I took her the regulation cup of tea at 7.30 there was no intent or designs for sex. I also noted that taking her a cup of tea at a certain time was the beginning of a new routine, the start of an insidious process of the everyday. She looked bright enough this morning and told me she had to get to college for her lectures. She was studying something to do with counselling and psychotherapy.

"So, when are you expected at college?" I asked.

"The first lectures are not until the afternoon, but we're supposed to do some library work and project research in the morning session."

I thought to myself that the morning stuff wasn't probably so important and maybe I could have the morning with her; a final hurrah before I could declare the long weekend complete.

It wasn't to be an easy winding down sort of morning because Karen was still pondering the revelations of the last few days, and had questions.

"I'm not sure about your ideas of the system or the automatic way we live. I think we do have lots of choices and can make decisions for ourselves."

We were having toast and marmalade for breakfast. "Let me tell you a story," I offered. It's better sometimes to tell something in a story format because then it can be recalled more readily than just conversation. A story has a beginning, middle and end, and the moral or purpose of the story means it hangs on a structure that is more organised and memorable than just words in conversation.

"Imagine that you're going on holiday for a week and have decided to go to Edinburgh. You get the train to Leeds, and from there you need a north bound train. You accidentally get on a train going south and don't realise until the first station, Doncaster. In your confusion the train sets off before you can get off and you continue southwards. You have feelings of embarrassment and anger and frustration, as each minute takes you away from your intended destination. And then you have to think about your ticket; get another back as far as Leeds because then your original ticket will be valid. All in all it's pretty annoying.

"Another thought strikes you. There is no reason why it has to be Edinburgh; you haven't got anyone in particular to meet, and you haven't pre-booked hotels or anything. You could as easily continue south until you find somewhere you might want to visit; there's Wales, London, the south coast, amongst others. And it will be easier. You will have to get another ticket, but you would also have to get another ticket in any case if you want to return to Leeds.

"In the end, the ticket inspector forces you into a decision and to avoid explanations and embarrassment you simply buy a ticket to London.

"And so we come to choices. I put two more slices of bread in the toaster and put the kettle on before continuing.

"You are now going south instead of north and you have convinced yourself that it is OK. You cannot now go to Edinburgh, and there were reasons why you chose to go there in the first place. Now those reasons are pushed to the back of your mind and you are determined to make the best of this journey. Can you make decisions? Of course you can; you can have tea or coffee, get off at Peterborough or keep going on to London. You can do anything as long as you carry on southwards but you cannot make decisions about the north.

"So, you see, you have the freedom to make limited decisions, but not to make decisions about anything you want to. And in the Indian system this is also true. As long as you continue on the path the system has decided for you, you can make small decisions but you cannot choose to leave the path. You can make some limited choices on clothes, for instance, but you cannot wear a mini skirt. You can eat out in restaurants but you are not expected to drink. You can have a career but will ultimately be waiting to get pregnant and provide a son.

"We fool ourselves into thinking we are free when we are clearly not. And if you switch into British mode, you can wear the mini skirt and you can have a drink with your meal, but then you will be travelling north, not south! And then, you will be an outcast, rejected by the system and left to fend for yourself.

"So, will you marry me?" I simply asked. This wasn't a serious intention of mine, just a question about how much Karen was an Indian or not, and whether she wanted to switch completely in to British mode, or be comfortable in Indian mode, or indeed, keep flitting from one to the other and ultimately fall between two stools and lose everything.

Part Eleven

Karen left my flat at 12.23pm in order to get to her lectures on time. She left her overnight case behind and said she would collect it later. December was a month of exams for her and she made it clear that she would be very busy. That meant no more long weekends, and even probably even no overnight stays.

I thought I would feel a bit empty after all the action of the weekend, but strangely, I felt relieved and easy after the door had closed behind her. I turned on the television and watched the snooker for a while, and reflected on all the revelations of the last few days. Basically, I summed it up like this:

We all have our moral, ethical and societal codes that have been fed to us from birth by our parents, teachers, friends and communities. As we grow up, so does this force of values, until by the time we are in early adulthood, the forces have become powerful, like an express train. Then we start to make the big decisions in life; career, marriage, family and so on. The decisions are based on the collective of our values and although we think we are making decisions for ourselves, actually we are driven in a certain direction, and make the decisions we are expected to make. As individuals we really have very little to with it. We do have a small amount of freedom, however, like choosing to drink tea or coffee, matters that are not really of any concern to the express train that is driving us.

The complicating factor for Karen and for me is that we are driven by two express trains, because we have an Indian code of values and a British one. Both are inevitable but different. For example, the Indian code does not allow for frivolous relationships between the sexes; if you get involved with someone there is an expectation that it must lead somewhere. The British code says that for a relationship to lead somewhere both people need to create an understanding by having a long process of dates and experiences together. In the Indian system marriage comes first and everything else can be sorted out afterwards, whilst in the British system marriage is the last piece of a complicated jigsaw puzzle.

For me and for Karen, there is a choice to be made; which system do we want to follow? But an even bigger question raises its head here; is it possible to choose one, or are they both wound around

each other alive and twisting like two snakes. For the sake of argument, assuming we can choose, Karen then has four choices:

1 She can choose to adopt the Indian code with no reference to anything else. In this case she will marry me and become my wife.

2 She can choose the British code with no reference to anything else. In this case she will want to get to know me better and will never want to marry me because of my drinking habits, my odd spiritualism, and often my bloody mindedness.

3 She can continue to jump from one speeding express train to the other and that must lead to destruction in the end. Imagine jumping when you're in your seventies; you will eventually slip and be crushed. She already knows the pain of this choice.

4 She can reject both the Indian and the British codes. What comes after that is then anybody's guess.

In the snooker match there is a seventeen year old Belgian newcomer to the professional game who has just knocked out the number one seed. It was totally unexpected and has woken millions of people up from their afternoon naps on their sofas. I think he will go on to become a regular feature in world snooker. I hope so. Anyway, it's time for a wake me up glass of wine, to fortify and invigorate me to greater things, like a bit of shopping. I need some bananas, and for that matter lots of other stuff that I suddenly realise is absent from my cupboards. It does always amaze me how much time and effort is required to keep the body going. Really, if you think about it, we spend nearly all our time on the body. We have to shop, then cook, then eat, wash up, visit the toilet every so often. Then the body starts to smell and we have to wash it, shave it, and groom it. We have to get money which we rapidly spend on a never ending carousel of this nature, and keep up our addictions, to booze, drugs, chocolate cakes and that keeps doctors in business, as well as gyms, and the whole ridiculous cycle of modern life. Ah! I feel better for that bit of indignation. The wine has done its job; I'm awake, and ready to go out.

Part Twelve

Karen came to see me on Wednesday. She was dressed like a student, which of course, she was. Wearing a backpack, presumably filled with books and other student related items, she looked a bit tired. We kissed and felt each other up, like animals in the wild that have to keep sniffing each other for reassurance. That thought made me smile but I didn't share the mirth with Karen. She unloaded her over stuffed mind and told me all sorts of things from her busy day which I let in one ear and straight out of the other one. I wasn't listening but I was marvelling at how much I wanted her just there and then. I had to desist, however, because she was clearly not in the mood, yet.

I made her a cup of tea and also offered her some Madeira cake that I had bought specially for her. She rattled on for a while with brief gaps to stuff her mouth with cake and eventually slowed off to a calmer, pedestrian rate, and then came to a stuttering end, and silence. After a short break to 'powder her nose' she came back into the living room, perfumed and powdered and we made love on the carpet, after failing to get to the bedroom despite several determined efforts.

She fancied a pizza, and had I known, I would have got one in. Instead I did something I haven't done for years; ordered a takeaway which I was reliably informed would arrive in about thirty minutes. That gave us plenty of time for more frolics of the sexual kind. She really was lovely, and following triangle after triangle of pizza, her little belly was finally full to the top, and we could return to each others bodies, although it's a bit like swimming after eating a meal, you should rest for a while and then do it a bit slower.

For the rest of the evening we listened to the radio, Hindi songs again, which are fantastic at times. Her resolve not to stay overnight whilst her exams were on, melted away and she didn't even mention going home to her own flat. I liked that and felt that she saw my flat as somehow hers as well. There was no serious talk about anything and we went to bed at about ten. Despite my efforts, she couldn't keep her eyes open, and she fell asleep. I was glad I had had her on the living room floor earlier; otherwise I might have felt disappointed.

Part Thirteen

On Thursday morning, I stuck to my routine of early morning tea and news but Karen surprised me; she emerged from the bedroom at six thirty, and said she had to be off by eight, to get to college. She was very organised and businesslike and went into the kitchen to clatter and clunk in there, emerging twenty minutes later with breakfast of eggs and toast for us both. I was very impressed and she cleared up and washed all the plates and cups before she left! I felt I could get used to this, but knew deep inside that I had always been pretty self reliant and would always get involved, or in the way, depending on your perspective of the matter.

The rest of the day was a bit of nothing really; I just watched television, drank wine and beer, and was glad that I wasn't out in the cold wind and rain. Karen came in at about five although we hadn't agreed any plans. It made me feel that we were becoming a real couple. She was weighed down again with coursework but told me that she had already got her first assessment module for her university application, to be completed and returned within 21 days. Whilst she sorted herself out in the bathroom and then rattled around in the kitchen, I had a look at her module.

"You'll have to help me with it," she said as she returned with a sandwich and a cup of tea.

"Well, I could," I said, "but I'm not going to because it's something you have to do yourself. It's your assessment; an assessment of you."

She looked at me oddly, but didn't say anything.

The module was really straightforward and simple. It assessed study skills, time management and organisational skills. Things included were a sheet asking about daily routines, and as long as you didn't write things like: wake up at 11 am, go to pub at 1 pm, and sleep until suppertime, you couldn't really fail it. There were also weekly activity charts and basic stuff like that. As long as you wrote down what they wanted to hear, it was easy.

"I will help you with explaining what they're after," I offered as a compensation for my earlier refusal.

"OK," she simply replied, and carried on with her sandwich.

After she had finished with the needs of her belly, she settled down and then said:

"I've been thinking about all that stuff we talked about at the weekend, you know, Indian code, British code and expected behaviour, and all that. So, what's the solution?"

I went through the four choices, listed earlier, and let her digest the information.

"So, if I choose the Indian code, you're saying we have to get married because the force of the Indian express train will drive us to that solution, but if I choose the British code, I would never marry you?"

"Absolutely." I replied confidently.

"That doesn't make sense to me."

"Let me explain. The Indian code sees marriage as a starting point. Love and stuff like that come later as you get to know your partner. In that case it will be too late, because by the time you realise what a real bum I am, you will be married to me. I can carry on being a bum because that's allowed; you'll just have to come to terms with it. But if you choose the British code, you'll find out all about me first and wouldn't touch me with a barge pole, let alone want to live with me. And there is the choice."

"Unless," she added, "I drop both the Indian and the British code, and then develop a new code of my own."

"True! But you won't be able to do it because you already have two codes inside you. How can you dismantle those? They have been planted in to you every day from the day you were born. They are you. You are them!"

"Well it's pointless then." She said indignantly.

"No it's not. There is a way. Because both you and I have two codes we can look out for each other. If we decide to follow the Indian code, for example, every time one of us switches into British code

the other one can spot it and save the situation. Of course, if we choose the British code there is no point because we won't be together in any case. Even then, you still have to choose a code otherwise you will continue to fail, falling between two stools and eventually destroying yourself. I ended with a dramatic flourish."

"So, really, you are saying that unless I marry you, I am doomed." She asked.

"Well not exactly. You could marry another person who is Indian. On the other hand, there are plenty of people out there just like us who are enjoying themselves and walking to their doom happy and ignorant. You could just do that and walk to your doom happily."

I continued:

"You see, your problem is that you still think you are the driver of your own train. You are not, and neither am I. We are all victims of an over-reaching system, and it is the system that drives us. It's just that we are unlucky to have two systems embedded in us. If we do not choose one system we are certainly doomed. It is our choice. Look what unhappiness you've had in your life so far. Was all that your fault? No it wasn't. I was the constant leaping from one system to the other and back again that led you to make contradictory and difficult choices. And it has left you here, washed up next to me, another victim of the two systems."

Part Fourteen

Friday morning. Karen said on waking up at the same time as me; 4.30 am:

"So it's all pointless then; going to college, getting qualifications. It's pointless because I have no real choices in any case."

"Well," I began; "tell me who told you there was a point. There is no point in anything really because we are all driven by bigger forces; but if you do become qualified and a counsellor, you might earn more money and be able to live a more comfortable life. It's like the prisoner who works in the prison kitchen; he gets a few more privileges than the prisoner who obstinately refuses to cooperate. But they are both still in prison. That's all there is to it."

We got up then and she made the tea whilst I turned on the television for the news.

"Is that why you don't work any more?" She asked, returning with the tea.

"Partly, yes," I replied.

"So what should I do? Shall I just sit here next to you? Shall we just sit here forever?"

"We could, I said. It's not a bad life. I eat well, drink well, strays like you let me make love to them, and there's lots of football and snooker, and stuff to watch. And if you don't like sports we could compromise and find stuff that you like to watch. But I don't think you're ready to be like me yet. You need to do your course, you need to talk to other people, mix and be mixed up by society. Eventually, when you've had enough, I will still be here."

Section Two - Lakeside

Day One

I don't know whether it's me running away from the world, or the eternal search of the spiritual person to find somewhere that engenders the conditions to further their experiences, but I found myself yet again going on a journey to find peace and quiet. I had previously retired to an apartment in the Indian Himalayas, and made frequent trips to the cottage in Scotland, and had recently returned from a journey along the Silk Road in central Asia. Now, I had just organised a lakeside trip, here in the UK to reflect further.

Karen had just finished her Counselling and Psychotherapy course for the academic year, so she was free, and I think, deserved a holiday. I needed someone with me for the times I just wanted to be a man, before or after my reflections into the deep waters of spiritual enlightenment.

It was July and quite warm with weather forecasts suggesting a pretty good summer, and I was driving the small hired van to a lakeside cabin that I had found advertised on the internet, and had booked for two weeks. We were in a van because I had decided that a retreat didn't have to be a sparse experience, and it was weighed down with supplies, enough to feed an army and get an army drunk with wines and beer. Another reason for having a vehicle, besides transporting our supplies, was that the nearest shops were a good ten minutes drive away, and we might have forgotten some items among our huge supplies.

We had made a list at my flat a few weeks earlier. I told Karen that, although I wasn't averse to roughing it, I preferred to have certain things in abundance, and if we shopped carefully, buying tinned food, for instance, we could bring back stuff we didn't use and make use of it in civilisation later. The list had become extensive and in the end I think there was enough to last a month. We had also decided to shop for fresh food in the nearby town, and since both of us could drive, there should be no problem. In addition to the seclusion of the lakeside cabin, I had also researched the local area for walking and exploring opportunities if we felt like it. At the cabin itself we had decided on no TV, but had a radio with us and a mobile

phone which we agreed should remain switched off at all times except in an emergency.

