

THE FLIP SIDE OF REALITY

The Life & Times Of Flip Bellingus

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Introduction

The Flip Side Of Reality is a collection of fictional tales about a man named Livingston Ashcroft Bellingus. He was dubbed Flip by his wife after a lucrative business deal slipped through his fingers. At least it appeared to have slipped away but time and a sympathetic jury allowed Flip to prevail. If I had to identify a theme in this collection I believe it would align nicely with something Flip was known to utter from time to time: *“Most things in this world and in others are rarely as they appear.”*

The premise for these stories is that they are told to me by my paternal grandfather, a professor of philosophy at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. In truth, my real grandfather was a machinist. The one thing my actual granddad had in common with his fictional counterpart is that he spun some extraordinary yarns. As a boy I would sit for hours listening to stories of his exploits as a motorcycle messenger in World War I and his happy-go-lucky life that followed upon his arrival to the United States after the war.

In the book I’ve painted Flip as an absent minded professor though that may or may not actually be the case. I’ll let you decide. I like to think that with one minor exception, these stories are lighthearted and even a bit inspirational. Most of them fall under what would be considered fantasy with a side order of science fiction sprinkled about. I’m told there are several situations that are quite touching and give pause for deep reflection. I’ll let you decide that as well. I’m particularly fond of the third piece, Flip Comes To America. The first person I shared this account with said she “got lost” in the story for several hours on a Saturday afternoon. Writers love to hear that.

I felt it best to assemble the stories randomly, meaning they are not exactly in chronological order. I bring this up only because they were written independently and a couple of them contain information that is slightly redundant, such as brief introductions of one or two characters. But the stories do not rely on any type of sequential arrangement as they’re completely fictional and presented for your enjoyment. So, please, enjoy.

Peyote Deception & Butterflies

“Most things in this world and in others are rarely as they appear.” Livingston Ashcroft Bellingus

Livingston Ashcroft Bellingus is my paternal grandfather. He was known as “Flip” to both family and close friends. He picked that name up in the early 1960s. There is nothing especially profound about the above quote though some would say it’s the defining theme for my grandfather’s life. It is very much accepted in the world of physics and other worlds as well. Flip

was known to cite this quote or variations of it from time to time. The last time I remember hearing him say it, he was sitting quietly in restraints at a rest home in Melrose, Massachusetts.

Throughout much of his adult life Flip was a respected professor of philosophy at Northeastern University on the Boston campus. Around the time his daughter Delores married “the Castilian,” a Spanish diplomat and food supplier to the Army, Flip began working on a secret project in the basement. There were many secret projects over the years. After months of working alone he unveiled what was later to be known as Flip McGuiness, Mysterious Freedom Fighter, a kids’ rough and tumble action toy.

There was no doubt about it, the consensus on Grandpa was that he was an airhead. With absolutely no mind for business or incidental details for that matter, he took leave from the university and traveled the country visiting various corporate leaders trying to peddle the toy. At best, he was laughed at and ridiculed, despite having a professionally produced film of the toy in action. Flip had somehow made the thing so it was able to leap and then “tumble” through the air almost in slow motion. I’ve seen the old film and it was impressive. Finally, after more than two years on the road with little to show for his efforts, he gave up and returned home. A changed man.

A couple of years later a well known company introduced the toy just in time for the Christmas shopping frenzy. It sold millions. It seems the husband of one of the receptionists he met in his travels filed for a patent, sold the idea to a major toy company and received a huge amount of money up front along with a thirty cent royalty on every unit sold. Pretty nice. It was the toy conglomerate that named the thing Flip McGuiness, Mysterious Freedom Fighter.

My grandfather didn’t seem to notice that his idea had made it into the mainstream. After seeing Grandpa’s invention on numerous commercials that year my grandmother began to call him “Flip,” usually in a mocking tone. The name stuck.

During his time on the road he visited Arizona. He told me of some interesting people he met there. One afternoon while waiting at the Greyhound station for a bus heading east he met some Indians. They gave him some dried green “mints.” He told me they were chewy and not very tasty but the men said they would make his breath fresh and make him a wise man too. They turned out to be Peyote.

Under the influence of the psychedelic mints Grandpa wandered away from the bus station and met two men camping in the desert. He said that his senses were alive and his head was full of ideas. Geometric and mathematical equations were vividly swirling through the air before him. He told me that during the experience he was at peace with himself and with the world. He sat with the two men and told them of his journey trying to sell the toy action figure.

The men spoke of happiness and sadness, success and failure and the need for people to experience all emotions for a balanced life. After several days of long and deep discussions with these men Flip said, “In life you can make yourself a hero or you can make yourself a victim, each takes about the same amount of effort.”

I later remember reading a very similar quote to that in one of the early books of the teachings of Don Juan by Carlos Castaneda. Could it be that old Flip was camping with a couple of wizards? With him anything is possible.

Some years later Flip began hanging out in dingy bars and drinking, not necessarily to excess, he just seemed to like the company. He told me this behavior was inspired by the 1987 movie "Barfly" with Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway.

He said that even though the movie was set in skid row and the characters were complete and total losers, he believed them to be two of the most honest people in the world. Talking about it would sometimes bring him to tears.

One day while drinking with some guys in a dive, Flip was chugging down a beer in an apparent contest with one of the other patrons. As he tilted his head backwards his stool slipped out from under him. He fell and cracked his head on a cast iron radiator. That's how he ended up in the rest home with what the medical types called a traumatic brain injury.

It was during this time that I often visited him. If he appeared to be spaced out before the accident, he was really off balance after it. In those days nurses would use whatever means necessary to secure over-active patients.

