

Chapter 17

FINGER ME

...and while there does appear to be a link between Cassandra Island and the deaths and disappearances, I, for my part, neither saw, nor sensed, nor found myself engaged in anything remotely cultish.

I trust the attached are satisfactory and that you won't be bothering me again.

--

David Ase

How many ways are there to say exactly nothing?

I'd been sitting on the files all week, unable to decide if I should send them off or keep them as insurance. My mind made up, I started editing. Every sentence sucked, of course. Perfectionism and procrastination make the best of friends.

I couldn't seem to get back in the swing of things. Calls that had come in while I was gone went unreturned. Clients hesitantly asked if I was sensing something every time my concentration wandered. Even reading was a problem. I made not one, but two stabs at a brick by Neal Stephenson—a must, according the hacker who'd installed my Linux server. The novel should have kept me turning pages until dawn. Instead I couldn't get past chapter three.

Channel-surfing helped me through the wee hours of the

morning. In between the endless house and wardrobe makeovers, I landed on an awful lot of Jena's Psychic Nexus. Every hour it seemed, a station somewhere in the northern hemisphere was airing her. Like any couch-potato rubberneck, I couldn't blip away. Wouldn't want to miss a trademark Alka-Seltzer fit. I caught one finally, which galvanized me by association with things psychic and distasteful into calling Byron from the number on his card.

An answering machine picked up, robo-voiced and curt. I identified myself, said I had material to send, and asked him for his email.

UPS came calling with an envelope next afternoon. Inside was a folded sheet containing the address (sleemans@pet.csis-scrcs.gc.ca) along with some instructions: *Use GnuPG. Finger me to get my public key. You know how to do that, right?*

Luckily I did, or I'd have called him back and wisecracked: "Put my lips together and blow?"

The same geek who had recommended Neal Stephenson, and whom I'd paid enough to keep in Coke and pizza for a lifetime, had tutored me on many things including GnuPG. It's a method for encrypting email that requires two "keys"; each about a thousand characters in length. One of them is public; you pass it out to anyone who wants to send you secret mail. The other one is private. You guard it like Fort Knox since it alone can undo what's encrypted with the public key.

"Finger" was the standard Unix command for getting public information on a user at a particular domain.

The problem with GnuPG is that once something's encrypted, you can't decrypt it—say, to change the text—unless you have the private key. Which, of course, you don't. It's in the hands of the recipient, in this case, Byron.

Bearing that in mind, I tweaked the last part six or seven times until it read: "... and that you won't be needing me again."

To the point and not as whiny.



Kirin called—eventually.

Marion was over, finishing her second brandy-tonic. I cupped my hand over the receiver, mouthed *Help yourself*, and headed for the study.

“Hey, Kirin. What’s up?”

“Nothing. No... well... not *nothing* nothing. Lots of stuff, really. Just nothing to worry about. That’s what you meant, isn’t it?”

“It was more of a generic ‘What’s up?’”

She tittered. “Right. Silly me.”

“So? What *is* up?”

“Like I said, nothing, really. I haven’t talked to you since we got back.”

“I guess that means that things are going well with Roy?”

“You do like getting to the point, don’t you?”

“My next-door neighbour might not agree.”

“Marion? The one with the booth at the Fair?”

“The same.”

“I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Maybe arrange a dinner or something.”

As long as Roy stays home.

“Roy and I *have* been seeing a lot of each other,” she said as if she’d heard the silent rider.

“I’m so surprised.”

“Don’t be nasty. I know you don’t like him.”

“I hardly even know the guy.”

“But driving back you said—”

“Those were just impressions. Even psychics fuck up sometimes.”

“Big time. You were so wrong about him.”

“Well, then, I’m glad to hear it.”

“You don’t sound like it. Really, David, Roy’s... special. He’s been so good to me. Good *for* me. We spend hours and hours just talking. He’s teaching—no, I’m *learning* things. Things I never knew about myself. I wish I could tell you.”

No need. From her tone of voice, the honeymoon had only just begun.

“There’s so much you don’t know about him,” she went on.

“I might, if you got around to telling me instead of gushing.”

“I can’t really talk about it. I mean, it’s not something I can put into words. I’ve met some of his friends. They’re great. Totally accepting. Like they’ve known me all my life. Do you have any idea how good it feels not to be a trophy for a change?”