The cabin was on the edge of a lake, surrounded on three sides by trees and facing onto the water. It was advertised as being suitable for four people but I have seen that kind of advertising before. For real comfort, a four bed retreat is usually suitable for two people if you want to have room to sit on your own occasionally, and have your own space. There were no other signs of life around, except out in the deep waters there were a few large luxury boats anchored and waiting for some rich owners to visit occasionally. On the edge of the lake were two small rowing boats, used to get to the big boats further out.

Recently, Karen and I had become settled. A description of Karen from a previous story I wrote is: *she's about five feet tall, slim, with long black curly hair, Indian, well spoken, and from London.* After the crazy first few months, of sex, passion and the like, we now were comfortable just to be together, and although we still had moments of re-energised passion, everything mostly seemed to be quite relaxed. We knew about each other's foibles and eccentricities, eating and sleeping habits and the like and found we could accommodate each other. Karen was a bit uneasy sometimes with my spirituality but that was to be expected; if you are not directly involved yourself, it can look a bit odd from the outside.

When we arrived at the lakeside cabin, it was mid-afternoon, and the first job for Karen was to inspect our new home. I am never interested in these room by room interrogations and so simply followed her around. For me it was enough that it had four walls and a roof, and everything else I needed was packed in the back of the van. The cabin itself was largely built of stained wood but it was brick built up to the first three feet or so. The door opened into the living room that was about 15 feet by 20 feet. Passing through the living room, there was a door that led to a short corridor that split into four further doors; two double bedrooms, a clean kitchen and a very modern and smart looking bathroom. There were rugs on the wooden floors, and minimalist furniture; just enough for living in, and on.

We had packed one box of supplies for the first night and I took that in for now. We decided to unpack the other supplies in the morning. So, it was tinned food including meat, peach halves, and cream. We

did, however have a loaf of fresh bread and tea, sugar and milk. I have fairly simple tastes and for me, this was a good spread. After we had eaten, the day was nearly done so we just went outside and strolled around the perimeter of our cabin, occasionally stopping to admire a wild flower or two. We stood at the lakeside with the water lapping around our feet, and watched the evening turn into night. It became a bit colder and so we went to bed.

Day Two

It was only about 4.30 in the morning and I was standing at the lakeside reflecting on how beautiful the scenery all around was. It was already quite light although there was a nip of cold morning air that made me shiver. In this place and at this time in the morning there was no real need for words, I thought, unlike at all other times in daily life. The morning was always quiet and the wilderness was complete in itself.

Habit made me think though. Sometimes, my head is full of thoughts and processes that need to be dealt with and then I can relax properly. Following my central Asian experiences and other influences, I had lots of unresolved matters and I had decided to try to get them out in the early days of this retreat, if possible. And so, I found myself musing on....

I was pondering about the movement of people and ideas, and in particular about the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was the most important pre-modern trade route linking China, Central Asia, and Europe. A 19th-century German scholar named the network of trails the Silk Road for the precious Chinese cloth that was originally the most valuable and abundant commodity transported on it. It isn't strictly speaking a single road but begins from central Europe in the west and middle eastern countries in the south. It then continues across central Asia, on to China. It also has paths that go north into Russia and south into Iran, Afghanistan and India.

Besides silk and fine cloth, all sorts of other goods were also transported, and with the goods, there also were people from all over the area, mixed up, inter-married and settled far from their original homes. With these people also came their ideas and

religions. There are two cradles of the major religions in the world. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all originate in the Middle East. Hinduism and Buddhism, together with minor religions like Jainism, and Sikhism originate in India. Other religions in the region include Zoroastrianism from Persia and Taoism from China.

There is lots of evidence that these religions took on original adaptations as they intermingled. There were also saints and gurus who travelled along the routes on personal journeys to develop their spiritualism. That is one of the main reasons I was interested in this journey. The Soviet era from 1917 until 1990 suppressed these ideas that are now emerging again.

For me, as an active Tantric, I used my skills to experience and extract strains of original thought and practices that I could develop back in the UK. It is very exciting that people like Gurdieff had many 'lost years' travelling in these parts, experiences that led him to his great spiritual heights. I would be happy with just a taste of what he experienced.

I went inside and put the kettle on. There's nothing like a big mug of tea in the morning. I took one for Karen and smiled at myself knowing that she would rather not be disturbed so early in the morning. But, left to her own devices, she would sleep until half the morning had passed.

As usual she was a bit dozy on waking. I always enjoyed how she transformed herself into a passable human, minute by minute, first thing in the morning. I always had the advantage on her because by the time I woke her up, I had already been up for a few hours.

'What time is it?' She asked the same question every morning.

'About six.' I replied. I'm sure she emits a silent groan every time I tell her it's anything less than 8am.

Day Three

When she finally emerged from the cabin into the outside world, it was nearly nine, almost lunchtime in my world. We walked along the lake's edge, following its contours. It was so relaxing with the rippling sound of the water and the singing of birds. We eyed the

rowing boats but decided to just walk this morning and maybe go out in a boat later. As we rounded another of the gentle natural curves of the lake, there was a wooden bench sitting so predominantly with its square angles, in this, a natural world. It had a plaque of dedication on it and told us that Mr. John Noble had always enjoyed this part of the world and hoped that other holiday makers and ramblers would get enjoyment from the rest this bench offered. We sat down then and could see some of what Mr Noble had enjoyed so much.

One of the things that always surprises me is the desire to be remembered. There are so many people who want to be remembered for something or other so that when they die it will somehow make a difference. Most of these individuals are just ordinary people and I think it is enough to have lived a full life without imposing their limited thoughts on future generations. Once you are dead, this life then ends and another may begin. It may be that they are so afraid of what comes after death that is too frightening to contemplate, and in desperation they want to leave a mark of themselves behind.

I think about the palaces and mosques, the fortifications and defences built by great leaders who may themselves have had dreamt of greatness. And we can see their constructions all over the world, standing proud and distinct in the otherwise desert like terrain. But who really remembers them and how much do they remember? Even if someone's name is remembered, what does that really signify? Consider the example below:

Tamerlane (1336-1405), Turkic ruler and conqueror, one of the greatest military campaigners in history, whose far-flung expeditions carried him from southern Russia to India, and from Central Asia to Turkey. He was born near the city of Samarqand, in what is now Uzbekistan.

So, whatever Tamerlane did, and it was very impressive, all most people know about him really is what is written above, and for them this information is enough. Really, who cares? Think about other people who are 'famous'. We know very little about them as people; were they nice people, did they like life, what were their likes and

dislikes, what did their children think of them, etc? Even if we can understand them as people, I ask again, who cares?

So, if we don't care about great people in history, who is going to care about lesser achievers like an actor, the owner of a string of supermarkets, a hockey player, or a politician? In fact, people are hardly remembered when they are alive never mind years after their death. People who try to be remembered are just wasting their time. Instead of trying for material greatness, isn't it better to just try to become a better person themselves? It must be worth more to just look inside and find out how they can be better whilst they are alive, to live better, help others, and be happy with their life as it is.

So, we are left, in country after country with buildings, beautiful in themselves, that are a minimal reminder that others have been here before. Where are they now; skeletons of empires, scattered in the desert!

I didn't tell Karen of my thoughts as she was simply soaking in the scenery and being warmed by the sun. After I had recovered from my reflections I asked her what she wanted to do next.

'Just sit and let it all wash over me,' she replied. So we did, for almost an hour. Then, Karen seemed to emerge from her own little world and took me by the hand and we slowly wandered to the cabin, and back to bed for a while. It did cross my mind very briefly if it was for love or did she just want to get some more sleep. Anyway, I soon found out.

Day Four

Karen had gone for a drive in the van to do some shopping, for fresh food, and I found myself on the bench, discovered by us just the day before. I was thinking about the misunderstandings of terms when considering spiritual matters. People tend to be quite happy to use terms with their own understanding of them and never think that other people might not see their definition in the same way. One of the biggest misunderstandings I have come across is between religion and spirituality. In fact, it is very important to define terms otherwise all discussion and debate is useless because people end up talking about different things.

Religion is based on the outer, objective reality. It is the outward expression of faith. If you belong to a religion, you have a place of worship, a congregation to participate in, hymns and songs to sing, a book to guide you in life, somewhere to introduce new life into the world, and somewhere to take your dead. It gives you an identity; a place in the community and the world.

My religion is Manchester United. It fulfils almost all the requirements mentioned above. There is a place of worship; Old Trafford stadium. There are songs to sing including, 'glory glory Man. United'. There are messiahs including the now retired Sir Alex Ferguson. There is a congregation of worldwide supporters. There is a reason to look forward to life; winning games and trophies. There is somewhere to have your ashes scattered; in and around the stadium. I could go on. Finally, there are even other people of other religions to try to convert; Arsenal, Liverpool, and Chelsea are a few of these.

Spirituality is entirely internal and subjective. Subjectivity defined in this sense is, a study of the subject, in other words, yourself. You can live your religion in your head centre but to live your spirituality you have to live in your heart centre. Spirituality is all about your personal relationship with God, nature or the universe. I have spoken to many people who say they know to a greater or lesser extent, and have a personal relationship with, God. They know this for themselves but cannot explain it to anyone else. In fact, it is impossible to explain it to someone else because it is subjective and internal. I can show you gravity by throwing an apple into the air and explaining to you that every time I do this, the apple will fall back to the ground. You might not understand the theory of gravity but you know that an object thrown into the air will fall back to the ground. This is why objective science is so good; experiments can be repeated to prove the action.

In spirituality, you cannot conduct experiments to prove your understanding. We have all experienced that fantastic feeling of seeing a beautiful sunset, or the emotions of falling in love, but you cannot even begin to explain the exact feeling to someone else because it is something inside and personal to you. It is the same with trying to explain your spiritual experiences; it cannot be done. Only you can know what you feel.

This doesn't mean that you cannot prove the experience to yourself. You should always be sceptical and try to discover if the feeling is just your imagination or really a meaningful experience that has actually happened to you. Test yourself and try to re-create the feelings. Test and test again until you are sure that for you the feeling is genuine. If you cannot prove it to yourself, you might still want to keep it because it makes you feel good. Spirituality is all about you.

Karen was back after a couple of hours and found me still sitting on the bench. After my reflections, I had nodded off in the sunshine and was just coming round when she sat herself down beside me. She talked of where she had been and what shopping she had done but, quite frankly, it all went in one ear and out of the other. I kept making the right sounds of agreement but later I realised I couldn't remember anything of what she had said.

Day Five

I was pondering on matters generally, when a great revelation came to me. It was to do with the story printed below, something I have mentioned many times before in my writings.

The Tao master Chuang Tzu gathered his disciples together one morning and asked them for help. He told them that he had dreamt that he was a butterfly. In the dream, he felt that he was a butterfly as much as this morning he felt he was a man, and asked the question: am I now a man dreaming that I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming now that I am a man?

I realised now that Chuang Tzu must have gathered together his novice monks rather than more advanced ones because the question was put in a simple way. You see, the mind works in an either/or way, a bit like a switch. The novices probably had not got to the level where they could pass beyond that point and move on to greater realisations. So, Chuang Tzu was asking them to choose whether they thought he was in fact a man, or a butterfly. No matter what the novices answered, they would be wrong because they were working from the head centre, which is the wrong equipment to use for spiritual realisations. By listening to their answers, Chuang Tzu would know whether the novices were ready to move on to the next stage of their development or not. His

question was made up and irrelevant; merely a construct to assess his novices.

I had just realised that there were seven possible answers to this riddle, not just the two presented, and the seventh answer was the correct one.

- 1 He could be a man
- 2 He could be a butterfly
- 3 He could be neither
- 4 He could be both
- 5 He could be less than both
- 6 He could be more than both
- 7 He could be eternal

When you apply the question in the right way and use the correct instrument to consider it, then it is easy. The correct centre, incidentally, is the heart centre. If he could be a butterfly in his dreams and a man in this reality, he could in fact be any number of creatures, incarnations, or beings on other occasions. For instance, tonight he might be a tiger or a wasp.

We are taught that this life of ours is real, and other experiences are imagination. I know for myself, and the reader can find out from my other works, that this reality is as much as a dream as some of the other realities I have experienced. Either they are all imagination or they are all true, or else something in between. And who is to say that imagination isn't as valuable as this 'real' life?

We have such a determination to see this life as the only real one, that we assume there was nothing before this life or will be after it, let alone parallel lives that run alongside this present one. I have proved that I can live in at least one additional life at the same time as this one and you can read it for yourself in my novel Hillside Retreat, Additional Chapters, Part Five.

There comes the question then, that if we can and do live additional lives at the same time as this one, are we affected in our skills and abilities by what is going on in the other lives? I find it strange that some people suddenly get ill for no apparent reason and thought about whether it could sometimes be due to actions and behaviours in other lives. I have spoken to doctors often, who tell me that medicine isn't an exact science, and they have gone on to tell me about people who are perfectly fit and healthy who sometimes drop dead for no apparent reason. As long as we assume we can only live one life at a time, then it may be unexplainable. But, if we accept for the moment that we may be involved in more than one life at a time, then isn't it possible that a sudden death in another life might act like a domino effect that then spills over into this life?

I am not thinking of natural ageing here, because the body does deteriorate with age and everyone slows down because of physical reasons or due to mental reasons as the body ages. But what about unexplained deaths? I have heard of old people who easily maintain their full faculties well into their 90s and beyond, whilst others are struggling in their 50s. In many cases there are lifestyle choices that lead to ill health including drinking, smoking and drug taking, and these deteriorations are clearly understood.

Consider this example. It's like a tree that grows upwards. As long as there isn't a branch growing out of the trunk, all the energy of the roots goes to the trunk. As soon as the trunk sprouts branches, some of the energy of the tree goes into the branches and less goes into the growth of the trunk. When a tree is mature, there is less growth at the top of the tree but significant growth sideways in the branches, which in turn sprout twigs and leaves. If one of the branches becomes diseased, it is possible that the sickness spreads downwards into the trunk and eventually kills the whole tree.

Is it possible that some people live a very long life because most of their energy is concentrated in just one life and if there are others, they are merely peripheral? If we accept this premise for the moment, we can understand that someone involved in many lives at the same time as this one will degenerate more quickly because they are using more energy and putting more stress on themselves. And if all this is true, what happens to the person when he or she dies; does one life simply shut off and its essence is displaced into one of the other lives, or even a new one? Are we truly ever dead then, because lives like branches of a tree continue to sprout out of

the trunk? If the trunk becomes diseased and dies is it possible to simply move into another trunk which has after all sprouted from the seeds shed by the original tree?