There was a handrail attached to the wall around the corridor in the hospital and old Flip was usually sitting in a wheelchair with a towel or some kind of strap attached to the back of the chair and tied to the rail. He was famous for shouting out stuff like, "CHECK MY GIRTH, I'M A TROUT!" and "COME FOR ME NOW KIMOSABE!" and "GOD BLESS YOU, GEORGE BAILY!"

I remember visiting one day. He saw me approaching and called me over. He pointed to the ward secretary. "That one, Chet," he said in a hushed tone. "Something ain't quite right with her." In an attempt to humor him I said, "Good call, Flip. She's simple minded, for sure."

He looked at me in wide-eyed amazement. "She is?" He placed a lot of emphasis on the word is, dragging it out. "Then what's she doing working here, Chet?" By the way, my name isn't Chet, but that's what he's been calling me since I was a small boy, only God knows why. "She's really a patient," I said. "The doctors let her sit in that chair and pretend to work here so they can keep an eye on her."

"Really?" He said, pausing for a moment. "They're doing the same thing with me, you know. But I've got news for you, Chet. Most things in this world and in others are rarely as they appear."

On another occasion I visited him while he sat alone in the hospital's garden. He told me that a friend of his from the old days had visited earlier, a man named Mike McGinty. I knew this wasn't so because a nurse had told me Flip hadn't had visitors for the last few days. While we were talking he smiled and said, "There's Mike now," as he pointed to a rose bush. I looked in that direction but all I saw was a butterfly.

I told him that there was no one there. He continued pointing as he whimsically traced the path of the butterfly in flight and said, "Not many people know this Chet, but the souls of the recently departed sometimes inhabit the bodies of butterflies. Every so often they come back for

short visits to see how family and friends are doing.” There wasn’t much I could say to that so I just kept quiet.

Shortly after his 87th birthday Grandpa changed. He suddenly became completely lucid and asked to see his doctor. After a thorough examination, which included a battery of every physical and psychological test imaginable, he was deemed to be free from any effects of the brain injury or dementia. Three weeks later he was released into his own custody.

Within a month he was in the Philippines courting a woman 60 years his junior. He wrote me a long letter saying that while he was in the rest home lawyers had been working to wrestle the Flip McGuinness patent away from the interloper who had stolen it so many years before. It seems that Flip had developed some sort of hybrid gyroscope/spring mechanism and filed a patent for it. It was that part that allowed the toy to tumble through the air in slow motion. Somehow this important detail slipped by the toy company. That particular component had since been licensed to many aerospace companies as it had numerous applications outside of giving the illusion that a plastic doll was tumbling through the air.

After much wrangling, the toy company agreed to have Flip named as co-inventor. A large windfall for his share of the sales of the action toy and the spring/gyro device came with the settlement. Apparently, he’d been faking his craziness during his stay at the rest home and that it was his accident and eventual dependence on outside care that invoked sympathy in the jury, allowing him the patent infringement victory. Go figure, huh?

Today, at the age of 117, Flip lives with his new wife Estrellita and their four kids. She thinks he’s 72. He’s as active as anyone I know. He raises Koi, orchids and butterflies. I guess at his age he might need a good supply of physical vehicles around in case any of his friends want to stop by and say hello on their way to heaven. And it also appears he’s been right all this time. Most things in this world and in others are rarely as they appear.

Senior Smile

I don’t remember the exact date. Flip actually walked to my house looking for me. I know I was in high school at the time. My best guess is that I was a junior and it was early in the school year, still officially summer. Recognizing my interest in business and entrepreneurial pursuits at an early age, it makes sense that he’d want to share this story with me. There was a playground just down the street from my house so we went there and took a seat on a park bench. He seemed eager to tell me something. It turns out that he’d been involved in quite a successful business.

Before getting into the story I think I should mention everyone in the family felt Flip had absolutely no mind for business at all. At least that’s what I believed at the time. On several occasions he has tried to advance profitable ideas only to find most people mocking his best efforts despite the fact that many of his ideas were, in fact, brilliant. I guess his delivery was less than stellar.

This all changed sometime in the latter part of the 1960s when Flip mentioned in an offhand manner he’d developed an unusual method for keeping his teeth white. The comment

drew the attention of his daughter, my aunt, Delores Bellingus, a woman who appears to be blessed with a wide variety of talents. I say appears because Delores lives a cosmopolitan lifestyle and has never had a job that I know of.

Auntie Delores first established herself as an entrepreneurial wizard when I was just a toddler in the 1950s. I offer some background on her before explaining how she helped her father amass a small fortune in the dental field. As you'll soon see, Delores was nobody's fool. I'll open with a quote she often used.

*Ninety-seven percent of the people make the wrong choices ninety-seven percent of the time.
Delores Saldana-Para Bellingus*

Auntie Delores was quoted saying this immediately after agreeing to marry the man who was to become her seventh husband. Everyone thought she was admitting that she was making a mistake in marrying number seven. And even though I was just a small boy at the time, she secretly told me that it was number seven who was making a serious error in marrying her. Then she laughed and laughed and laughed.

Delores is a wonderfully vivacious, colorful and beautiful woman. Long before it was fashionable, she insisted on keeping the Bellingus name in each of her many marriages. The only time she even came close to compromise was when she added the name Saldana-Para, her seventh husband's name.

Rodrigo Saldana-Para was a Spanish diplomat who, near the end of WWII managed to secure a large contract with the U.S. Army supplying them with beans and salad oil. Soon after the war ended the United States became involved in the Korean conflict and Rodrigo expanded his operation, supplying roughly seventy-five percent of all the food for our troops in Korea on the ground and at sea.