“Male friends?”

“Men and women. Why?”

Because the Roy I met was not the type to have a lot of female buddies.

“Idle curiosity,” I said.

“No, you’re thinking Roy’s the kind of guy who doesn’t really like women.”

“You got me there. Looks like whatever else is going on, your sensitivity’s improving.”

A funny silence followed, as if I’d touched a nerve.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Kirin asked.

“Is that another one of your ‘I don’t believe a word you’re saying’ questions? You’ve got to stop that. It kind of puts a damper on conversation.”

She exhaled into the phone. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just that sometimes you say things—”

“For the sake of talking, like everybody else. And speaking of talking, we should get together. Can you pull yourself away from Roy long enough to come around for a drink?”

“Actually that’s why I called. I do want to see you but I’m going away for a while.”

“Let me guess—Roy in a trailer by the Grand?”

“It’s going to be cramped. Roy says it’s not really big enough for three—I’m going with Carlin after school’s out—but apparently there’s a shitload of summer things to do around there. I want Carlin to enjoy herself. Roy says we can take day trips to Lake Erie.”

“Port Dover’s nice. So’s Turkey Point and Long Point Beach.”

"I've never been. Typical Torontonionian."

"I drive down that way sometimes."

"Really? You should come and visit. Meet Carlin, get to know Roy better. Hang on a sec—he wrote down directions. I'll go get them."

I started feeling guilty leaving Marion alone and went down the hall to join her.

"Okay, David. Here it is. Take Highway 6 south from Hamilton to Caledonia, then turn right at Caithness Street."

I held up a finger to let Marion know I was nearly done.

"Yes. Highway 54. I know it. Before you cross the river."

... on an arch bridge like the one across High River... on the far side there's a hot dog stand that's served up footlongs since forever...

"Take 54 past Onondaga, then turn left at English School Road. Half a kilometre after the turn there's supposed to be a sign for Brantwood Park. That's where we'll be. I guess you'll have to ask which trailer's Roy's. Promise me you'll come and visit."

I assured her I would, then made telephone goodbye noises while Marion looked on, head cocked.

"Kirin Neemes," I said before she asked. "The woman I went to Cassandra Island with."

"Ah, the one who thinks she's genuinely psychic. Her confusion getting on your nerves?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Your promise to look her up had all the sincerity of a cocktail kiss."

"It's not her, Marion. It's the man she's seeing. And to be honest, I am a little annoyed."

Marion nodded. "You sounded it."

"I did?"

"Don't worry. I doubt she noticed. She hasn't had the benefit of being your drinking buddy for the past two years. What's the problem?"

"I was looking forward to having a playmate for the summer."

Marion swirled ice cubes in her glass.

“That’s the problem with single friends, isn’t it?” she mused. “As soon as they meet someone, they make you feel like they were only hanging around till something better came along.”

I raised my tepid rye and ginger. “Here’s to staying single.”

Marion clinked my glass. “A fine sentiment, David, but it’s not going to do you much good this summer, I’m afraid.”

“Why not?”

“I’m going home early this year. In fact, that’s why I’m here. I wanted to impinge on you to water my plants and keep an eye on the apartment while I’m away.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“So soon? Is everything okay?”

“No one’s dying, if that’s what you mean, but there are some things I need to take care of.”

“For two whole months?”

“You know how it is with family.”



“Is anything the matter, David?” Ferko asked.

“Why?”

“You seem subdued. It’s not this outing, is it? Dr. E-cubed feels I’m up to it. You’ll have noticed in some ways I’m even better than before.”

It was true. He was speaking almost as he used to. His co-ordination had improved as well. Normally methodical and cautious, he was sailing down the boardwalk at Kew Beach as if his wheelchair were a go-cart.

“Plus, it feels good to have been in my car again—I shouldn’t say that, should I? it’s been yours for how long now?—and watch the world fly by.”

“I don’t drive *that* fast.”

“Jaguars choose their own pace on the open road.”

He tacked a little to the right to let a rollerblader clatter by. The perfect afternoon had drawn a stream of tanned male bodies to the boardwalk. Most of them were barrelling along on inch-wide wheels. Amblers were few and far between.