Day Six

Karen felt that we needed some exercise. She was getting a bit bossy recently, although I quite enjoyed it when she took charge. I was quite happy sitting and watching life on and around the lake, the peace and serenity. But she was right; we did need some exercise. We looked at the sheets I had printed out from the Internet previously and found three walks that were circular. These were medium walks that meant they weren't too long or too strenuous. The one we decided on was seven miles in total and involved walking through fields and then open terrain to the top of a hill and then along the tops, before coming down and round the hills and back into the valley. The sheet said it was a very picturesque walk with great views from the tops.

We needed only one rucksack and it seemed to be a nice day so we decided on cagoules and not coats. Karen made the sandwiches and we had some bananas lying around. After filling our water bottles we set off in the van to the starting point of the walk which was only about two miles from the cabin. We pulled into the lay-by, locked the van and set off up what was quite a gentle hill. I could see that the uphill section was quite long but we had lots of time and could stop for the views and for a breather whenever we liked.

As a change from previous trips out in the hills, I gave the route map to Karen, and so I had no responsibility at all. She took up the lead and her pace was quite comfortable for me. I have always noticed that my hiking pace is slower than most people's, I think because I want to enjoy the views and have a more intense experience. I used to walk with a hiking club but always found myself at the back of the group and eventually stopped going completely because the others seemed more interested in getting to the end point and not really seeing anything on the journey itself. The front runners always had stopwatches as well; more runners than walkers, I felt.

As I pondered about that walkers group, I started thinking about other things that frustrated me and eventually found myself with my pet frustration.

I used to get very frustrated when I could never find anyone who was even moderately interested in spirituality. Everyone, it seems, is interested only in material things; money, babies, property and the like. Once you have seen even a glimpse of the spiritual experience, there is nothing to compare with it.

Everything in the material world seems pretty insignificant and poor. I compare it with action in a primary school playground; lots of children having petty arguments about whose turn it is to play on the swings, or with the football. However, now I see things differently. If no one is interested then the more there is for me to get on with. It's like going to an empty supermarket; there's no one to push past, or queues to wait in. Another way of looking at it is to imagine a huge box of chocolates; they're all mine! I have tried to share the magical experience but no one is interested, and so, I have started withdrawing from the world and immersing myself completely in this magical world. Every now and then I have to emerge into the material world to pay the bills, do some shopping and cooking, and make sure my landlord is happy with my tenancy. When everything is in order, I can then return to my own world of enlightenment and experiences.

Another matter is that some people simply don't believe anything I say. That used to be very frustrating because I have been doing this for eighteen years and it doesn't help when people think you're just a bit more than mad. I have become easy with this position as well; maybe it's got to do with age or something. In any case, I think that even if everything I say or do is entirely from my imagination, it's not a bad way to live my life. After all, I don't hurt anyone, it's all very enjoyable, and I'm having fun.

My main frustration though, is when I see people suffering or struggling through life, wasting their time by wandering up blind alleys. I can see the path they need to go on, but I see them obstinately wandering up yet another blind alley of stupidity. If I point this out to them, I simply get abuse and am accused of being pompous and arrogant. There is no helping some people and so I just imagine I am watching a television programme; there is no sense of responsibility then as one programme ends and another drama begins.

After reaching the top of the hill, we stopped and sat on a very conveniently placed rock. After a few minutes of just taking in the scenery, Karen started rummaging in the rucksack and pulled out a banana each for us, to 'keep us going' as she put it.

On the way back down, Karen must have taken a wrong turning because we found ourselves on a sharply descending path. I knew we were on the wrong path because the description of the walk hadn't included any difficult pathways. I didn't tell Karen and decided we should just discover where it led. For her part, Karen didn't know she had gone 'off piste'. The path ended and we were in deep grass, up to our knees.

'Is this the right way?' Karen turned to me and enquired.

'No, it's not.' I replied

'Why didn't you say anything?' She asked.

'No reason,' I said. 'I thought it might be interesting to find out where it led.'

She was quiet then, deciding whether to be annoyed with me, or herself, I expect.

'So, what do we do now?' She asked.

'You're in charge.' I pointed to the map in her hand.

'Let's go back then.' She said decisively.

Just as I turned, I saw something white in the grass out of the corner of my eye. Karen noticed me turning back and also stopped. Only a few yards from where we had stopped, there was a skeleton of a sheep. I had to investigate but Karen didn't move. It was complete as if someone had laid it out exactly. It seemed to me that because this wasn't a main path, the sheep had died and lain here for a long time. It was completely dry and clean. I went to lift the head.

'What are you doing?' She asked

'The head, you know, Mark collects skulls.'

'Leave it alone.' She implored.

I couldn't see the problem myself. The sheep was long dead, my friend Mark collected skulls, and this would make an ideal present for him. I pulled the skull and it came away very easily. In the side pocket of the rucksack I always keep strong string and so I threaded it through an eye socket, tied it and then fastened the skull on the outside of the rucksack, leaving it dangling nicely as we walked.

Karen turned her nose up at the whole experience but didn't say anything further. We turned around and returned the way we had come. At the point we had made the error, I pointed out the correct path and we set off again. It was a mistake anyone could have made because the correct path was partly hidden by tallish grass. The way to tell, though, is always to know that planned routes describe the terrain very well and medium walks are not only for young people; the paths should be suitable for anyone. As soon as it started to go downwards steeply, it was obvious. These are things you learn by experience.

Day Seven

We went to a restaurant for an evening meal more than once in the fortnight because even though we could both cook, and we had lots of supplies, we felt that we deserved a bit of variation and luxury. As in most holiday areas, there was lots of choice, including one of my favourites, traditional British food. One cuisine I always eliminate first is Indian since that is what I eat regularly in any case, and the other consideration was Karen's vegetarianism. I don't really know what vegetarianism means because there are lots of variations. Some people don't eat eggs or fish as well as avoiding meat, and some vegetarians are what I call 'fair weather' vegetarians, who might eat meat when it suits them. There was a friend of mine who was a vegetarian but who couldn't resist the smell of bacon in the mornings! Karen herself had been known to eat eggs without being concerned, and on occasion, white fish.

We went into town to do some shopping and decided to drive around the streets to identify which restaurant we fancied. I told Karen that the decision was entirely hers since I was flexible, except of course, no Indian food. She tapped the side window in excitement when she saw a vegetarian restaurant that seemed to be a leftover

from the hippie days of old. It was called 'The Wholefood Space'. I was a bit disappointed but didn't show it as it was me who had magnanimously told her to choose. Personally, I could have done with a big piece of meat attached to a bone that I could crack my teeth on.

In the evening, we went to The Wholefood Space and I had a whale of a time ordering. Karen knew what she wanted but all I could see on the menu was lentils and cous cous. So, I asked Karen to guide me and she very calmly went through some of the dishes in a very serious way, trying to educate me at the same time. I just found it really funny and couldn't prevent the odd snort of hilarity. I don't think I disturbed the other few diners there, but I thought of the 'anywhere else I could be at this moment'. I was very badly behaved until I realised Karen was getting annoyed and so I diverted my attention to a reflection about sheep's heads.

One of the delicacies in both Arab nations and in central Asian countries is sheep's head. I have heard of this dish before but have never tried it yet. Given the opportunity, I would certainly give it a go, but am not sure how it is prepared and cooked, or how it is eaten. I was also thinking about vegetarianism because often when people go abroad and think about meat dishes that seem to be different from food at home, they say things like: 'it's enough to make you a vegetarian'. In addition to this, people have often asked me on my views about vegetarianism and spiritualism.

The confusion comes when people start to give preferences to different life forms. We say that animals are more important than vegetables, and edible vegetables are more important than grass or weeds, (although wheat and other staples are grasses themselves). It is a human problem of interpretation. If we assume that there is a God, who made everything, surely he would give equal weight to all species. It's like asking a mother which of her children she prefers; she might emphasise particular qualities in one or other child but would not say that one is better or more important than the other. If you look at the eco-system, we can see that there is a great interdependency between all species, plants and animals alike. And so, the answer from a spiritual point of view is that all species are equally important, and assumed preferences for one or other is simply a human construct.

At a deeper level, life is dependent on death. Virtually everything we do involves death in some way. Even drinking a glass of water entails the killing of thousands of micro-organisms that live in the water. Walking along the street involves squashing insects underfoot, and driving along in a car, bus or train involves the squashing of insects on the front of the vehicle. Hinduism has a good explanation of the relationship between life and death. God is portrayed as a trinity, called Trimurti, and is made up of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the maintainer, and Shiva the destroyer. Without death there cannot be life; can you imagine if nothing ever died? And without birth there can be no continuation, and that requires the forces of maintenance. It is a cycle.

Coming back to the question of vegetarianism, I say that it doesn't exist. It exists if you consider it to just involve not eating meat, although even that conclusion is tenuous. Fertiliser has one of its main ingredients as crushed bones of animals and therefore, vegetarians are eating as much meat as anyone else. If you look at vegetarians not killing or being responsible for killing living things, then vegetarians kill more than anyone else. Each leaf of salad, each grain of rice is the killing of something.

Someone once said that if horses ruled the world, God would look like a horse, and horses being at the top, would never sanction the eating of horse meat. In that case, eating humans would be OK because they would be further down the pecking order. It is all a matter interpretation. Cannibalism is frowned upon only because it is the eating of humans by humans; otherwise it is meat like any other.

The meal itself was very good, with lots of spices and herbs to improve the otherwise fairly drab ingredients. The food, as Karen told me, was mainly a variation on Greek cuisine, just omitting the meat. There was a very nice cheese as a side dish that smelled awful but tasted really creamy and nice. She told me the name but I forgot it but remember her telling me it was goat's cheese from the hills. In the end the experience was a good one simply because it was different and original, although I don't think it would be my first choice on the next visit into town. The main thing, though, was that Karen enjoyed herself and that made me happy.

After the meal we wandered through the town, visited a few pubs, and generally relaxed. The biggest advantage of Karen was that she

rarely drank alcohol and was therefore both a girlfriend and a taxi driver; two for the price of one!

Day Eight

The sea was only about an hour's drive from our cabin and we had decided that we would definitely have a day out there. I had also found out that there was a boat trip that sailed twice a day and both Karen and I had decided we wanted to experience that as well. We set off at about eight in the morning with a box full of picnic food. We needed to stop on the way for fresh bread and fruit, and similar stuff that Karen mainly needed. As usual I drove first because I am a morning person, and Karen agreed to drive us back. That would allow me to have a drink or two as well. The drive was fairly straightforward although we did stop a few times to admire the views, and we arrived at almost ten o'clock. The first job was to have a snack and I felt particularly good sitting with the back doors of the van open as we ate and admired the sea stretching out to the horizon. There were a few boats out already but I wasn't sure whether they were going out or if they were fishing boats returning at the end of their fishing trip.

We strolled through the town then, relaxed and occasionally holding hands. The shops were mainly tourist, stacked with 'kiss me quick' hats and sticks of rock. There were a lot of fish and chip shops, all closed for now, and a few tea shops with mainly older people as customers. Karen reminded me that we needed to do some fresh food shopping to take back to the cabin, and we both agreed it would be best done at the end of our day, rather than let the food sit in the warm van for hours.

The boat ride was advertised everywhere, and by the time we got to the dockside there were about twenty other people already queuing. The boat itself could probably take about fifty people. It had a deck with a roof but no enclosing sides, for easy viewing, and rows of plastic seats. There were stairs going down below. This was mainly for rainy days, I expect, but today the sky was blue with hardly any clouds, although it wasn't very warm. Down below there were lots of seats around the sides, with round tables, and a bar at one end. At the other end were the toilets. We didn't have to wait long before the boat cast off and there was a light ripple of applause from the passengers that made me smile.

The journey was advertised as lasting about two and a half hours, so we just relaxed and watched the coastline retreat into the distance. I always love boat trips, although I haven't been on very many. As we got further away from the shore, the weather seemed also to be changing, with a few more clouds gathering above. Although there wasn't any rain, most of the trip was experienced with a thick layer of cloud above that didn't allow the temperature to rise. So it was a fairly cold trip although I didn't mind; I had my own heater in Karen!

We went down below to get drinks and then returned to enjoy the scenery. As the boat was only about half full, it was a better experience than it might have been further into the season, with plenty of empty seats to spread out across.

I thought of what a simple example of free will and destiny this journey presented. Each time I discuss spiritual matters with people, I try to think of examples that are practical and easy to understand. In this case, I thought of the free will we passengers had, of deciding to travel on this journey, but then we were all now intertwined in a sort of collective destiny on this boat. So, although we are all from different places and had different reasons for travelling, we did now find that we were all together on this boat for the duration of the journey. So, the answer to the question, do we have free will or are we controlled by destiny is that we have both free will and are subject to destiny. If something should happen, like a storm, we would all be in it together. And, at the end of the journey, when we disembarked, we would all be transformed back into individuals with the free will to decide what we would do next. But not Karen and I, who were travelling together and therefore had a continuous intertwined destiny of our own.

Karen was telling me something that edged into my consciousness and brought me back to the present. She was talking about how she liked boats and had only been on a few in her life. I said that I had also only been on a handful of boats and ships in my time. Then we went back below to the bar and there was a sort of buffet laid out.

'So when were you on a boat last?' I asked her. She told me of holiday outings and I told her of my experiences as we ate some kind of spicy pasty with salad and then I had some sausage rolls and quiche. I had another beer for myself and one on behalf of Karen since she didn't drink much herself.

Day Nine

Karen had declared that she was going to introduce me to something entirely new, to educate me in alternative ways of doing things. I thought I pretty much knew what I was doing and my methods were proven by time, but I agreed anyway. All this had been discussed at night, just before we went to bed. Karen told me that when I awoke, I should wake her up before I got out of bed. She emphasised the last bit slowly and louder than normal, like talking to an errant child.

I awoke at about 4am and instinctively got out of bed. Then I remembered the discussion of last night and got back into bed. I shook Karen's shoulder gently but she was in a deep sleep, so I used the failsafe method of tracing my finger down her neck and then travelling on to her breasts. This always works with any woman as there must be an instinctive reaction, and she did catch my hand just before I got to where I was intending to go. She took a few moments to catch on to what I was doing and at first probably thought that I was just feeling like having sex. Then she realised and turned over to face me.

'If you want, you can make a cup of tea, but then you must come back to bed.' She said.

I thought this was going to be a sex filled session that she was building up to and so rushed to get my tea and then back to bed. As I sat in bed, she just put an arm over my chest and cuddled up; no further intention than that. Then she seemed to go back to sleep.