In 1952, as the war was coming to an end, Delores met Rodrigo while they each vacationed in the Catskills and it was love at first sight for both. Almost immediately they decided to marry. The only stickler in the union was the issue with the names. Auntie was steadfast in keeping her family name. Rodrigo, a proud Spaniard unaccustomed to concessions, finally agreed to a compromise, thus the name Delores Saldana-Para Bellingus. Rodrigo felt his name should come last but Delores told him he could take it as is or find someone else to marry. He took it.

Delores has been and is to this day an imaginative and resourceful woman. One day in the mid 1950s Rodrigo came home complaining that cockroaches were overrunning his warehouses both in Spain and in the States. As he left for the office the next day Delores handed him a plastic restaurant-style ketchup dispenser containing white powder and told him to sprinkle the stuff liberally where the roaches had been seen. He did as instructed and immediately noticed that their numbers were diminishing. Delores made more of the mixture and within a month the roach problem was completely solved.

As time went on she was able to strike a deal with the United States government whereby she would grant them a nonexclusive license with optional yearly renewable rights to use the miraculous insecticide. She licensed the concoction to the War Department for a million dollars with undisclosed quarterly royalties to be paid as long as the stuff was in use. Rodrigo scoffed at the deal saying it was not nearly enough money up front. But Delores has had the last laugh as the white power has become the number one combatant of pesky insects of all types in military installations worldwide bringing her quarterly payments into the millions since the deal was reached in 1956. The ingredients are not even a secret. This is what it's made from:

- Finely ground flower
- Pulverized sugar
- Plaster of Paris
- Vanilla extract.

It seems that the bugs are attracted by the vanilla odor and gobble up the mixture of sugar, flower and plaster. Within seconds, the plaster combines with the natural juices of the roach and inside of a minute or so sets up, killing the critter. No fuss, no muss, and just a little mess. The secret to the magical powder is the precise ratios of the ingredients and the only one with that information is Delores.

In 1957 Delores was a guest of President Eisenhower in the Oval office and received an official presidential citation for her contribution to making the military a more sanitary and efficient institution. At the ceremony Ike was quoted as saying something really profound like, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Sadly, Rodrigo was unable to attend the event as he passed away earlier in the year, the victim of a massive heart attack while in the arms of another woman.

According to Delores, she had been very successful well before her association with Rodrigo though most of the Bellingus family saw her in an air of mystery as she lived, worked and played well away from the rest of the clan. I'd always assumed that Flip wasn't aware of her business prowess. But that all changed sometime around 1968.

I still remember a warm breeze blowing in the park that afternoon as I silently lamented another summer passing away. I was also a bit self conscious and hoped none of my friends would see me sitting there on such a nice afternoon with my Grandpa. Flip was anxious to get started with his story. He began by saying that he had no clue of how to take a business idea from the conceptual stage to market. Several years later I found out this was entirely false as you'll discover later. Then he told me how Delores had been able to bring one of his ideas to market when it accidentally came up in conversation a couple of years back.

Delores had been home visiting in the summer of 1968. She was sitting in the back yard with Flip under a shady old willow. They were drinking iced coffee and chatting. As Flip tells it,

Delores was commenting on how her coffee consumption was discoloring her teeth. Flip looked at her and asked her to smile. She obliged.

“Your teeth look fine to me, Dee.” Flip was the only one to call her Dee.

“I know they’re not bad,” she said. “But I have to go to the dentist every three months or so for cleaning, otherwise they turn yellow and then brown if I don’t stay right on top of it.”

“Why don’t you paint them?” Flip offered.

Delores laughed. “Paint them? Sounds like it could be dangerous.”

“It’s not,” Flip said. “Toward the end of 1966 I noticed how my teeth had gotten yellow. So I thought about how I might change that. I did a lot of reading and while I was studying I got an idea. That was to paint my teeth white. So I did.”

“You painted your teeth, Daddy? Did you mention it to anyone?”

“Not that I remember,” Flip said. “Though your mother noticed it right away. I’ve done it once since then, though they didn’t really need it. They look pretty good if you ask me.” He flashed a toothy smile displaying remarkably bright teeth.

“I guess I never noticed how nice your teeth were, Dad.”

“They wouldn’t look nice at all except for my painting them,” he said.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Delores said. Of course, Flip was often well out of his element with casual conversation and took things quite literally. So when Delores asked if he was serious he answered in a very matter-of-fact tone that he was.

“Aren’t you afraid of absorbing dangerous chemicals from the paint?” Delores said. Flip smiled again. “Don’t be silly, Dee. I didn’t use house paint. Like I said, I did some studying and came up with my own blend. It’s completely harmless and can last quite a long time.” Delores sipped her coffee and sat thinking for a couple of minutes.

“So what’s in this paint, Daddy?” Flip smiled.

“Very finely ground Abalone shell mixed with pulverized vanilla bean.”

“That’s it?” Delores said.

“No,” Flip said. “There’s also lacquer, a natural lacquer. It’s derived from tree gum.” Delores pondered his answer as she looked at her father. Finally, she spoke.

“I’m not much on dentistry,” she said. “But I’d guess that tree gum would have some sort of sugar in it. Sugar would be an unwelcomed ingredient in tooth paint, I’d imagine.”

“Smart girl,” Flip said. “The sap from some trees is high in sugar and in others, it’s quite low, mostly protein, actually. I took my time studying all kinds of trees and found one in particular that has a very low sugar content.”

“Still,” Delores said. “I’d guess any sugar at all would be out of the question.”

“That’s right,” Flip said. “But there’s an ingredient I added to the mix that allowed the stuff to retain its qualities of a viable pigment medium without the sugar being present.”

“And what might that be?”

“H₂O₂,” Flip said.

“What’s that?” Delores said.