Ferko pivoted to watch the latest specimen go by and sighed. I mussed his hair and let him take my hand.

“I think I’m feeling lonely, Ferko.”

“Would you care to talk about it?”

“Is the doctor in?”

He dipped his head and fell professionally silent.

On the beach, families had staked out turf with blankets and umbrellas. A rail-thin skinhead sailed a Frisbee to his Doberman. Couples wandered near the shore, lost to everything but sun and sand and their own company.

“It’s silly,” I said. “I was looking forward to spending time with Kirin this summer. I find she’s comfortable to be around, even though she thinks I never mean exactly what I say. And I guess I thought it would be kind of fun to, I don’t know, hang out. But now she’s gone and shacked up with this guy she met at Cassandra Island. And Marion’s scarpered, too. Family, she says. Till September.”

“The redoubtable Madame Harper. You’ll miss her conversation. Your friends have all deserted you.”

“Hardly ‘all’.”

“We are talking feelings here, not facts.”

“Dumb, huh?”

Ferko slowed his wheelchair to a ruminative crawl. A JetSki whined out on the lake, sending up a squirrel-tail of water. The skinhead’s dog ran after it. A mother with two children pulled them close and scurried off.

“What’s really wrong?” he asked.

“I’m bored,” I said, surprised to hear myself.

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It doesn’t, does it?”

The JetSki faded out of earshot. Ferko’s wheels thumped along

the planks.

“Is this by any chance related to your missing years?”

“Sorry—I’m not following you.”

“Up till now they’ve been the motor of your life.”

“Only insofar as I try not to think about them.”

“Avoidance generates as much momentum as acknowledgment, you know.”

An errant cloud—a tiny ball of fluff in an otherwise clear sky—slid across the sun. The light went silver for a moment.

“When I won the lottery, I thought all that would change.”

“Because you had the means to re-invent yourself? No one can do that. No matter where you go, you always get there with yourself.”

I smiled at the aphorism. “Show me a self-made man, I’ll show you Bedlam?”

“Chesterton was talking about something else—how we are formed not just by individuation, but by context—but yes, the quip applies.”

“And how does this relate to missing years and being bored?”

“Simple, David. Your money lets you order things exactly as you wish. The difficulty is, that order had its origins in flight. Evasion from the mystery of you. You gilded over it but now the gilt is wearing thin. The puzzle of your missing years is starting to show through. Your lassitude’s a symptom.”

He stopped abruptly.

“Would you mind? The sun is getting hot. I’d like to take some shade.”

He spun himself to face the lake. I backed him off the boardwalk. He grunted, then gestured to a picnic table nestled in some larches.

“Over there, I think,” he said. “That way you’ll have a place to sit.”

“So, what should I do?” I asked as he aligned his wheelchair with the table’s end.

“Not what *should* you do, what *will* you do.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Not necessarily. If you’ve paid attention all these years, you know that patients come to therapy because their strategies for circumventing pain no longer work. Have become, in time, more vexing to them than the pain they sought to flee.

“Your missing years have never ceased to be a source of pain. You’ve dealt with them—or rather not dealt with them, since in your case you cannot—by finding challenges that keep them in the background. The hardship of your life out on the street is an example.

“But now you are a millionaire, and Fate’s gift has deprived you of the challenges you need to stay distracted. As a result you’ve gone into reactive mode. You don’t seem to have much will for anything. This is actually a good sign. You *must* react—respond—not go seeking more distractions. That tactic now risks turning into crippling neurosis.”

“A fine summation, Doctor, but—what should I do?”

He looked off, his face a complex of indulgence and concern.

“Confront what is,” he said, as if it were that easy. “Confront what is. See where it leads.”



I inserted the CD in my computer, settled in a reading chair and picked up the remote. Without AC, the air in the apartment had gone muggy after sunset and my skin stuck to the leather arms.

Earlier my feet had stuck the same way to the floor as I padded from the TV to the fridge to my computer desk and back again. With nothing grabbing my attention, memories of Axel’s giant’s body had surfaced to the point I’d had to deal with them. Which ended in another kind of stickiness, but didn’t help the listlessness.

The remote control was growing warm from holding it. I couldn’t put this off forever.