I might not be the quickest thinker of my time but I began to suspect that it wasn't all about sex. I had my tea, had withdrawal symptoms that I wasn't listening to the early morning news as is my routine, and reciprocated with her by simply holding her close. I was wide awake and since I am a morning person found this experience of being in bed when I was fuelled for an active morning, very strange indeed. In the end I dozed off intermittently and finally came round properly at about 6am.

'So, what's all this about then?' I asked her.

'Nothing,' she replied, 'it's just that I want you to realise how normal people wake up in the morning.' She was obviously getting

me back for the early morning cups of tea I had been taking her to get her out of bed and ready for action.

'Oh'. I replied.

Karen was just happy to continue laying there with her arm holding on to me in case I escaped.

We had breakfast at eight. Everything was in slow motion it seemed to me. We had toast and marmalade and more tea, and then talked about the new approach to the day.

'It's just that I'm ready to burst into action as soon as I wake up,' I began.

'Well, for today, I want you to go at my pace,' she said. 'We'll have two or three breakfasts, loll around for ages, listen to nature and then perhaps sit outside and watch the world of the birds and the insects. We can just be here, in each moment without needing to do anything, or justify the day by achieving or completing something.'

I must say, I was impressed by her almost poetic expression. Although everything she suggested went against my daily routine, I felt that I would try it. After all, it was her holiday as well as mine. I briefly felt a bit guilty about waking her up at six every morning, then smiled about it and realised it was something I enjoyed doing.

Our second breakfast was porridge, and the third was fruit, all done at a snail's pace, almost in slow motion. There was a lot of closeness, hugging and kissing and the like and then we showered together. That was nice!

'So what shall we do next?' I asked.

'Nothing. Let's just see what comes up.' She said.

What came up was music on the radio. We hadn't bothered getting dressed properly but did find ourselves sort of dancing every now and then, each time some song or other moved us. Mostly, the songs were from the 1970s, some revival programme or other and we listened to stuff like Barry White, Elton John and Gladys Knight and the Pips. It was really good stuff once I got into the swing of things.

'My simple heart will always love you.' That song was particularly poignant this morning.

We had a lunch of crackers and cheese and more fruit. We took our chairs outside and sat in the sunshine. We drank fruit juice, Mango, and did some more touching and kissing. It was turning out to be a fantastic day; I loved it. I'm not sure I could do this every day though.

It got me thinking though, about how simple life really is, and how we complicate it ourselves. Really, all we need is some good food, a warm and safe place to live and maybe a bit of rainy day money to meet those costs that we don't anticipate. Everything else is superfluous. We mix ourselves up with mobile phones, internet and satellite TV contracts, personal loans for things we don't need, and then get a job and work to get enough money to pay for it. We have holidays, not because we want them but because we need them to get a breather between all the nonsense we are involved in. And then, most people need another holiday to get over the one they have just had with all the family fighting and disappointing experiences. I was beginning to think too much and so, even though Karen couldn't hear my internal diatribe, I stopped this journey of thought and returned to the present to continue our special day. And that got me thinking again; why should this be a special day? Why can't we be like this all the time? Are we slaves to our thoughts? Can't we turn the mind off once in a while?

In the afternoon we went for a walk, gently like everything else today, along and around the lake. We didn't go all the way around because this lake is very big, but we went further round than previously and discovered that nature just goes on and on. We paddled on the edge of the water, cool but a bit stony underfoot. 'So, what's the plan for the evening?' I asked.

'No plan,' she replied

'I keep forgetting don't I,' I said. 'My mind keeps interfering and thinking I should be doing something, you know, to justify the day.'

'We all live like that. It's difficult to switch out of a particular way of thinking.' She was getting deep. 'I remember when times were different, I used to have all weekend like this. I had a big warm towelling dressing gown, and a tea service that I only used at the

weekends. I used to make a pot of tea and read the lifestyle pages of the newspapers. I never read the news part of the paper; too heavy and all that. The Saturday used to stretch into Sunday and by Monday morning, I was ready to deal with the working week again.'

In the evening we cooked together, again at a snail's pace, with every action interrupted with a song on the radio, or a light and irrelevant thought about anything that raised its head. I was beginning to feel that I had been anaesthetised and it felt great. After that we went to bed without looking at the clock to tell us if was time to go to bed or not. We definitely didn't have sex, although there was a lot of lovemaking; there was a different quality to everything.

Day Ten

When I woke up a about 4.30 am, I automatically went into my morning routine of tea and news, and it wasn't until a few slurps of tea later that I remembered the experiences of yesterday. It stopped me in my tracks and made me think. Why couldn't I just turn off the radio and take my cup of tea back to bed? So I did. But it wasn't like before; Karen wasn't ready for me. Perhaps, just as I'd dropped comfortably into my routine this morning, so she had also considered yesterday as a special day and was now back into her routine. Are we really such predictable animals? As predictable as dogs and cats, horses and sheep? So, I got up again and went back to the news. Whatever had happened yesterday, I did know that some invisible line had been crossed and Karen and I had entered a new dimension in our relationship.

I decided not to take Karen her early morning cup of tea and leave her to enjoy her sleep and let her rise whenever she wanted. I went outside and decided to row out into the lake. There is always a different sense of peace out on the water. I couldn't help but compare the water here, confined in the perimeter of the lake, with the sea, where we had been out in a much larger boat. This was like a bite sized version of the sea which in turn, I suppose, is a smaller version of an ocean. And, I surmised, I was a smaller version of a greater force of human activity. We tend to live in circles inside other circles and looking out we can see bigger circles again.

Every so often two circles collide and sometimes form one bigger circle, like Karen and me. We then have a bigger consciousness than one of us alone. You can see couples who have been together for decades become like each other, being able to second guess their partner in nearly every area of thought and activity.

As I was pondering on these matters, I realised that nature was just getting on with it. Ducks and fishes don't need to reflect or theorise on things, they just do what ducks and fish do. So why do humans have to think everything to death before they are satisfied? I decided to stop thinking which is impossible because stopping thinking requires thought. I laughed out loud then at the knots I was tying myself up in.

Back on shore, I felt really good for the exercise I had just had and went in to make a cup of tea. I really wanted to wake Karen up and enjoy her company at this special early morning time, but stopped myself. It was a lot of fun for me, but she, poor girl, had to put with it. She never really complained though.

Eventually, Karen woke up and drifted into the living room at about 8.15am. She asked me why I hadn't woken her up and I told her I had been sorely tempted but had reined in the desire. She reminded me that today was the antiques fair in town and had I forgotten all about it. We had seen the event advertised when we had gone into town for the boat ride. I certainly had forgotten, but we had plenty of time to get ready and set off. Going early to an event like this is only important if you have something specific in mind to buy, but both Karen and I didn't have anything in mind except a day out.

We arrived at the antiques fair at about 11am. On quick inspection, it consisted of serious antiques stalls inside a large warehouse type building and a car boot sale outside. I always think of these types of fairs as the graveyard of people's lives, where items that were once valued by the owner, who had probably passed on, are shamelessly sold to other people. The owner might have carefully polished and cherished the item and it might have had some personal memories and affections, but now was bereft and unwanted. I didn't tell Karen any of my thoughts because I didn't want to depress her and she was quite happy and sometimes excited by what she saw and touched.

We decided to start inside and look at the 'real' antiques first. Most of the stuff was of no interest to me, especially the larger furniture

pieces, but Karen was repeatedly drawn to the jewellery displays. She saw one piece that she just had to have. It was a brooch made of gold in a pointed leaf shape with green leaves and red cherries, or little apples, in front. She put it on and asked me what I thought. I just said it was beautiful, to please her, and she paid quite a lot of money for it. Really, I am the last person to look to for approval in matters of style and fashion. But, I was the only one there with her and beggars can't be choosers. I just hoped she would still like it in a few days or weeks time. I was a bit surprised that Karen didn't give a thought to who might have cherished that brooch in the past or what might have happened for it to end up on a stall.

I reflected on who might have owned these items on display and was it true that so many people died off so regularly to justify a whole antiques fair? That thought was too big for me to take in and so I stopped the reflections right there and then. Outside there were all sorts of knick knacks and frankly lots of rubbish, the flotsam of life, although I did nearly buy some CDs of 1970s soul music. In the end I didn't, and concluded that the reason why the music we had listened to had been so nice yesterday, was probably because it had been unexpected and spontaneous.

Karen saw a stall that seemed out of place in this event; a stall that personalised crockery. She was like an excited schoolgirl and said we had to have matching mugs with our names printed on. I certainly didn't share any of her excitement but pretended I did, to keep her happy. So I asked her to choose the mugs. There were quite a few different designs and she spent an inordinate amount of time doing so. For me, it just reminded me of people who have to make a mark of themselves in the world, for what reason, I couldn't fathom. She eventually chose two matching lime green, upside down bell shaped mugs and we had our names, Harry and Karen duly printed on them. I just felt like laughing but tried my best not to and pretended my mirth was because of my happiness and pleasure. We stopped for some lunch then and had fish and chips, a brilliant choice, I thought, and the best one so far! Then it was back to the car boot sale where, fortunately, Karen didn't see anything else we might need.

There was a notice board by the entrance of the warehouse building that neither of us had noticed the first time round and so we had to see what other things were going on in the town. Actually, there were lots of activities, probably because it was the start of the

holiday season and we both commented on a play, 'The Lost Heart', which had two showings every day. I was happy at the cabin, and would have been content to just stay there, but Karen was getting into the swing of things, so I asked her to write down the details, just in case we wanted to go. She said there was no need because she would remember in any case.

Day Eleven

When I woke up in the early morning, I felt that we had done quite a bit in terms of activity on this holiday, but all the days were sort of mixed up in my mind. So, I got my mug of tea, in the personalised mug, turned on the news on the radio and grabbed a notebook and pen. I tried to remember what we had done and when and then decide if I wanted to do much more on this trip. The reason for this list was because Karen seemed to be turning the break into a series of activities and I wasn't sure I wanted to be so busy.

Day 1 Travelling to the cabin

Day 2 At the cabin

Day 3 Walking and discovering the bench and meal out

Day 4 Karen went driving and shopping

Day 5 At the cabin and restaurant meal

Day 6 Circular walk

Day 7 Restaurant

Day 8 Boat trip

Day 9 Karen's special day in

Day 10 Antiques fair

I thought that we had done quite a lot for a 'retreat in a cabin' holiday and decided to try to curb Karen's desire for more and more ventures. Quite frankly, I was a bit tired and had expected that we wouldn't have done anything really; that would have suited me. We had four days to go. I felt that I could probably handle the theatre but didn't fancy anything else. I did recognise that stopping Karen would be difficult and I should use great tact; something I have never really had. Just to start off with, I decided she really did deserve an early wake up with tea in her personalised mug. In any case, I always enjoyed waking her up, even if she didn't like being woken.

The issue with doing things is that it becomes a habit. There are people I know who can't stop for a moment and always have to

have something to do next. Sometimes this means that they are already thinking about the next thing before they have completed the present activity which leads to lots of activity and no outcomes in real terms. I have always thought that this might be a form of running away from life, by having no time to think about anything in any detail. You have to strive to achieve anything in life, that's true, but too much striving can lead to no achievement at all.

It's the same with enlightenment; you have to strive for it but if you strive you will never become enlightened. This is one of the great conundrums of spirituality but it is easily explained. When you start getting interested in spiritual matters you have to learn lots and this can be done by listening to other people on the journey and reading about it. I read about 1500 books at the start of my search. But there comes a time when you are ready to move on further but the burden of all the knowledge you are carrying impedes your progress. That's why Buddha said 'if you meet me on the path chop off my head'. What he meant was that if you keep stopping to think what did Buddha say, or what would Buddha do, then the Buddha is actually getting in your way. In this case you have to be able to disengage from the experiences of others in order to have realisations of your own. Teachings are like maps; they show you the way to your destination but once you get there it is time to put the map away and experience the delights of the destination for yourself.

And so, I told Karen that I felt a bit tired from all the activities and would rather just relax at the lakeside for the rest of the holiday. She, being a doer, didn't really understand my position, but despite this, said that we should both be happy, and if she felt a bit constricted by the lakeside cabin she could always go out for a drive by herself. But she wasn't really happy, I could tell.

I turned to the matter of our personalised mugs. Karen said she enjoyed the tea more than usual because she now had a special mug. I said I had also been pleased with my new mug. I was lying, of course. For me the tea was nice because it was tea, and the mug just made me feel like a mug myself.

After my discussion with Karen about activities we decided to stay at the cabin all day and not think about going anywhere until at least tomorrow. We had enough fresh food and of course, lots of tins, and Karen declared that she would make me a brilliant lunch. And it was

brilliant; potatoes and spinach curry, with fragrant yellow rice and yoghurt. There was enough of it left over for the evening and I could have eaten it forever, it was that good!

During the rest of the day we just sat outside watching nature and hearing faint strains of the songs coming from the radio inside. In the late afternoon we went for a walk and sat on our bench, or rather, the bench left there for us by Mr John Noble.

'I wonder what he was like, John Noble?' I asked out loud.

Karen looked at me quizzically. 'Who?'

'The bench man, John Noble, who left this bench behind for us to sit on.'

'Oh,' the penny had dropped and she remembered the plaque. 'Whoever he was he must have been a nice man, to think about other people and their comfort, and he must have liked nature to leave it in this spot.' She said.

'What would you leave behind?' I asked Karen.

She thought for a long time, until I thought that she would never answer and then she replied, 'I've no idea.'

'That's what makes it even more special. To leave something behind that people like and to have taken the time to think it out first.'

We went on discussing, or rather small talking, until the evening came on and then we returned to the cabin for the night. I had lots of vivid dreams, all jumbled up and tossed and turned all night, whilst Karen seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Day Twelve

The next morning I felt very upbeat and ready for anything, and so we decided to go to watch the play in the theatre in town. We decided on the first performance, in the afternoon. I wondered what it might be like, a play called 'The Lost Heart' but soon decided to wait for the actual performance rather than speculate pointlessly. We had toast and marmalade and then lots of fruit that was

beginning to over ripen. Then followed a brunch of left over cheese and crackers. In fact all our food so far this morning was leftover stuff. Somehow, it tasted better than when first bought fresh.

We went out rowing after the cheese had been finished off, and true to form, I rowed Karen out. She wore a wide brimmed hat that I not seen before, and looked like an actress in a romantic comedy of the 1960s, in black and white. The water shimmered and we were drifting along in perfect peace and relaxation. It was a surprisingly beautiful moment. I think all great moments are ones not expected, but spontaneous.

We got to the theatre at 2.30pm and found a really small building. Just outside the theatre itself there was the entrance and vestibule that had a small bar at one side. We had a drink but had to be quite quick because the play was starting in ten minutes. In the theatre the seating was almost on the stage itself and there were seats for no more than about 40 people. The room was square with seating on three sides. The stage was so close that I led Karen to seats right at the very back. Even then, it felt like we were active participants in the play. Maybe that was the intention.