“Simple hydrogen peroxide. It took a while to get the percentage just right but once I did, this stuff will stick to porcelain, Teflon, stainless steel, plastic, bones, polished wood, and most important, teeth. I’ve kept a few old hound’s teeth as lucky charms since I was a boy. I experimented with them as I developed the stuff. I took a chip of one of those teeth and soaked it in the mixture for 90 days. Not even the slightest sign of decay. Then I took the stuff to the college and had one of the science profs take it to the lab and test for sugars. None. That’s what I was after.”

“Amazing,” Delores said. “So how do you get it to stick? I mean, it’s got to be a pain to try and paint teeth while your mouth has saliva in it.”

“That took patience,” Flip said. “First I painted the loose dog’s teeth with a fine brush. The paint spread evenly and stayed in place nicely. Absolutely perfect consistency. But I knew it would be hard to apply it to a live subject that way. One of the benefits of having a completely organic and non-toxic mixture was that it could be swallowed without harm. It’s not very tasty but it’s not a poison either. Then I replaced the brush with a small atomizer.

“This worked well but the paint set up too fast and clogged the atomizer. I ended up solving that problem by diluting the paint more. But that meant I had to apply three separate coats to get the desired finish. I ended up getting one of my students to help me. He was failing philosophy and I told him I’d let him pass if he helped. He’s actually the one who painted my teeth the first time. Then I painted his.” Delores sat speechless. Flip continued.

“I think it would be feasible these days for a dentist to take an impression of your upper and lower teeth. Then he would be able to cut out the actual teeth from the mold and make a lightweight latex bite block with holes or windows that would show the exposed teeth, just the part of the teeth needing the paint. And with modern pneumatics these days I’m sure it would be pretty simple to develop a small sprayer that would apply the paint evenly to each tooth. The stuff dries in under a minute so applying three coats wouldn’t take long at all.”

“Daddy, do you realize the commercial potential for this?”

“I’ve thought about it but didn’t know who to turn to,” Flip said. “I’ve had other ideas that didn’t quite work out.” Delores blushed, knowing her father was referring to the Flip McGuinness action toy.

“Two things right off the bat,” Delores said. “If you wanted to go to market with this you’d first need to get a patent on the paint, maybe on the procedure too. Then you’ve got to develop a small pneumatic tool that would apply the paint properly, unless that is, there’s already one available. And you’d probably want to patent that as well if you did need to develop it. Then you might consider giving the process a catchy name and file for a trademark on that.”

“Do you know about such things, little girl, trademarks, patents?” Flip said in earnest.

“I do,” she said. “I hold patents and exclusive rights to several profitable products. Flash me that smile again, Pop.” Flip showed his pearly whites.

“Remarkable,” Delores said. “How long since they’ve been done?” Flip stopped to ponder. “I had them done the first time in the fall of ’66. Then I had your mother help me with it again this past spring.”

“Mom? Ugh. That must have been some fun,” Delores said, knowing her mother wasn’t always patient with Flip and his projects.

“She was a good sport,” Flip said. “Not good enough to want it done to her but she painted my teeth just fine, don’t you think?”

“They look amazing. I think you’ve really got something here, Pops.” Flip smiled.

Delores got started immediately on the project, making a half dozen phone calls to various business contacts. Flip got busy producing a new batch of dental paint. At Delores’s suggestion he prepared several off white tones as some people were certain to want them. Delores handled the patents and trademark filings for the product and process, which was Eternal Smiles and Eternal Smile Process. As it turned out there was no need to develop a pneumatic sprayer as there was one already available that was perfect for the task at hand.

Delores let Flip paint her teeth and was delighted with the results. She and Flip were trying to convince Marguerite, my Grandma, to have her teeth whitened but she was wary and said another time, perhaps.

While everything was in process Delores stayed in her old bedroom at the Bellingus house so she could stay abreast of all the demands of a new enterprise. About a month into the preliminary setup work Delores received a call from a prominent attorney who specialized in the FDA approval process, something neither Flip or Delores had anticipated at the outset. The news was disturbing. The lawyer reported that clearing the Food & Drug Administration hurdles would likely take more than five years and cost several hundred thousand dollars, minimum.

Delores pointed out that the ingredients for the product were all quite harmless. The attorney told her unofficially that the ADA, American Dental Association, a huge lobby in Washington along with their first cousin the AMA, didn’t take kindly to new, innovative products or procedures that might upset or dislodge well-established and protected techniques and that the Food & Drug Administration, unofficially, indicated that they would require a full course of trials lasting several years regardless of how benign the product and process was. Delores was disappointed for Flip and pondered how she might gently break the news. She approached him again in the back yard as he sat reading.

“Daddy,” she said. Flip looked up and smiled.

“I’ve got some disturbing news about our Eternal Smile project.”

“Really?” Flip said.

“Yes. It’s going to take several years to get the product and process approved by the government. Seems we might be stepping on the toes of the people in the dental industry so we’re going to have to go through rigid, by-the-book testing.”

“Hmmm.” Flip said. “Red tape everywhere we turn these days.”

“Yeah,” Delores said. “It gets worse all the time.”

“But that doesn’t have to stop us,” Flip said.

“I don’t see how we can get around this, Daddy. If we go forward without approval the government will shut us down. Then they’ll see us as troublemakers and make it impossible to get approved.”

“Why don’t we offer it in a country where there aren’t so many rules?” Flip said. “I’d bet there are millions of people all over the world that would like to have nice looking teeth. Maybe we could bring it out in Europe or South America. Those people are happy to have products that do the job and still believe in common sense over bureaucracy.” Delores smiled.

“Daddy, that’s brilliant,” she said. Flip smiled.