The CD held an image of a tape recording Ferko’d made. A hypnotherapist—one Dr. Helen Behr—had come for dinner. She knew my story, but after supper asked to hear it anyway, “from the

horse's mouth." Her dark brown eyes—two marbles in an apple-doll face—had glittered with attentive interest. Afterwards, she and Ferko had discussed "the case".

Then, without warning, she'd begun to talk to me, explaining how she wanted to proceed. Her voice was calm and reassuring and as comforting as Campbell's soup. I sensed a trick. The intuition was confirmed when she broke off mid-sentence.

"Well, that's not going to work now, is it?" she said, unperturbed, as if she had an arsenal of things to try.

Ferko sipped his brandy. "I had a feeling David might put up a fight."

I protested. We'd talked about hypnosis often. If anything he'd been the cautious one, putting off this evening. I'd been the one who wanted to go through with it.

Dr. Behr worked hard to get me in a trance, but no matter what, I stayed immune. It was as if in wanting her to take control, I overdid it and absorbed her objectivity. Her gentle, patient words became my own voice giving me directions.

The mind commands the mind and meets resistance.

Unfazed, she asked if there were any music I particularly liked. Something calm and soothing. Nothing sprang to mind. My life, pre-Ferko, hadn't left much room for stereos. Ferko said he might have something, and withdrew an album from a cabinet devoted to LPs.

"Debussy," he said. "The pictures he creates inside my head let me float anywhere."

He put the record on and at the same time flipped a toggle on his reel-to-reel TEAC.

I'd never listened to the tape he made that night. He'd insisted that I take it with me when his stroke had forced me to move out. My geek-for-hire, whom I'd had encode and burn it, had returned it with her eyebrows raised and just one comment: *Weird shit, man.*

I thumbed the Play button. The drive whirred on, and moments later music filled the room: a flute, a harp and a viola, shimmering like sunlight on the surface of a lake.

Dr. Behr spoke:

“It’s lovely, Ferko. Thank you. Don’t you think so, David? Like summer breezes blowing on your skin. And water, too, with white light dancing on the surface. You know, my parents had a cottage north of Gravenhurst. We used to go there after school ended. I recall those summers perfectly, the days that started with the twittering of birds before the sun broke over tall pines far across the lake . . .”

Her voice became a bourdon to the Debussy as she recounted summers she had known, teasing me, seducing me toward a place where bright, fleet music was a Mt. Hope summer day.

“Where are you now, David?”

“By the pond behind the barn.”

“Are you alone?”

“My friend is here.”

“Your invisible companion?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“Lying in the grass. I have something in my hand. A cigarette. No—a joint. I’m smoking dope. It’s very badly rolled.”

“Where did you get it?”

“From the barber’s son.”

Leather jacket, tattooed forearms, rumours about pregnant girls. . .

“Did he give it to you?”

“I bought it. With money from my mother’s purse.”

“Your foster mother?”

“Yes.”

“What are you feeling?”

“Lazy. Happy. Heavy.”

“What do you see?”

“Blue moths in the bullrushes. A turtle on the bank. It’s hot. The water’s calling me.”

Slipping out of cut-off shorts and underwear. . .

“Is your friend still with you?”

“Yes. We’re in the pond. We have a game.”

Staying under water till the need to breathe’s so fierce I feel my lungs inflame, my penis start to stiffen... I break the surface with a shout and tread in place until my friend has had his turn...

“Game?”

“A contest. My friend, he... likes the feeling.”

Legs jerking... air-starved sinews scrabbling to the surface... gasping, panting... eyes wild with excitement...

A stretch of music with no overlay of words. A clink of a glass, most likely Ferko setting down his brandy.

“What’s happening, David?”

“I’m stretched out on the grass. It tickles. The sun is hot. My skin is warm. I’m rubbing it. My friend seems realer than before. It feels like his hands on my belly.”

“Are you aroused?”

“Yes. I’m playing with myself.”

Imagining the unseen presence as a real person, warm like me... water droplets sticking to his skin... him rolling over, nuzzling... his hardness on my thigh... on top of me, rocking... grinning with complicity...

“Shit!”

“What is it, David?”

“Someone’s coming.”

No one comes back here, unless... I haven’t done my chores...

“David!”