The story of 'The Lost Heart' was two newly married couples who were trying to set up their lives but were faced with all sorts of difficulties. They had dreams and aspirations beyond their realistic possibilities, and were always wondering when they would get a break in life. Most of all, the sub plot was that they were not suited to each other, and really, if the couples swapped partners with each other, they would be better off. And so, there was innuendo throughout of possibilities both sexual and in terms of relationships. My first thoughts about the play was to wonder why would such a play be performed in a tourist town? It was a comedy of sorts though, and maybe a bit of experimental theatre.

There was an interval half way through and we went back to the bar which now had snacks as well as drinks and we had a slice of quiche each and some little cakes. Karen said she was really enjoying the play and wondered how people come to be together who are obviously not suited. I asked her if she thought we were suited to each other and then she got a bit gooey, and held my hand. The play ended rather abruptly, leaving all the questions of the suitability of the couples, up in the air. The intention was to make the audience work hard to come to their own conclusions. I liked the

ending because it is a bit like life; often there are no easy answers or happy endings.

Back at the cabin, after cups of tea in personalised mugs, we talked about what we thought the ending would be. Karen was a bit more cutthroat than me, and thought it would all end in divorces and secretive sessions of sex between the opposite couples, whilst I thought they would all get together and solve their material issues except the sexual matters. They would end up spending their lives fantasising about what it might have been like. A bit negative and sad, I suppose, but I know lots of couples who try to make 'the best of it' because they don't have the courage to admit they were wrong.

'And what about us,' I asked, 'are we living or fantasising?'

'I just want romance.' She answered.

'And are your romantic needs being met?'

'Sometimes.'

'And what about your dark deep down needs?'

....

Day Thirteen

One thing I insisted on over our tea in the morning was that there was to be no packing up today. We were not due to return until tomorrow and so should not waste this day in anticipation of the next. It was only a few hour's drive home and so we could even start packing tomorrow lunchtime and be OK.

Karen was in the bathroom, and since she tended to take a long time, I went out for a gentle stroll. On my mind was our relationship. I had been thinking for quite a while now if it was possible to come up with a mathematical formula about how different stages of a relationship develop. The first stage, which is the physical and lots of sex part, lasts for a few months, in my experience. Stage two is like this relationship now, when a couple becomes quite comfortable with each other but there is still more learning about each other to do and the longer term questions

arise. Stage three is when either the relationship fizzles out and dies, or when the relationship is cemented into a long term prospect. I was pondering on where this relationship was going because we were coming to the end of stage two.

The other thing that bothered me was how predictable relationships can be. The very fact that I could project the three stages meant that my previous relationships had gone through these stages. Are we all that predictable, and if so why do we think it will be different the next time? I could almost predict to the day, where Karen and I were going, and the next step for us will be the thinking about living together. I had a small flat that is perfect for one person but would be too cramped for two people. Her flat was too far away for me because I didn't have a car and would find it difficult to get to town easily. My shopping habits mean that I need to be near the town centre. Karen didn't presently have a car either but she didn't mind all the travelling.

I had reached the bench by the lake, and sat down to contemplate the matter further. I wondered what John Noble would think about it all. After all, I think he was a level headed man and had found the perfect place for his bench, so I put myself in his place and projected.

I think he would simply have asked, 'do you love Karen?'.

The answer to which I would say was 'yes, but what 's love got to do with it?'

You see, I think that the first stage is passion, the second love and a growing commitment, and the third stage is really a business deal. The third stage consists of where to live, money matters, and curtains and carpets, as well as future plans, ambitions and aspirations.

I was beginning to depress myself and so tried to put all this thinking out of my mind, got up from the bench and continued walking. When I said 'what's love got to do with it' I was serious. Love changes its nature as a relationship develops and there are lots of types of love. The love in the first weeks is really passion, and the love after years of being together is more companionship than love. In between these there is the love of nest building, and then the love of having a family, if that is the plan.

There were then two options for me at this moment; one was to sit down with Karen and talk it through like you would talk a business deal through, and the second one was to bury my head in the sand and let Karen, or destiny, take its course. So, in true brave heart style I decided to bury my head in the sand!

We had lunch at about one, and that consisted of bits of this leftover and bits of that sell by date, a real mish-mash that tasted quite good. Karen more than once, looked at me a bit strangely and I thought that she might have been thinking about our future as well. It was quite natural to be drawn to these matters as our holiday was coming to an end. One thing ends and another begins....

'What are you thinking about?' I asked.

'Nothing, really.' She replied and then I knew she had been thinking about something. Nothing really, in my book, means 'something'.

Was I going to take the bait? Yes I was. 'Tell me about it then.'

She just took another bite of our mish-mash lunch and said nothing for a long time. I let the moments pass and build up until the pressure became too much. 'It's just about where we go next.'

Bingo! I had guessed correctly but wasn't that just part of the predictability of relationships?

'We go home tomorrow.' I made it harder for her because I wanted her to think I wasn't following her gist, and so she would instigate the next step. After all, I had decided to bury my head in the sand.

'Not that.' She said. 'You know, us, our relationship.'

Since the reader knows my theory of relationship predictability I will leave the rest of this conversation blank. We had our meal, talked around the subject for a long time and I ended by telling her that it was up to her. I was easy about everything. She didn't like that and said I should contribute to our future in equal shares. I told her I loved her after she insisted I explain my feelings, then we kissed, and went to the lakeside holding hands. Overall, it was unsatisfactory for her because she wanted more certainty, but I was unwilling to process business deals whilst on holiday.

I asked her what moments of this holiday she had liked best. That lightened the mood a bit. She said she had enjoyed the antiques fair, the boat ride and the personalised mugs. I said I had enjoyed the boat trip, the rowing boats here at the lake and, tongue in cheek, agreed that the personalised mugs were definitely a winner. We later both added that we had really liked Mr John Noble's bench.

Day Fourteen

We got up late on our last day. Somehow, it seemed appropriate to make love and loll around half dressed until about ten in the morning. Then we slowly began to get our stuff together, although Karen did most of this work. I did occasionally move stuff around so it looked like I was helping. We didn't really do a good job though, and in the end, just threw our half packed bags and boxes into the back of the van and promised ourselves to sort it all out back at home.

We set off for home at about one o'clock and ended a cabin break in the wilderness that effectively wasn't really a wilderness break at all. I asked Karen for points out of ten for the holiday and she said eight out of ten. I agreed with her and that made us both happy. We were synchronising well and surely ready for stage three of our relationship.

On the journey back we saw a sign pointing to a place of outstanding beauty and so diverted a few miles to see it. There were quite a few cars parked up there and it was a high point overlooking a deep and long valley full of greenery and with a river running along the bottom, visible through the trees in places. We sat then on a bench that had no plaque of dedication written on it, held hands and just drank in the view.

The rest of the trip back home was straightforward although there was an atmosphere between us. Just like the holiday season was starting and our break was ending, life is full of beginnings and endings. Relationships often come to a head, and can also settle down only to raise their heads again. This was one of those times when there was an expectancy and a need for clarity regarding our future and I regretted not being more candid yesterday when we had almost discussed the future. I like to be very clear and open, if possible, but that also requires the other person to reciprocate. I am

not the most subtle person and don't like second guessing the feelings of others. And so I decided to put my cards on the table as soon as we got home.

We arrived at my flat and Karen turned to sort out the bags and boxes in the back of the van. I stopped her and said that could wait. So we went up to my flat and I put the kettle on; it would have to be tea from plain mugs, as the personalised ones were still packed away in the van.

'So, then, let's sort it out then.' I said.

'Sort what out?' She questioned

'There was too much pressure in the van, of thoughts and feelings about the future, so let's put our cards on the table.'

She was silent then, maybe thinking that I hadn't heard her private thoughts on our journey back. I had heard them and they were very loud!

'You want to know if we are going anywhere with this relationship or not, don't you?'

She raised an eyebrow, of what, surprise or concern?

'We have two choices. First, we just let the relationship drift along. We both enjoy it but in the long run it will die. Second, we make a commitment to each other, sort out the practicalities of where we will live, money, bank accounts and all that stuff and then we will be an item, long term.' I thought I had been quite succinct.

She took a sip from her cup.

'Well? What do you think?' I persisted. I was a bit forward but felt that things needed to be said. I had been happy to let everything drift at the cabin, but somehow the journey back had annoyed me. It should be a time of love not misunderstandings and I wanted to know where we were.

Karen said nothing and so I continued, 'Do you like option one, leave it as it is, or option two, commitment?' She was surprised by

my attack and said nothing. So I said, 'Well it's not a difficult choice is it. Say it; one or two.'

'It's not that simple, is it?' she asked.

'Well, yes it is. Tell me which option you like and then we can consider all the implications.'

'You weren't so interested at the cabin,' she said

'But I am now.'

'Well then, option one is an ending but option two is a beginning. Who would want to end it? You really haven't left me a choice. Option two then.'

I knew she would opt for option two because there wasn't really a choice to make.

'Right then, we are officially an item. Do you want to just live together or get married?'

'Hang on a minute. You're railroading me. Let me catch my breath first, please.'

'OK. You can relax now. As far as I'm concerned it's a deal. I'll go at your pace now, since we've made the main decision.'

Then I got up, gave her a gentle kiss, and felt better that the future was now known as far as possible. The details, no doubt would be completed by her; women like these kinds of things, don't they?

I fetched a bottle of wine and two glasses, filled them both up and gave one to Karen. 'To seal the deal then.' I said and we drank to it.

I relaxed then, on the sofa, without a care in the world. Karen came and sat with me and that was that!

After a short break, to get our breath back and digest the enormity of our discussion, we emptied the van of all our boxes and bags of supplies. We didn't talk much then but instead filled the cupboards and shelves in my kitchen with tins and packets. We did pause briefly to admire our personalised mugs and Karen put the kettle on.

The tea was like a peace pipe; each sip went quite a way to relax us further. After the tea, Karen said she would take the van, to return it to the hire company on the way home, and that she would see me soon. We kissed briefly and off she went. I sighed a big sigh of relief and turned on the TV, the first time I had watched in two weeks. Nothing was different though, and all the familiar programmes followed each other for hour after hour, as I let the normality of my life return in its familiar way.

Section Three - Back to work

Part One

After Karen had left, I had a little time to rest and prepare myself for the ongoing work that had undoubtedly been building up. We had ignored all telephone calls on our fourteen day retreat, and so I found many messages waiting for me. I decided to leave them all until at least the morning and so have time to unwind from the holiday. It made me smile about how I thought it was supposed to have been a retreat but turned into any other holiday that most people have. Besides staying in a cabin that stood alone, it could quite easily have been in a teeming tourist resort. The idea of a retreat is fairly impossible in the UK because for a real retreat we should have physically been separated from the world by great distance. We weren't, and in addition to that, we had a van to drive ourselves into the surrounding towns.

Reflecting on the holiday as a whole, though, it had been a good break, allowing me to relax, despite Karen's need to do things, and it let me have the time to think out and rationalise my memories of central Asia and some other spiritual matters. So, for me it was now an evening of Arabic and Hindi songs, lots of beer, meat, and bone crunching. It is a very male thing, to grind your teeth on bones and crunch away, and very satisfying every now and then. That's probably why spare ribs and other bone dishes are popular. The easiest of course, is chicken, with the option to step up to spare ribs and eventually leg and thigh bones of larger animals.

It was a good evening of singing and dancing all by myself, drinking more beer than was probably advisable and looking forward to a hangover in the morning with no one to admonish me and tell me off. I was glad then, that Karen wasn't going to visit me for a few days; she had other things to do. Perhaps, she was as relieved as me and had her own vegetarian schedule of winding down with crunchy celery, romantic music and a candle lit perfume filled evening. Sometimes, I wonder if I am just stereotyping!

Part Two

I woke up at four in the morning and felt very satisfied that I could return to my routine of early morning news on the TV and a big mug of tea. The personalised mug made me laugh out loud, and so for old times sake, I used my usual mug instead. I had to behave myself when Karen was around but could now laugh out loud at the idea of a personalised mug and I was almost in tears at the absurdity of it all. Then I thought of Karen and felt a bit guilty; after all she had put her heart and soul into carefully selecting the colour, shape and size of the mugs. That's why I liked her so much, because of her simple likes and wants.

After my morning ritual of waking up I listened to the messages on my mobile phone, and jotted them down. There were three messages from people who wanted their heart centres opened up, (be patient, the meaning and process is described in full later), two alleged haunted houses that needed some intervention, and a request from someone who I didn't know, about some spiritual activity detected at an ancient Christian church near Edinburgh. The last one sounded very juicy indeed! Two others were just to say 'hello and how are you?' type of messages.

The mention of haunted houses and spiritual activity usually makes most people nervous but I tell them that they need to clear their minds and think rationally. The main culprits of misinformation are film industries. We all think of Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Werewolf and the horror films from our childhoods. In recent times horror films have become even more gory and can be very frightening. So, when I mention that there is a haunted house, people think of dimly lit Victorian passageways, candles blown out by the cold and icy breeze, creaking doors, blood and terror. It is important to remember that all these films are pure fiction, designed to fill cinemas and make lots of money. Of all the spirits I have encountered, there have been none who drag heavy metal chains around in the dead of night, or are headless horsemen, or the like.

Most spirits look and act just like we do. They are lost to the extent that they cannot move on after death. Usually there are one of two reasons for this. Firstly, they have died suddenly and simply don't know they are dead. Secondly, they have a great affinity with someone or something from their life that draws them back again

and again and then doesn't allow them to move on. The reasons may be an unfulfilled love, wealth, a valuable item that they have always associated themselves with, etc. All religions tell us not to mourn too much for the dead, because each time we do, we are effectively trying to draw them back to us. For people who have died naturally, they usually move on easily, but if there is any reason why the spirit finds it difficult to move on, our mourning only makes it even harder. Our love can in effect, be a blockage to them.

I started calling people back at about eight o'clock. I booked in one heart centre appointment each day at 4 pm, starting tomorrow, booked one haunted house for this afternoon and one in five days time when I had completed the heart openings in between. I try to only have one appointment each day. People usually have to come to me first, so that I can assess them in my own environment and because if there is a need to travel to their homes, I need a lift.

Part Three

I think I need to explain the process to opening the heart centre at this point in the story because by now some readers will be biting their fingernails with expectation and eagerness.

There is some very complicated theory and misinformation about our spiritual centres, spread by people who don't know, or by books that profess to know it all. We have all heard of the seven chakras and so on. I am not saying it is all nonsense but do say that for most people, the opening of these centres is too complicated and not required. I work simply on two centres, one which we know is the head centre, and the other one is the heart centre. Below is a previously published explanation of how to open, or activate the heart centre.