Delores immediately called the attorney back and asked about the procedures for getting approval in other countries. Within a couple of days she had a list of countries that would be friendly to their venture. After discussing the possibilities with Flip they decided to start out in Argentina as regulatory restrictions there were virtually nonexistent. There were certain adjustments that had to be made in the venture. They changed the name of the product and process and kept it simple calling it Senior Smile. Flip bought a set of Spanish language cassettes and began to study them thinking it might be useful if he had a feel for Spanish seeing as how he would be involved in marketing a product in Argentina.

At this point in the story Flip suggested we walk to his house as my grandmother was preparing her famous lamb stew, one of my favorites. When we arrived Gram told us it would be an hour before dinner so we sat in the den to continue our discussion. I’ll admit that I have heard many unusual stories from my grandfather over the years and have most often taken them with a grain of salt or outright dismissed them out of hand. But having Auntie Delores involved in this gave it an air of credibility that many of Flip’s yarns were lacking. I was eager to hear more about tooth painting.

As I got comfortable in the den I was about to ask my grandfather several questions. He seemed to sense this and held up his hand as if to have me stop. Then he got up from where he was sitting and walked into the dining room. He immediately returned with a box containing a pile of magazine clippings and several VHS cassettes. He turned on the television and put one of the videos into a player sitting atop the TV. I knew something special was up because Flip almost never watches television. He sat beside me, smiled and said, “Wait till you see this, Chet.”

“What is it?” I replied.

“Watch,” he said.

The video began to play and for the next half hour I was utterly flabbergasted. The first clip started on a sound stage where a talk show was hosted. Everything was in Spanish but Flip had somehow gotten someone to add subtitles in English. The clip opened at the end of a particular segment with a pretty blonde show host named Lupe Moreno announcing her next guest, which was, Flip Bellingus, Senior Smile. It was strange to hear my grandfather’s family nickname on television. It was even stranger to hear the introduction in Spanish with the name

being pronounced in what sounded like broken English. But that was just the beginning of the strangeness.

All but a couple of the commercials had been edited out and the hostess came right back on and introduced Flip again. Only this time he actually came out onto the set, shook hands with two other guests, hugged a pretty lady as she made room for him on the sofa and took a seat by the hostess. She began speaking to him in Spanish and to my amazement he responded in kind as though it were his native language. I understood some of it but was glad to have the subtitles there.

First she asked how the new venture was going. Flip answered easily. But there was something about him. He didn't appear to be the guy I'd known my whole life. He was animated and gregarious. He acted as though he was a regular on the talk show circuit. He spoke fluently and used hand gestures. There were several questions about teeth painting and Senior Smile. Flip would occasionally turn to the pretty lady to his right, the featured guest before him. They'd cup their hands and whisper to each other as though they had big secrets and then laugh like old friends. He was a talk show natural.

I watched in amazement as Lupe Moreno asked question after question and Flip replied like nobody's business. After about five minutes of casual interviewing, the hostess said they were going to a commercial and when they returned Flip was going to paint her teeth!

The show returned in a few seconds with Lupe talking about how wonderful people looked after getting the Senior Smile process. Then they flashed several before and after pictures up on the screen showing various people young and old who had received the whitening treatment. These were impressive photos. The camera then moved to what might have been a beautician's chair where Lupe Marino was sitting with a sort of bib on. The other guests were gathered around. There was a work station on wheels off to the side where Flip's teeth whitening utensils sat. He donned a set of latex exam gloves. Then he picked up what appeared to be false teeth though they were actually a bite block he'd made of Lupe's mouth before the show.

All of the openings for her teeth had been cut prior to the segment. Flip placed this device in her mouth and the camera showed a close-up. All of her teeth were showing while her gums and tongue were protected. Flip went to his countertop and picked up what looked like an electric toothbrush, though it was actually a little battery operated pneumatic paint gun. Then he picked up a small squirt bottle of paint. He described every move he made in perfect, if not eloquent Spanish. The audience was stone silent as he went along.

He put a small amount of paint into the gun and then placed it on the counter. Then he opened up a sterile towel and explained to Lupe that he was going to first dry her teeth and then gently blast them with air. This would be the final preparation before applying the paint. Lupe just nodded and gave the thumbs up signal. Flip first dried the inside of Lupe's mouth and then shot several blasts of air in. Then he quickly took the paint applicator and applied a thin coat of paint to her upper teeth with a gentle sweeping motion. He used a wooden tongue blade to help access the back row. With that done he swept her lowers. After the first coat he blasted her mouth with air again.

He continued to explain it all as he went along. As soon as he had the lowers done he said that her top teeth were now ready for another coat. He repeated the process twice more and again followed each application with a blast of air. Finally, he announced he was finished. The entire process took less than three minutes. He removed the bite block from Ms. Moreno's mouth. The camera drew in close. Everyone was watching as Lupe ran her tongue over her beautiful new dental paint job. She smiled and proclaimed there was no foul taste, something she was slightly concerned about before agreeing to have the process done. Flip handed her a mirror. She broke into a wide smile proclaiming how beautiful her teeth looked. The audience went wild with approval and applause.

The guests and hostess returned to the interview set and took their seats. Both of the previous guests booked appointments with Flip right then and there to have their teeth whitened. Flip explained that there were two local Senior Smile centers in La Plata but because he felt so close to his new friends he would personally take care of them. The audience went wild. The show went to a commercial. It was an ad with Flip explaining the Senior Smile process and pointing people to one of many convenient locations. When the segment finished Flip stopped the video with a remote control unit.

"Well, what do you think?" He said.

"I don't know what to say. I never knew you spoke such fluent Spanish."