Mr. Bennett calling me... no time to hide... naked, hard... a Ziplock bag of dope and rolling papers...

“What the—? What the fuck are you doing? Get up, you little pervert! Put your fucking clothes on.”

Struggling into cut-offs... penis jammed under the waistband... zipper barely closed...

Whack!

The blow comes unexpectedly. I fall down on my knees...

Whack!

Cheeks stinging, scalding...

Whack!

My brain jarred loose, jangling in my head...

Whack!

Tears burning in my eyes... fronthand... backhand... front-hand...

"... let no fucking weirdos in my house!"

Whack!... pricks of light, a swarm of glowing blackflies...

Whack!... the world goes bright, then starts to dim... Whack!...

"Stop it! Stop!"

"What is it, David?"

"He's beating me. He's crazy. I can't make him stop. On and on ..."

"Listen to me, David. Listen to my voice. This is Dr. Behr. I'm going to count backwards from ten. Every number is a step away from him. He can't hurt you if you walk away. When I reach zero—"

A sound of grunting, like someone being kicked.

"David?"

No response. Just music—flute, viola, harp.

"David?"

"It's stopped."

"Where are you now?"

"It's dark. And hot. I see slats of light. Dim shapes. The outline of a truck. I'm in the barn. My legs feel itchy. I'm covered with... grass. I've been mowing."

The unused hectare out behind the barn... the long, concealing grasses crushed and mulched beneath the blades...

"I smell gasoline. I spilled some filling up the mower. It's gone, but I still smell it. My hands are in my pockets. There are... things there."

"What sorts of things?"

"Rubber bands. A penknife. A pack of cigarettes. Other stuff. I want to hide it. There must be somewhere in the barn."

"Up there."

*The hayloft... tins of paint and varnish... broken garden tools
... decaying furniture...*

"You're sure?"

"He never goes up there."

*Paint and thinner fumes... a mouldy armchair ripped across
the back... a centipede that crawls out when I stuff my treasure in
...*

"No. Not that. Keep it out."

The metal cylinder of kitchen matches.

"David?"

"I'm sitting on the floor. It's cool. Cement. I have matches in my hand. I'm lighting them. When the flame gets near my fingers, I pinch the blackened part and watch the flame crawl up the unburnt part. Whoa!"

"What is it?"

"Where I spilled the gasoline, the air went *poof!* like a small explosion."

My imaginary friend is moving off.

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see."

A plastic jug of gasoline... a small dark pool of liquid spreading out on the cement...

"Light it."

A fresh match flares bright yellow.

"Drop it."

"Is it safe?"

"As if we care."

Another poof!, this time soft, like ears popping... a pool of sapphire flame, retreating from the edges as the gasoline burns off

...

"Cool."

"Yeah."

"It's going out."

"Pour on more."

A drop of gas... a steady golden trickle... a wavering blue

flame, hovering above the floor...leaping to the open jug like magic...

"The jerry can's on fire. The mouth is melting."

Beautiful, the way the plastic softens, widens, folds upon itself

...

"I can't put it out. I want to but I can't. I don't remember where I put the lid."

"Leave it. Let it burn."

"What's going on, David?"

"I'm running to the house to let them know."

A rustling from the CD, as if my body were re-living the event. A nasty buzz like an electric current started in my belly—a taste of what might happen if I kept on listening. Did I need to risk it? Dr. Behr's hypnosis hadn't been oblivious. I still recalled, as words, what in trance-state I'd recounted.

Hannah, my foster-mother, dropped her kitchen knife and scurried to the door. Oily smoke cascaded from the entrance to the barn. Grey wisps leaked through cracks between the siding boards.

"Tom!" she screamed. "Tom!"

From the living room, Mr. Bennett, watching TV, shouted *What?*

"The barn's on fire!"

"What?!"

He lumbered through the kitchen in his undershirt and briefs. Red flames darted out the big barn doors. Higher up, orange tongues licked the walls and scooted to the roof.

"Call the fire department, Hannah! Call the fucking VFD! My truck's in there!"

He broke the screen door in his haste to run across the drive. The heat already reached the house. He flung an arm protectively across his face and kept on going.

Rooted to the spot, Hannah raised her hand and started going *no-no-no* as he stumbled into roiling smoke and nearly solid flame.