You have two centres inside you, (actually there are more but at this level you don't need to know). The centre that you are all familiar with is the head centre where your brain is, and the other centre is your heart centre. The brain is a very useful tool and you cannot function without it. Some people say it is the most important centre but that is not true. You would die without the brain, but it is also true that you would die without your heart, lungs, kidneys, stomach and so on. But it is an important centre.

If you want to follow a spiritual path, you must find and nurture your heart centre. It has all the equipment required to give you enlightenment. If you try to gain enlightenment by using the brain you will always fail. It is just like trying to watch a TV programme on a radio; it is simply the wrong equipment. If you want to watch a TV programme you must have a television set. Simple! If you want to gain enlightenment you must use the correct equipment, and that is your heart centre. So, if you are trying to do some spiritual practice, firstly you should think which centre am I plugged into at the moment? Make sure you are in your heart centre.

I will tell you how to activate your heart centre. Close your eyes and take yourself down to where you think the heart centre is, roughly near your actual heart. In there you will find a mirror that is very dusty. The shape of the mirror doesn't matter; you can choose the size and design of it yourself. It is dusty because since you were born, you have never been there or even knew it existed. Clean the mirror. Watch the dust coming off and realise the shiny mirror of your heart. You don't have to do anything else yourself. Every time you remember, travel down to the heart centre and polish the mirror, and every time you have a spiritual question, travel down and listen to your heart centre. The heart centre will only give you one answer, and that will be the right one, even if everyone else tells you it isn't. If you ever get more than one answer, you can be certain that the head centre is at work and so you can dismiss those answers and try again to ask the heart centre. Often, you have to come back out of the heart centre and do something else and return there a bit later on.

Consider, when you turn on the TV, that is all you have to do except change the channels. The TV works by itself, inside. In the same way, once you have polished your heart centre, it will switch on. You do not have to do anything but be there, just as you are there when the TV is working away.

The head centre needs you to do things, like make decisions. The heart centre does not need you to do anything, but just to be there. If you go to the market to buy a cauliflower, you have to make all sorts of decisions: how fresh is it, how big is it, how much money is it, and so on. You are used to doing these kinds of thinking activities and have been doing them since you can remember. But the heart centre needs you to just relax and do nothing. Things are revealed

by themselves to you, when you need to know. You should try it and see. If you fight or strive to gain enlightenment, you can be sure that you won't because you are trying and therefore using your head centre. Enlightenment will come by itself because you already have it. You don't have to work for it, find it, or earn it in any way. It is part of you. Don't rush.

Finally, I will give you one more example to help you. If there is a bucket sitting outside, what does it have to do to get filled up with water? It simply has to be there, and when it rains, the bucket will fill up by itself. The bucket itself does nothing. In the same way, there is nothing for you to do once you have opened the heart centre.

A word of guidance for the reader is that I deliver this process myself and often add or take away some methodology depending on the person sitting in front of me. It is very easy to do but sometimes requires my direct attention to tailor it just right.

Part Four

At 4pm, Annette, the haunted house client, came to collect me. I invited her in, gave her a juice drink and a cake bar to eat and chatted small talk with her. When I am working, every action I do is for a reason and the work starts as soon as I meet the client. The reason I gave her something to eat and drink was to relax her and give myself time to scan her aura for blockages and her energy flow. This is important because many haunted house clients have no such thing in their house and the problem lies elsewhere, usually in the person themselves. Her aura was pretty clear and as expected, for a middle aged working woman. Then we went to her home. I already knew a spirit was there before I entered the house.

I asked her the following questions:

Is there someone in particular that you are expecting to find out about?

Do you know the person?

What relation were they to you?

Is it a man or a woman?

How old were they when they died?

How did they die?

Were you living in this house before the person died?

Often, people do expect to meet someone they know, and most often the person they expect to meet is not there. It may be an attempt to assuage the guilt they themselves have for some reason or other, or a fantasy. Annette was looking for someone in particular and I knew that it was just wishful thinking on her part. There was a spirit there, a woman in her late forties or early fifties, dressed in an expensive greenish dress, and she was expecting someone or something. She wasn't distressed, just waiting. The dilemma for me was either to tell her that the spirit she was 'feeling' wasn't there, and leave it at that, or go on to tell her about the spirit that was there. She had correctly been 'feeling' that someone was there, but this spirit had no connection to her. I decided to tell her that there was no spirit to be found. I didn't think there was any point in complicating things further by introducing this spirit to her because it would probably lead on to further steps about who she was and what had happened to leave her wandering in this house. As for me, I would move the spirit of the woman on myself and not let Annette know. And in a short time, Annette would stop feeling a presence.

Part Five

On the day after the first haunted house case, I had successfully completed the heart centre opening at 4pm, and Karen came at 5.45pm, full of happiness and joy. I always admire people who can be so happy and full of the simple pleasures of life. She hugged me and planted a generous kiss on my lips. Then she made us both a cup of tea.

'I have got something wrong.' She said.

'What?'

'We should have got two personalised mugs each.'

'Why?' I had enough on my hands with the one mug!

'Well, if I'm here, my mug will be back at my flat. If we had two each we could have kept two here and two at my flat and drank out of personalised mugs wherever we were.' Such simplicity and such a conclusion, it made me smile.

'What can we do about it now?' I was just going along with the flow.

'I don't know really.'

'We could find another shop. There must be one around here, and then we could have them made.' I stated the simple solution to her woes!

'But, they'll have to be the same style and colour mug. In fact, they have to be identical.'

'You look for them then.' I concluded this fascinating exchange.

After that level of discussion, we settled down on the sofa and just enjoyed each other's company. She asked me what I'd done today and I said not a lot. She said that I should get out more and do things, including voluntary work and charity stuff. What she didn't know was that I was doing voluntary work already; I never charge for my spiritual interventions, and far from being at home doing nothing, I could be travelling anywhere in the world or in other universes. That's called 'Astral Travelling' in some books.

In the evening, Karen made a vegetarian supper of egg curry, with lots of fresh coriander, just as I like it. It struck me that it was a good job I had consumed so much meat on the previous two nights, and I really enjoyed the change tonight. We had naan breads and fresh yoghurt as well, and mango slices for afters. Then we went to bed.

Part Six

On television, you can often find ghost hunter types of programmes, where a team of cameramen, reporters and sound experts visit

suspected haunted places and try to discover the truth. All of these programmes fail to find anything except suggestive grainy pictures and 'bump in the night' sounds. They are bound to fail because they are using the wrong equipment for the job. They are using their head centres which is like trying to watch a TV programme on a radio, as I have described earlier. Occasionally, I have been contacted by teams like these for advice. I have never been on TV, and most of these people are not TV related seekers; it's an interest or hobby.

I was contacted by someone called Steve, about some strange goings on at an ancient church near Edinburgh. The best description that the team could come up with was that they felt there was a door leading to somewhere else, inside the small church. They could feel it but could do nothing else. I knew at once what was going on. They could feel something but couldn't get beyond that point because they were only using their head centres.

What they could feel was spiritual energy. Each time someone goes to the church, or even thinks about it, they are projecting some of their energy. Even if the thoughts are negative, they are nevertheless projecting energy. Energy itself isn't good or bad. It's like electricity; you can use it to light a dim room or electrocute a condemned man, but the electricity itself isn't good or bad, is it? The spiritual energy builds up and allows some people to feel something. Most people have no idea of how to access the energy and so it simply grows. It's like a bank account accruing interest and you can only withdraw the money once you find the bank book. I knew how to access the energy and had done so on many occasions previously. That is also how miracles happen; someone goes to a place that has gathered energy over hundreds or thousands of years and inadvertently or accidentally accesses the energy and the huge burst of spiritual energy may cure them. But for most people it is purely accidental.

I told Steve that I was prepared to go to the church but I would need certain things to happen. I would need someone to drive me up there and book me into a hotel for a night. I would need access to the church. I would work at night and would be in the adjoining graveyard from about 1am. I would have to be left alone. I knew that the access to the church and graveyard at night would create a problem because people start getting nervous. The problem is that Christianity has a god and a devil. Anything 'dark' or mysterious

begins to smack of devils work. There was no way these villagers were going to allow me free access to their church at night, doing things that were unknown to them.

I left Steve to work things out and I was definitely interested if he could talk the villagers into it. I suspected he would have no chance; it's one thing to let cameras into a place in daytime, and quite another to let a tantric in at night!

Part Seven

By the fifth day after our return from the cabin break, I had caught up with my spiritual backlog and only the second haunted house remained on my list. That appointment was cancelled for now. The home owner had made some excuse or other but promised to contact me again later. These sorts of cancellations are fairly common because people become frightened, or mention it to someone else who then talks them out of it. So, I had a few new enquiries but no definite bookings and a few days to do other things. Karen came round at about teatime and I asked her what we should do. She was a bit down in the dumps because she had made no progress on the new mugs front, and couldn't find what she wanted.

'Have you got a receipt from the place we got the other mugs from?' I asked her.

'I think so.' She replied.

'Well, call them and see if they have a shop, or trade at any antique fairs around here.'

She cheered up then and started rustling things in her handbag. She had lots of bits of paper and little bottles and lipsticks and god knows what.

'It must be at home.' She said after quite a bit of action inside her handbag. 'I'll find it later.'

I don't know why I gave her advice on acquiring two more personalised mugs, but it was too late now and so I had to just

accept that at some stage in the future we would indeed have more of them.

Then, and it came as a surprise to me, Karen handed me an envelope full of leaflets of flats to let and said: 'It's just a thought, but it's worth looking at what's available just in case, you know, if we live together.' She had obviously been working overtime to have so many leaflets, and whilst I had been lost in my spiritual stuff, she had been thinking about the here and now, and our future.

'We should decide what our requirements are then.' I said.

'At least one more room than this flat.' She said.

'And the size of each room should be bigger than this flat.' I added.

'Don't forget location, location, location.' I think she must have been watching property programmes on TV.

After a while my head was beginning to spin from the drudgery and repetition of the words on each leaflet, and I asked Karen to choose. She said that it was important that we should both be involved in the process. I couldn't really care less but didn't say anything to her.

'And then we can go and view some properties.' My heart sank at the thought of having to go see flat after flat. I had been shopping with Karen before and she took a long time over even an item of clothing. I couldn't imagine the pain of looking at all the features of a flat with her. She noticed my pain and gently coaxed me by saying we didn't have to view more than one flat each day. That made me sink into an even deeper hole of despondency.

'Ideally, Karen, I would like it if you chose because firstly, you have good taste, and secondly, I don't.'

'It's too important a decision. You have to be involved. Otherwise it's not really us being a couple, is it?'

We agreed to put all the leaflets back into the envelope and have another go tomorrow. I hoped the envelope could mysteriously disappear but knew we were now in new territory and I would have to play my part in this game of life.

Part Eight

Whenever I perform a heart centre opening procedure, I always make sure that my clients have my telephone number and tell them that for the next few days they can phone me anytime, 24 hours a day. This is because sometimes they feel strange and sometimes become nervous or worse. Many people who come to me already have an open attitude to spiritualism and may have inadvertently collected spiritual energy that becomes very focussed once their heart centre is opened. It is usually temporary because after a short while the energy dissipates and then they return to normal. This concentration of energy can manifest itself in the ability to send messages to people by the force of their heart centre. They think of a person and a few minutes later the phone rings and it is that person that they thought about, who tells them they had a sudden urge to phone. Other examples can include 'seeing' spirits and the like.

For some people nothing at all happens when their heart centre is opened, and they tend to stop cleaning the mirror of their heart centre and soon dismiss the whole process as useless. I tell them that they will get out of it whatever they put in. If you buy a very expensive computer and expect it to do something for you, it won't, unless you first input something into it. Even if you want to play a game, you first need to install it and then learn all the controls.

I was reflecting on these matters as I drank my first cup of morning tea when I received a text at about 5am. It was from a client who told me that he was very happy that I had opened his heart centre and felt that he could now feel spirits much more clearly and had seen the image of a woman in his heart centre. I replied that he should keep on with the experiences but always be sceptical and make sure he was really seeing the image and that it wasn't just his imagination. It is very important to try to verify everything that happens to you to make sure it is not simply make believe.

After some breakfast, I turned to my own practices. I was working on a curse to see if it really was possible to place a curse on someone. I had selected someone who I moderately disliked and had been projecting energy to his aura to see what happened. It is very important not to tell the person you are working on, because the results might be skewed if they start to imagine things that may or may not be there. My real problem was that I didn't really hate

anyone and so my energy projections were a bit weak. What I was doing now was to concentrate the energy by using a powerful mantra and then project energy in pulses. It was definitely better this way and so I decided that more work on the mantra would be useful.

When the rest of the world was awake, that's usually about 9am, when offices and shops open for the day, I went into town to do a bit of shopping and take some money out to pay the rent. It really does annoy me that I have to wait for five hours every morning before I can do anything because everything is closed until 9am which is lunchtime in my world. I dream of the day when genuine 24-hour opening times are the norm! I bought two pasties, some fish steaks, and lots of beer for later. Being so supplied with goodies I went home again with a warm feeling of satisfaction inside. At home I watched comedy programmes that made me laugh, part of my routine. It is very important to have a time for laughter every day; it really sets me up for the day ahead.

Part Nine

After the eating of the pasties, I started thinking about Karen and her upcoming birthday. I had no idea what to get her. For me, it is my birthday every day and I don't see why it can't be the same for everyone else in the world as well. I never understand why only some days can be special. Karen hadn't told me anything she really wanted except the personalised mugs, but I decided that the search for mugs should be left to her; a little drama that one day would lead her to a happy conclusion. I did think of making a CD of music for her, probably of 1970s and 80s Hindi pop songs. In any case, I think that a personal gift, made especially for a particular person is better than buying something off a shop shelf. I also decided that the birthday card would also be better hand made on my computer.

Karen came in the afternoon and I asked her outright what she wanted for her birthday. She just smiled and said she had everything she ever wanted and said that a special evening in might be the best present. I thought about that and agreed that music, a meal, and lovemaking was probably a real winner.

We watched a film on TV together. Oddly, for this time of day, it was a Bengali film with English subtitles. It was all about poverty and desires for things that were unattainable. It reminded me of people at all levels of society who always want more because they are driven by materialism. In the film, the family just want a chance to pay off their debts and not have to worry where their next meal was coming from. But, in modern western society, with all the money and education and welfare services, often the same poverty is apparent. People have to choose to 'eat or heat', that is eat well or pay their bills instead, even though they earn hundreds of pounds each week. They have so many bills for numerous things they do not need. Poverty in the west means not having satellite TV, the internet, or mobile phone contracts.