"I didn't either," Flip said. "Once we knew we were going to start in the Argentine market I bought a Spanish language course and practiced a little. Delores has a friend down there who's a dentist. She and I flew down and showed him the process. Dee had come up with a franchise agreement and offered this guy a special introductory deal. We spent the better part of a week doing people's teeth for free. Finally, the dentist, Manual Hernandez, said no more free treatments and he began charging for them. Word got around and two weeks later there was a little story on the evening news in La Plata. That brought in a lot of business for Dr. Hernandez. Delores hired an agent down there to handle the franchise inquires. We signed up 113 dentists and 42 physicians all over Argentina inside of a month. It caught on in a big way. I didn't have much to do with the business stuff at first.

"But after two more nightly news reports Delores got an offer to have the process featured on a morning talk radio show. Dr. Hernandez was scheduled to appear but cut out at the last minute. There was an English translator at the radio station so I volunteered to do the interview. But when I got there people were all talking about the new teeth whitening process. They didn't know who I was right away and I began talking to them about it, in Spanish, almost perfect Spanish. I had no idea what had come over me but I was having a ball explaining everything."

"You had no idea where this fluent Spanish was coming from?" I said.

"None at all," Flip said. "Right then Delores comes in with the station manager. It was like a party, all of use talking and laughing and getting along like old friends. You know something, Chet?"

"What's that?"

“I’m not all that sociable normally. But when I’m speaking Spanish, I don’t know... Something sort of comes over me and I light up.”

“You were sure lit up on that tape we just watched,” I said.

“I know.” Flip said. “And that was one of the earlier ones. So far we’ve been in every major market in South America. Brazil was the last one because their language is Portuguese. A while back I picked up a Portuguese language course and have been practicing a bit.”

“So are you as fluid in Portuguese?” I said. Flip answered in rapid-fire Portuguese and flashed a Senior Smile.

“Why do you suppose these languages are coming to you so easy?” I said.

“Not sure,” Flip said. “It just seems to come. I haven’t given it much thought.”

“What does Gram have to say about all this?”

“She’s tickled. We’ve been having a lot of fun down in South America. And the money’s great too. I don’t ever have to go back to the college if I don’t want to. I could retire right now.”

“Aren’t you about ready to retire, Flip?” I said. At this point in time he was 71 though he looked closer to 40.

“You know, Chet. I don’t think so. I feel about 35. I’m having a lot of fun. All of this Spanish business has me excited. You watch the rest of that video. You’ll see. I’ve been a guest on all types of shows. Right now there’s a Spanish network that wants me to do a weekly show where I tell stories.”

Flip enjoyed being the spokesman for Senior Smile for just over a year. He went on the radio and TV circuit in Brazil promoting the process and helping to sign up dentists for the blossoming enterprise. But something unexpected happened. South American dentists were finding people who’d had the whitening procedure were experiencing far fewer cavities. It seems the ingredients of the paint somehow hinder tooth decay. There were mixed feelings over this discovery throughout South American dental community.

Some of the dentists stopped offering the procedure fearing they’d have no more patients if they continued with the whitening process. But more of them were glad to tout the benefits of the Senior Smile and continued to do a brisk business offering the service. Flip told me there were several independent laboratories in South America studying his dental paint to see if they could come up with a reason for its remarkable ability to hinder tooth decay.

There’s more. Delores got a call from the attorney who specialized in the FDA approval process. He said he’d received several unofficial and encouraging calls from various government people hinting that the approval process could possibly be put on the fast track. Apparently there were high rollers in dentistry smelling cash. Flip was against it. He said they had their chance. Not only was he against it, he completely withdrew his application.

He told me he was happy to be able to offer the process where it was welcome without all the baloney. Those were his words. He also reasoned it would remain affordable as long as it

stayed out of the U.S. Soon after that he became completely disinterested in all of it. He's hired Delores to manage Senior Smile and marketing in any non-English speaking country where it was welcome. Whenever Deloris heads to South America on Senior Smile business my grandmother tags along. You should see her tan.

Grandpa is back at Northeastern teaching philosophy. He's developed a near obsessive interest in movie magazines and grocery store tabloids. He can go on endlessly about all the hottest celebrities though he still has no interest whatsoever in seeing their movies at the theatre or watching them at home. I always thought Grandpa's obsession with movie stars was just another peculiar pastime. But as we'll see later, it wasn't at all. I'm sure Flip considered it research.

Flip Comes To America

In the mid 1970s, a few years after graduating from high school I hit the skids. It was my own doing as it appeared I was subconsciously attempting to stretch my heady graduation celebration into the next decade. In doing so my own irresponsible behavior had inevitably caught up with me. I was out of work and out of luck so I moved in with my grandparents.

Of course, Flip was present some of the time when he wasn't teaching or off on one of his many indefinable adventures. I went through the motions of looking for work but my attempts were halfhearted at best. However, I did make an effort to help my grandparents with various household chores. One day Flip called me into the basement. I had no idea what he wanted but followed dutifully.

He had several flower pots on his work bench, each with some unidentified sprout poking through the rich, black soil. He asked me to gather them up and follow him to the yard where we would plant them. Dutifully following his instructions reminded me of the old days, when as a boy I'd help him with yard work. He asked how things had been going for me as we worked. I tried to make light of my true feelings and told him everything was okay. I knew he didn't believe me.

When we finished he told me to get cleaned up and to change my clothes. Normally I would have asked him why but something told me to simply do as I'd been instructed. A half hour later he and I walked to Broadway where we caught a bus to Everett Station. There we boarded a train on the Orange line to Boston's North Station where we got on a budliner heading for Rockport, a bustling seaside town where my grandparents sometimes vacationed. En route I asked Flip where we were going and what we were doing but he remained silent until we were heading out of North station for Rockport.