For myself, I live a completely cash lifestyle and do not have any contracts except the one with my landlord. I don't have credit cards and have only one debit card and that was after the credit union went bust in the recession and I had to have a card to withdraw money. I live on the poverty line but feel quite well off because I don't play the game of life, where you have to have everything, just in case, and keep up with the Jones's. In addition to this, my writing doesn't cost me anything and Tantra is also free. My interests give everything but cost me nothing. What a winning formula!

Feeling like I had won the lottery of life, I got us some snacks during an advertisement break and opened a bottle of wine. Karen accepted her glass, which told me that she had no other plans today, and so we settled down again to the film and I felt nice and warm inside despite the poverty filled drama we were watching.

'What do you dream of?' Karen asked me.

'Just to be left alone by the world.' I answered.

'What, from me as well?'

'Of course not. But it would be good if you were my secretary standing between me and the world.' I was thinking about the flat hunting.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you like being in the world and I don't. If you did all the things you are good at, I could concentrate on my writing and spiritualism.' I made it sound so easy.

'It sounds like you don't want a girlfriend but a housekeeper or something.'

'That would be perfect, but I want a housekeeper, a girlfriend and a wife, all rolled into one.'

She punched me then, on the shoulder, and any faint glimmer I had of my ideal woman disappeared immediately.

'Ok, then,' I compromised, 'just a housekeeper and girlfriend.'

'No chance. You don't get away with everything. And anyway, you need to get more involved in other activities.'

After the film had ended, we had another glass of wine and a cup of tea, a strange combination that she often chose.

Part Ten

It was only 3.35 am and I was awake, fed and watered, and decided to do some astral travelling to check up on someone. Astral travelling can be real fun. Consider the following extract from another published story of mine when I explained it to a client:

Imagine you are driving your car and suddenly it breaks down, what about you? Are you dead? He answered no he would still be very much alive unless it was a fatal accident. I reminded him that it was only a breakdown and so he said he would still be alive. Exactly! The body is like a vehicle that transports you around. You are not the body but over time people have become used to thinking of themselves as the body. Just as the driver is separate from the car, so you are separate from your body. Just as a car can break down and be repaired, so a body can be ill and be repaired by the doctor. There comes a time when your car is so old and decrepit that you scrap it and get a new one. And so it is with the body. There comes a time when it is beyond repair whether that is because of old age or an accident. The spirit simply leaves the body and finds another womb. Simple or what?

We associate ourselves with the body because from birth we are told that we are the body. When you can identify who you are, your soul, or spirit, you can then see a difference, a space between your original self and the temporary mode of transport we have; the body. It is not a matter of theorising or intellectually understanding this point, it is a matter of experiencing it. When you can see the difference, you can then detach yourself from the body.

In the early days of astral travelling, I had to prove it to myself that I wasn't simply imagining it all. So, I started leaving my body and travelling upwards over my home. Then I would look down and see what I could see, in other gardens. On returning to my body, I would walk to the particular gardens in question and look over the fence to verify that I had actually seen the items. In this way, I proved to myself that it was true.

Once you can detach yourself from your body, you can travel anywhere you like. Imagine you are outside your house. It might take you a second to do so. Now, imagine you are in a city or country you have visited before. It will only take about a second. So, it doesn't matter how far away it is to the place, you can imagine it in the same time; there is no travelling time to be added for places further away. In the same way, when you are astral travelling it doesn't take any time at all to be there almost immediately. After all, you don't need a ticket or a visa, you don't need to pack or get to an airport, and you don't have to carry the bulk of your physical body with you. All you have to do, is park your body up on the sofa, detach yourself, and off you go, and the body can wait patiently for your return.

In dreams you can be asleep for just a few minutes but dream that you have travelled a long way over a long time. In the same way, in astral travelling you can be away for days or years but when you come back you might only have been out of your body for a few minutes, or less. The whole concept of time and distance is different from the one we are used to in our bodies.

This morning I travelled to a house in a village in India to see how a particular family was getting on. It is possible to visit at any time of the day, you don't have to add the four and a half hours time difference between time zones or anything like that. I saw the family sleeping and noticed that the old grandfather wasn't there. I later found out that he had died. The particular interest I had, was

in a little boy, about 7 or 8 years old. He was as I had expected, and I projected ten or so years later to see if what I had predicted would happen to him actually did happen. Then I returned to my body, waiting patiently on my sofa at home.

And as I clicked in to my body again, the news was on again, but the stories were the same ones I had already watched earlier this morning. There really is too much repetition on TV these days!

I nodded off after that, and didn't fully recover myself until about six o'clock.

Part Eleven

I'm really glad I'm a writer because it allows me to write down certain practices and when people ask me about them I can just print off the relevant pages rather than sitting down and explaining everything over and over again. I have already written something about mantras but recently have been asked over and over again to explain them.

So one morning at about 5am, I found myself in front of my computer reflecting on the mantra. I don't know anyone who can use a mantra effectively. People get hold of a mantra and simply repeat it over and over again. Some people think that a mantra is more effective if it repeated a certain number of times every day. They are fools! I will explain it all again.

A mantra has got nothing to do with the words that someone repeats; it's all about breathing. You should only use a mantra that's given to you by someone who can speak it to you directly. If I tell you to breathe one long breath, then two short breaths then one long breath again, you will forget what to do very quickly. A mantra is simply a set of words that allow you to remember what to breathe and how. It is easy to remember a string of words than a set of breathing instructions. One of the easiest and powerful mantras that I give out is: Om nama shiva om. If you simply repeat it you will gain nothing out of it. But, if I tell you how to say it, you can gather and concentrate spiritual energies even if you say it only a few times.

This mantra has 9 syllables:

Om
Na
Ma
Aa
Shi
Va
Aa
Aa
Om

If you speak the mantra it has only 6 syllables. That is why it is so important to hear it directly from your teacher; so it has real meaning.

In addition to this, each syllable is of different length and intensity. For instance the first Om is more like ohhhng. Notice that the Om actually ends in 'ng' and not 'm' and the whole word lasts as long as one of your normal breaths. By contrast the 'Na' that follows is short and the 'Ma' is longer again and consists of two syllables, the second one being 'Aa'.

You can see how a simple mantra can sound very complicated but I could teach it to someone in front of me in a minute or so, and by remembering the words and the tune, the client can then always remember the lengths and intensities of the separate words or sounds, and most importantly, how to breathe.

The mind thinks in terms of amounts, and so it is logical that if you repeat the mantra 30 times it is better than repeating it 10 times. This is all wrong because you have to remember that we are working in the heart centre, not the head. You can decide for yourself when to use the mantra and how often you repeat it. The aim of the mantra is to concentrate your spiritual energy in your heart centre and everyone has their own particular needs and requirements. You have to learn these requirements yourself.

Caution: do not use this mantra without guidance. I have only touched on it slightly here, and it needs personal training directly with the client to activate it effectively; otherwise, it is just so many words.

I made a cup of tea then and smiled at the people I know who waste their time every morning and every evening repeating nonsense mantras in the hope that they might do them some good. Really, we do live in a small-brained world of ignoramuses. Having glibly smiled at the people I come across, the tea tasted much better. I reminded myself that I shouldn't let my ego get the better of me and so silently apologised to the people I had just dismissed so casually.

I didn't do much for the rest of the day, except watch repeats on daytime TV and drink lots of tea and eat junk food. It struck me that this wasn't an effective use of my time, but since I didn't feel guilty about it, I did nothing more to change the direction of the day.

At about 3pm I thought about Karen and that she would be coming in a few hours. I decided that she deserved more attention than usual because in her own way she was doing things behind the scenes to make us into a couple, like 'flats to let' literature. She was probably pounding the pavements, travelling to estate agents in her lunch hour, and other things that were deserving of special treatment from me and an acknowledgement that she was not only very nice, but also dedicated to us and our happiness. After a lot of thinking I decided to cook something special for her and make it a special evening. I pulled myself together and went shopping for ingredients. I thought I would make a mixed curry of aubergines, courgettes, mushrooms, potatoes and tomatoes, with a side salad and natural yoghurt. I also decided to get a few bottles of wine in, and select some special Indian music from my vast collection.

In the end, it was a great evening. Everything was almost ready by the time she arrived at nearly 6pm. We kissed and touched, and gently danced every now and then, and then ate very slowly, interrupting the meal with wine drinking, and singing a few lines from the Indian songs every time we were overcome by the poetry of the words. There was no talk of flats or mugs, thankfully, and the evening merged into night.

Part Twelve

I was rudely interrupted a few days later, at about 7am, from my morning routine of laziness, by a phone call from someone I had seen a few weeks ago. He said he was at Manchester airport and had just got off a flight from Amsterdam. He was just checking I

was available and told me he was coming straight to my place. He seemed quite frantic.

When he arrived, I reminded him to turn off his phone first. He is a businessman and always keeps getting interrupted by phone calls at all times of the day and night. I had made a special rule just for him that required him to switch his phone off before I let him in because I found it very annoying.

He said that he had been in Amsterdam with 'the lads' at a party. He had seen a fortune teller who had told him to be very careful. I remember I had told him the same thing just a few weeks ago. He wanted to know how two different people in different countries would say the same thing, and what was it that he had to be so careful about?

In his case, I had told him only a limited amount of information because what happened to him would depend on what he did. I found that I couldn't tell him any more because it wasn't up to me. The fortune teller in Amsterdam had said the very same thing and he was also unable to fill in any details. Sometimes this does happen, when you know there is a potential danger, but the case is so complicated that except for tying him up and keeping him prisoner it is impossible to be exact about what may happen. The choice then, is either to say nothing at all, or give the person a general idea that something may occur. I had decided to give him a general warning but regretted it when he began insisting I tell him something more specific. On that occasion, he had dismissed my warning, but the visit to Amsterdam had now spooked him badly.

After a while, in which we made no further progress, he left, very dissatisfied. If I could have been more specific, I would have told him. Some months later he was found dead in suspicious circumstances. The police investigation took about five weeks and in the end, even they closed the case, unresolved; death by misadventure or something like that was the conclusion. The only unresolved thing I had, was being compared to a fortune teller; the cheek of it.

Part Thirteen

The first flat we went to view was a Victorian house that had been split up into smaller units. I loved the high ceilinged rooms, and the size of the windows that had not been double glazed but were in their original style and condition. The bathroom and kitchen was modern, and I for one would have signed the lease there and then. Karen, on the other hand was very snooty about it, and pointed out the cost of heating the place, the loss of heat through single glazed windows, and other things that I let pass straight in one ear and out of the other. Once I knew that this wasn't the flat for us, there was no point in listening any further.

What I did think about instead, was the original family that must have lived here more than 150 years ago. They must have called it home and thought it was theirs forever. I wondered when they left and where their descendents were now. Did they even know that once this had been the family home? It's the same today, with people putting up gates and CCTV cameras to protect their home, thinking that this is theirs. For most people, in only a few decades from today, all the homes that are proudly owned by these people will be owned by other people instead. And then, they in their turn will think that this house is theirs. Really, home ownership is just like long term hotel room occupancy. It is strange how people repeat the same behaviours of their predecessors. All together, I wondered how many different families had lived in this house since it had been built and how many more would occupy it hereafter.

I was jostled out of my thoughts by Karen who was saying something to me.

'I know we said we wouldn't see more than one property each day, but this estate agent says he has time to show us another property nearby.'

I simply agreed because this viewing had only taken a few minutes and even I could stand to see another one before giving up for the day. So we did.

The next property was pretty much like the first one, but this time it looked Edwardian and had double glazing. The outside had been sandblasted and looked much brighter than the Victorian house earlier. To me, it made no difference, although I did have one

requirement; I wanted a south facing flat so that we would get lots of sunshine in. Karen had all sorts of reservations and I thought about how I had passed her test to become her boyfriend; after all I had lots of flaws as well. Two down, and we were no nearer our dream, or should I say, her dream home.

After the viewings, we went to a tea shop for a drink and a cake. That was nice. Karen was rattling on about houses and homes and what made a house into a home. I politely pretended to listen but was in fact only half listening for a break in her speech to make affirmative noises. I thought to myself that really I should show more interest and tried to pull myself around from a state of disinterest to a point at which I could take all this worldly stuff seriously. Then again, I thought why I should be interested; after all, it was her project and not mine. I could live in a cardboard box!

Part Fourteen

I woke up at about 2am one morning with the hairs on the back of my neck standing up in fear. I was shaking. I had just seen an old man covered in bruises, someone who I thought I had moved on after his death about six months ago. I got up and went and sat on my sofa, all the time wondering why I was frightened. There is no need for fear because all the spiritual action happens on a different plane. Lots of times I have told people that if their experiences become uncomfortable, they can simply leave their heart centre and travel up into their head centre. There is no overlap then, and the experience can be put on hold, or even dismissed.

The old man in question was about 90 when he died. He had a stroke and was unable to do anything for himself for about three years at the end of his life. He had been well looked after but had lots of drugs to keep him quiet, especially at night because he kept the household awake by his babbling and shouting. His wife could understand some of what he said but others, including me, couldn't work out his words and I expect that made him even more frustrated.

I had looked out for him in the final years so that I could make sure he moved on smoothly when he died. I have done this successfully many times in the past. Due to his stroke, it was difficult to tell how

much he did still understand. As a character, before his stroke, he had been a very hard working person, very careful with his money and especially made a lot of money from planting vegetables in his allotment and making money by supplying nearby shops with his harvest. He once told me that he didn't spend any money from his pension, and lived off the proceeds of his vegetable and herbs sales. He could be found in his allotment at all times of the day.

When he died, I spent only a little time in trying to see where he had gone but I was sure he had moved on fairly smoothly. Many people who get very ill before they die do move on easily because they have the time to reconcile their condition, often for months or years and come to terms with the idea of their death. With this old man, I had obviously gone wrong in my assessment because I now saw him six months or so later, covered in bruises. It must have been that his stroke hadn't left him with enough faculties to prepare him for death.

After his stroke, the local council had closed the allotments and sold the land to a private developer to build houses. They had constructed a tall green metal fencing around the whole allotments but had not built anything because of the recession. I went into my heart centre and found him. The solution was simple. His obsession with his vegetables and herbs meant that he had returned to the allotment after his death and was trying to carry on with his business, not knowing that he was dead. He couldn't understand why everything had stopped; obviously to me, I could see that shopkeepers can't even see a spirit let alone buy vegetables from them. He had been throwing himself about in confusion and was covered in the bruises. I simply told him that the allotments were now closed and it was time for him to move on. It didn't take long and after a few minutes he understood and was gone. I went back to bed at about 4am to try to get a few hours sleep more but the hairs were still standing on my neck and I didn't feel very good about failing in this task.