Finally he spoke. He said he'd noticed I'd been down lately. I nodded in agreement thinking the word down was somewhat of an understatement. In earnest he told me that he could relate to my feelings and added that he had some important information to give me, information about the family. That wasn't particularly earth shattering as he would often take me aside and tell me fantastic tales that were tagged important and secretive.

He explained that when he was near my age his whole world dramatically changed inside of a few days and that he ended up in a funk for several years that varied in intensity from mild to severe. He said he wanted to tell me the complete and unabridged story and that if I agreed to listen, it was not to be repeated to anyone. I don't think I can recall a time when one of his stories wasn't contingent upon my keeping it a secret so I agreed as asked.

Before he began he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a packet of papers. He said that he felt it was important to chronicle the events of the lives of various Bellingus family members and that he wanted me to carry on the tradition. He suggested that beginning immediately, I should make every effort to create a descriptive account of the family's presence in New England. I had little talent or interest in writing but nodded anyway.

The packet of papers was the written version of what he was about to impart to me. Then he smiled and said that he'd written this particular installment in the form of a short story told in first person. He said it was an account of his life from the time he arrived in the United States from Glasgow, Scotland in 1920. The story ended more than 14 years later. He wasn't sure if it was proper to call it a memoir or a short story. I've made slight modifications of the version that follows, changing the teller's point of reference from first to third person where it made sense. There was something peculiar about this particular session. Flip was far more expressive and animated than usual.

There was a yellowed and creased steamer ticket displaying two stamps secured to the packet with a rubber band. One near the top showed the word Glasgow along with the date, April 17, 1920. The bottom was stamped: Boston; May 6, 1920. I assumed these dates represented the days of his departure from Scotland and arrival here. He handed me the papers and said that I could use them verbatim as the first installment in the Bellingus Family History or that I could be creative with the information. I had to ask what he meant by being creative.

He responded that I should keep a record of every noteworthy story he'd ever told me and that I could write it up any way I saw fitting as long as I kept the facts straight. I distinctly remember feeling better about my own dismal situation upon hearing this as I felt I was being trusted with an important task. Then I pondered the word facts for a moment as I recalled some of the wild stuff he'd told me over the years.

The account that follows is a blend of Flip's story (which is absolutely fascinating) and my own interpretation of it as he explained it to me on the train ride to Rockport, finishing it later that evening in the hotel room we took.

Flip was 23 years old when he first set foot on American soil. He arrived on the *Duchess of Hamilton*, a freighter that also carried passengers and was owned by Caledonian Steam Packed Company. Of course, he hadn't yet received the nickname Flip. In fact, I was shocked to learn his name wasn't Bellingus when he arrived in the States. It was on this enlightening trip to Rockport that I discovered Flip's real name was actually Dudley Steed. Dudley Francis Steed, to be exact. More on that later.

Back in 1920 Flip tells me he was a much different man; that he was openly cheerful and outgoing. And unlike the Flip I've grown to know, he loved to be around people, large groups of

people. Upon his arrival in Boston in May of 1920 and without definite plans, he immediately set out to find some new friends. From Flip's account of his first day in America:

We approached Boston harbor at noon as the morning fog was lifting. I said my goodbyes to my travel mates. As we docked I made my way to the forward of three gangplanks, wanting to be among the first passengers off the ship. I traveled light, carrying only a single suitcase. I'd already exchanged my British currency for American money and was ready to explore my new home.

After leaving the *Duchess* I walked through the streets of Boston. My first impression was that it was a shabby place with tattered street urchins running about selling fish, cigars, produce and other sundries. I kept my eyes front as I made my way into the heart of the city. As I walked the scenery became more to my liking. I was experiencing the wonderful Boston I'd read about in the picture books back in Glasgow.

First I got a room in a modest yet clean boarding house. I stowed my belongings and ventured outside again. On a whim I hopped onto a passing trolley. We road through the city until we came to Huntington Avenue. We passed a storefront with a hand painted sign in the window that read: Sign Painter Wanted Immediately.

I jumped off the trolley and made my way across the street to the shop. I spoke to the man inside. I think he somehow found my brogue appealing.

"I'm yer new sign painter," I said with a smile. The man looked up from his desk. His name was Ronny Flynn. "That so?" he said.

"Yes sir." I returned.

"How's your Old English?" he said.

"English is my first and only language," I said thinking the question was peculiar.

"Not your language," Flynn said. "Can you print the Old English style? I have an odd bird for a customer wants everything in that blasted Old English. Not many sign men do it justice."

"I guess I can print it as well as the queen," I said with a wink. The man got up from his desk and eyed me. He pointed to a drafting table in the corner of the sprawling shop. Three men sat working at similar tables nearby. He picked up a fountain pen and a bottle of black ink from his desk and we walked together to the table. There was a large sheet of paper pinned to the board with various doodles drawn about it.

I parked myself on a tall stool as he placed the pen and ink on a tray attached to the table. "Show me your stuff, queenie," he said. On a table off to the side was the front page of the Boston Globe. The masthead was printed in Old English. I pointed to the paper and asked if he minded if I used it as a model. He nodded. Within two minutes I'd copied the familiar Globe flag in perfect Old English. Then I showed him some freehand work featuring a few more common lettering types and asked if he had any more requests.

He shook his head indicating that he'd seen enough and asked when I could start. I found out he was a sign broker. Merchants from all around Boston would come to him looking for hand painted signs for their store windows. He ran a busy shop. I explained that I also did drawings

and asked him if I could work from my room in the boarding house. He looked me over again and said he preferred that I at least started out in his shop and if that went well he'd consider letting me work from home. We agreed on my pay and I started the following day. Not bad for my first hour in America, I thought.