Part Fifteen

After the experience with the old man, and the negative feelings that they created, I needed to re-energise myself. So, in the days following, I thought about all the good and positive feelings and

experiences I had in my spiritualism. I was also much more cooperative with Karen's interests including the saga of the personalised mugs. She had found the receipt for the first two mugs and asked me to phone the company up to see if they traded anywhere nearby so we could get another pair. They didn't really come near to us but there was another antiques fair nearer than the one we had seen them at, and so I decided to take Karen there myself. As you can imagine, she was very pleased indeed with my suggestion and made a picnic lunch to take with us.

I hired a car for the day and we set off at about ten o'clock, complete with the picnic and the two original mugs to 'make sure we get identical ones' as she put it. Thinking about it to myself, I felt it would be better if we had two different sets, one set at her flat and one at mine. Then, we would have a different experience each time. I realised I was beginning to think like her and so quickly told myself that one person with a mug obsession was enough. It made me smile.

We found the antiques fair easily and Karen, with a childlike enthusiasm, dragged me through the crowds until she saw the stall in question. At last, I thought to myself, a conclusion to this little predicament. It really made me smile and I felt like laughing out loud, what small and insignificant things make us happy. After all, it was just to drink tea out of, wasn't it? I asked Karen if she fancied anything else engraved just in case. She thought about that for a while but then she said we should wander round the rest of the fair and if something struck her we would still have plenty of time to act. As usual she was drawn to the jewellery displays but didn't buy anything. In the end, the two mugs were enough and despite my efforts to make her think, and her determined efforts to think of anything else we needed, we left with just the two new, but identical mugs.

Part Sixteen

After our return from the antiques fair, we had a special cup of tea in our new mugs to celebrate the completion of this vital event. Then Karen left, saying she had a few things to do. I relaxed and just watched TV whilst letting my thoughts wander. I thought about the best experience I have ever had in my spiritual journey, something I have never written about before.

I had been taken very ill, and for months, doctors couldn't work out what was wrong. Whilst the doctors thought about it, I was deteriorating and eventually my own doctor referred me to hospital by ambulance where I was admitted, filled with drugs in the resuscitation unit and moved to a ward where I had my own room and en suite facilities. I had a canular in each arm, and up to five different drips. In all, I spent a week there but the spiritual experience started on the second evening.

At about 8.30pm I could hear some very beautiful bhajans. A bhajan is a Hindu religious singing or chanting, and it was very beautiful. I knew that an old Hindu woman was dying. During the daytime, I knew there was a silent vigil by her bed and in the evening someone came to lead the gentle singing and chanting. The person singing was a professional person and the family were sat around the old woman's bed repeating the chants. I have never heard such beautiful singing in my life, although I didn't know what was being sung. Hindi is my third language but religious singing is very different from everyday speech. The singing would end at about 9.45pm and then most of the relatives would go home. I could see candles around the old woman's bed and thought that if this was going on in the hospital, the smoke alarm in the room must have been disconnected. It made me smile that I was thinking of the practicalities at a time like this.

The next night I could hear the singing again, and decided to investigate. I hadn't been out of bed for three days and was very weak. I also had to push my drip stand with me, reduced to only the one by now. I left the room and was making my way down the corridor towards where the singing was coming from when I was intercepted by a nurse who led me back to my own room. I told him that I could hear the music and singing and he told me that it was surprising what people heard in hospitals. That made me think. It is certainly true that when someone is very ill it is easy to hear and experience things that ordinarily aren't available. I have sat with dying people who tell all sorts of stories, like people coming in the night to take them away, or people passing through the room who are not of this world.

In bed again, I could see what the old woman was thinking. She came from a small village in India, and as a girl, her home was made of bricks, that were crumbling in places. The outside walls were painted pink and on one side there was a pond of clear water.

There was also a rowing boat. I continued to see various snapshots from her life as she recalled them. On the third night she died at about 9.22pm. As soon as she died, all the images and film I could see stopped immediately and the singing stopped a few minutes later. I can say that sometimes when I recall the singing after all this time, it is still the most beautiful thing I have ever heard.

After about 20 minutes of her death, I could see clearly, projected on to the wall of my room, about 10 foot long and 6 foot high, an opera in German, a language I do not speak. Nurses came and went, checking various things whilst this German comic opera, the likes of which I have never even heard of let alone seen before, went on and on. In all it lasted about three or four hours and I could do nothing to stop it. I had to endure it. I felt that the old woman must have seen it at some time in her life. When the opera ended, thank god, it was replaced by about an hour and a half of chamber music. I say chamber music because that is what I think it was but I have never listened to that kind of music before and so I don't really know what it is called. It was much better than the German opera though, which I had found a bit ridiculous. After that, things returned to normal.

I know the old woman had had a good life and she had lived to a very old age. I was surprised by the family because I couldn't detect any negativity in their attitudes. I also know that they made some charitable donations. Reflecting on the matter afterwards, I don't think she died in hospital, but the whole event happened at home, and I can still see features of the home, although I don't know exactly where it is.

In any case, I was discharged after seven days, was helped into my flat, and took six months to recover enough to take matters of my own life in hand. Other people shopped for me, cleaned my bathroom and kitchen, and generally looked after me. I came out of the illness much clearer in my life centres and now have even clearer spiritual experiences. I look at the whole period of illness as a clearing out of things not needed in my life, and now I feel much better to continue in my spiritualism. Often, serious illnesses can be for the best.

Part Seventeen

It is a bit frustrating that in all the relationships I've been in, not one woman has shown any interest in what I do spiritually. They have seen clients come and go and yet have seemingly never wondered why people seek me out. They have seen me completing quite remarkable practices and yet don't seem to care enough to want to know more. There are some reasons for this, I think, one of them being that it's like my hobby, not theirs, or because the spiritual path of a woman is different from the path of a man. The advantage, though, of them not being interested is that when I come back into the world, I have a partner to return to who is just a normal every day woman; I don't have to worry about her being in some trance or similar. Overall, it's good that they are not interested but it would be better if they acknowledged my work from time to time.

It was such an event one day when Karen arrived at my flat. She has her own key, and on entering found me lying on my back in the middle of the room with my eyes closed and my arms and legs spread out. I could sense her having a look at me and then leaving the living room to let me get on with whatever I was doing. Then again, what could you say to someone in that position? I got up and followed her, gave her a hug and a kiss and asked her how her day had been. Thankfully, she didn't say much and just got on with things in the kitchen. I returned to the living room.

What I had been doing, was separating myself from my body. The most important part of this practice is to recognise that there isn't the body one the one hand, and the original self on the other. There are layers and layers, like someone undressing on a very cold day. It is not simply a matter of stepping out of the body in one simple action. A really good way to try this exercise is when you have aches and pains, and since I had been ill recently, I had plenty of those. If you lie down in bed, or on the floor, locate somewhere in your body where there is pain. Then go really deep inside your heart centre and feel if there is pain there. You will find that the pain is not inside but particularly in a specific place. Our habit is to slow everything down if one part of the body hurts and that is a safety technique to protect ourselves. But looked at closely, we are just as aware, intelligent, and bright inside even if there is pain outside, in the body. We tend to act as if all our being hurts but that is just habit. This is one simple way to start separating the inner or original

self, from the body. It's like a car with engine trouble; it doesn't mean the driver is any less aware or bright. Try it and see.

Karen must have heard me turn on the TV, and realised I was back in the world, so she came back into the living room with a cup of tea and a piece of cake.

'Yours is in the kitchen.' She said raising both hands to show me there wasn't a third and fourth hand to carry mine in as well.

'So, what's the plan for the evening?' I asked her on returning with my tea.

'Nothing.' She answered, 'Unless you want to do something in particular.'

'No'

I was pleased that there weren't any plans that she was going to surprise me with, so we just relaxed on the sofa. After a while she got out her bag and showed me the instructions of a project she was going to do for college. It was something to do with active listening on her counselling module, and I thought that was interesting. But I did wonder if once someone is trained in active listening, could they listen inactively ever again, or was it a transforming kind of training that was non reversible.

'I have to try it out on someone, and tonight that's you.' She ventured, ending the sentence in a question as if seeking my agreement.

'OK'. I simply answered thinking that it should be simple and fun, and didn't require too much from me.

'We have to role play. You are the client with a problem and I have to both ask the right questions and actively listen to make sure I get the most information out of you. I also have to try to ensure that you are comfortable as well with the whole experiences.'

If I am capable of having an evil glint, I was trying to hide it now. This game could be really fun. I stopped myself, though, because poor Karen needed to do this for her course work and I should try to make it as easy as possible despite my instincts to really test her. In the end, I had a problem with debt and she tried her best to elicit information from me. I tried my best to behave myself but did drop

the occasional complication into my case despite my best efforts. It was really fun.

Part Eighteen

I had a client, David, who wanted to learn how to do age regression. I am not trained in this, although I have helped people in the past, and agreed to show him the basic techniques. I did add that it's best done by experts trained in the field. I picked a time of day when I knew Karen wouldn't be home because for this exercise it is important that there are no interruptions. Mobile phones, electronic gadgets that may sound and doorbells should be disconnected. The first requirement for this exercise is total relaxation. Lie down or if preferred you can sit in a chair. Breathe slowly for a few minutes until your body is really relaxed. Then, travel down from your head into your shoulders and feel the relaxation of your shoulder muscles. Travel down your left arm to your hand and down each finger to feel the relaxation. Do the same with your right arm. Then travel down to your organs, and down each leg, right to the toes. (I am explaining this quite quickly here. The actual process might take ten minutes or so.) When you have travelled over the whole of your body, return to your heart centre and breathe easily for a minute or so.

We are now going to travel backwards in this life. Think of an important event that has happened to you in the last five years and revisit it. Then go back further to an achievement or event ten years ago. (Obviously, but it needs mention, it all depends on the age of the client. If someone is 25 years old you have to shorten the years between experiences compared with someone who is 75. In all, try to go back through important life events like promotion at work, marriage, first job, college, first relationship, first day at school, first memory, etc.)

When you get to the first memory, you need to really dwell on that point and get as much detail as possible. Then:

Travel back to the next thing you can remember. Can you tell me what that memory is? (This is where the real skill comes in to the practice. You need the client to take a leap backwards that lands them into their last life, and the experiences can be very varied.)

If the client cannot do this, that's OK. Some people manage it first time whilst others never achieve it. Whatever the position, bring them back into this life by travelling forward through perhaps two or three memories in this life. Then tell them to relax and when they are ready, to open their eyes. If they have not managed it this time you can tell them to practice by themselves. You might have to write the instructions down for them so that they can familiarise the routine. You might want to try it with them again after a month or two, or refer them to a professional. You do have to be careful though; there are a lot of fakes around and one way to tell a fake is by how much they charge. I never charge, but I do realise that people have to eat and pay their bills, so a nominal charge might be acceptable.

Part Nineteen

I was reflecting that being a tantric can be the most lonely job in the world, if you let it become so. I don't know any other tantrics in the world, although I imagine there must be some. There isn't someone you can go and ask about how to achieve a particular practice, there are no books and no course to attend to enlighten you. The few books that do exist have certainly not taught me anything because tantra is something you do, not read about. Knowledge is useful in many ways but tantra is about understanding and that requires doing. I always tell people who I give practices to perform that they will not gain anything by rationalising ideas in the mind; they must always do the practice and learn from the results.

I have one particular objective that I have been trying to achieve for more than six years. I try going this way, or that, underneath, over the top, inside out and outside in, backwards. Maybe, one day, I'll find a way. However, I have achieved one other objective that I have been trying for, that's taken nearly a year. I was trying to influence someone to do something in particular that is outside their normal routine by sending energy to their aura; in other words to change someone's behaviour.

Everyone has an aura and that is an energy field that surrounds them at all times of the day and night for the whole of their lives. I have written in detail about the aura in other writings. There are no good or bad auras, just different ones. Have you ever met someone who you instantly dislike or makes you uncomfortable, or conversely

someone who you are instantly attracted to? Often, that is because your auras are not compatible or very compatible. I was trying an experiment on a woman I know who I wanted to influence. As always I didn't tell her, otherwise the experiment might be inadvertently affected by her behaviour to please me, or deliberately block me.

The process is to project energy to that person's aura in order to unbalance them from their everyday routine. I wanted to change her routine so that she would meet me in a particular place, at a particular time, and to add further proof, I wanted her to say certain things that I was programming her to say. So, about a year ago, I started sending energy to her. It was a slow process. Then I started to send her suggestive words. It's like projecting the desire to go to the cinema. Once the person thinks about going to the cinema, the added influence of my suggestions makes it much more appealing. Or, the subject may wake up thinking that a trip to the cinema is a good idea. Either way, the subject thinks they are making the decision themselves and will not feel the influence of someone else.

Each time I visited the place I wanted her to be in, I was disappointed. Then, one day, she did appear as required by me. I was very surprised and had to do a double take before I realised I had succeeded. That then left her to speak the words I had planted in her. And she did! That evening I danced and sang songs to myself and to thank nature for allowing me to fathom out the process. For hours, I just kept saying to myself that I had done it. I had learned how to influence the behaviour of another person. It had taken a long time but I would now be able to do it quicker in future because I wouldn't need to wander up blind alleys and wrong directions. I knew what worked!

I thought that if only I could conclude my six year old journey, that would be the ultimate achievement, but decided that I should enjoy and celebrate this moment first. Karen came round to loud music and empty beer tins and couldn't understand why I was so happy. I didn't tell her either but simply said I was very happy today. I wished then that I could influence her to do all the boring flat hunting and stuff, but dismissed the thought quickly; I had real tantra to perform.

'Let's go somewhere tomorrow, for a change.' I said.

'I can't tomorrow. I'm busy. But the day after I'm free.'

'Where shall we go then?' I asked.

'It's your idea, you decide.'

I thought that was a good idea as well, because Karen might decide that we needed to something that I might find too touristy or every day, and so I told her I would surprise her. We decided that we would meet at nine o'clock tomorrow, and I would phone her to tell her where.

Part Twenty

After a major achievement like the one I had just completed, the body can go through many types of emotions. After the emotion of Eureka, there can sometimes come a feeling of emptiness because all the build up of expectation is dissipated. So, the next morning, I found myself completely flat, still repeating 'I've done it' to myself but lacking any desire to do anything else. I was as flat as a pancake! And I still had to think about a day out tomorrow. I felt like several days in rather than anything else. But, girlfriends are girlfriends and she would hold me to it, so I had to think of something to do.

After breakfast, there were lots of repeats on daytime TV that were just right for my mood, and a couple of Westerns promised for the afternoon. I love Westerns because they require no real concentration. It's always very simple; good guys versus bad guys with a pretty woman caught in between. I decided that our day out tomorrow would be a day in, watching daytime TV. I phoned Karen and told her to come to my place at nine tomorrow and to shop for a picnic lunch as well. That meant no cooking for the rest of the day. I felt that would be a pretty good day.