I wandered out of his shop and walked a few blocks until I arrived at a place that in time would become dear to me, Northeastern University. There was an impromptu student rally underway. A young man was shouting through a homemade paper cone about the loathsome income tax and other dastardly deeds of President Woodrow Wilson. There was a small group of students gathered around. Pedestrians walked by without paying much attention to the assembly.

I walked up to the rear of the group and she turned around. An utter and complete angel. She looked directly at me and smiled. We were nearly eye to eye. Her stylish short hair hugged her head closely. Her full lips were painted deep red. Her dark and soulful moist eyes signaled that she possessed both elegance and perhaps deep wisdom. She wore a loose fitting cotton dress with a deep V neck revealing small yet plump breasts. I smiled back and nodded trying to think of something clever to say. "This chap doesn't think much of the president, aye?"

"We've had enough of him," she said, pointing to a student holding a sign displaying a grotesque caricature of Wilson. I extended my right hand.

"Dudley Steed's my name. And yours?" She hesitated briefly and extended her hand.

"Blanche Boyette," she said. "My friends all call me Iris though."

I smiled as I took her hand. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Ah..."

"Iris," she said, smiling. "You can call me Iris."

"How is it your friends call you Iris, if may I ask?"

"What's that accent of yours? Irish? Scot? Brit?"

"It's Scottish," I said. "I've arrived just today from Glasgow. I'm here to become an American." Iris looked me up and down with a subdued smile. "They call me Iris because as a junior classman here," she pointed to the building before us, "I had the lead in *Skyscraper Village*, a play we put on. The cast and the University got quite a bit of attention over it. It was a satire of modern times. Everyone sort of remembers me as Iris, I guess."

"I see. So you're an actress?" I said.

"Let's just say I'm versatile," she said with a quick wink. I nodded as the man with the megaphone shouted an obscenity.

"So you want to become an American, huh?" Iris said with a hint of disgust.

"You make it sound like the grippe." I said. A Boston police car rolled slowly by on Huntington Avenue. Megaphone man stopped shouting.

"Listen, Dudley," Iris said. "A few of us are getting together in a bit over at a pub on Parker. Care to come along?"

"I'd love to."

"Good." Iris said as she reached for my hand and led me away from the group and onto Huntington Ave.

"What about the others?" I asked.

“Oh, they’ll be along after this little soiree breaks up. The pub’s just a couple of blocks from here.” I followed willingly thinking I’d fallen in love.

The others never came. I had Blanche Boyette all to myself as I spent the rest of the afternoon staring into her eyes sipping licorice brandy over ice. We sat in a cozy booth near the back of the place. At first we sat across from each other but after the first drink Iris came around the table and sat beside me. Before I knew what was happening we were kissing passionately. What a first day in America.

This certainly wasn’t the version of Flip’s arrival to the United States he’d given the family. I’d occasionally see him sketching various people and objects but had no idea he’d made his start here as a sign painter. I guess Flip was gifted in the arts. He played piano like Liberace when I was a kid so painting didn’t come as too much of a surprise. I wanted to interrupt him several times as he told the story but he waved me off and said he’d take questions later.

He told me that he’d been immediately smitten with Iris. She was a popular student at Northeastern studying journalism and theater. She was 19 and explained that boys her own age were immature and inexperienced in the ways of life. She hinted that she’d recently broken off an affair with one of the instructors at the university. Flip said that none of that mattered because Iris was a bona fide beauty and he was in love.

He said that this woman had two different and distinct personalities. Blanche was the easygoing and grounded one while Iris was often insensitive, flighty and tactless. He more often referred to her as Iris than Blanche. I somehow took that as a sign that she more often displayed the Iris behavior. Flip confirmed this several times as he told his story.

In the early going Flip and Iris were good together. He was earning plenty of money as sign painting came easy to him. He explained that he loved to draw and that lettering and drawing didn’t seem like work at all. Consequently his production was more than double the average sign painter. He also began doing freelance illustrations for a few local publications. Within days he became a reliable contractor for Ronny Flynn and was granted the privilege of working from home within the first week.

When he wasn’t working he was with Iris. She maintained a busy social schedule and Flip was nearly always in her company. By June the couple was nearly inseparable. On Friday, July 2nd, Flip and his girl boarded a train to New York City. As he explained this particular part of the story he mentioned several times that lately Blanche had been behaving in a kind and loving way.

That changed when they got to New York. They visited nightclubs and theaters and upscale restaurants and toasted each other with Champaign. They stayed in a plush suite at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. On Sunday, July 4th they got married. This was almost too much for me to hear. Flip had been married before he’d met my grandmother. He still refused to answer questions as he went along and said I’d have the full story before we returned to Everett.

He explained that as a young man in Scotland he'd never seen anything like Boston or New York and there were certainly no women like Blanche back home. It was like he'd been granted a magical wish instantly making him a man of distinction. He spent all of his free time with Blanche on his arm. He again told me she displayed two distinct personalities and he loved both of them. Even as he told the story more than fifty years later I sensed there had been something special about this woman as well as tragic.

And although he wasn't a student at Northeastern, he was well known among the in crowd. All of Blanche's friends knew and liked him. There was a time he seriously considered going into the sign business on his own but reasoned that his full social life wouldn't allow it. He had all he could do to meet the deadlines of his present employer. When he mentioned this he admitted he was sacrificing his goals for the sake of the glorious time he was spending with Blanche, burning the candle at both ends as so many of us do.

Shortly after returning from New York Flip gave up his room and took an apartment a short distance from the university. Blanche moved in the following week. She insisted they tell no one of their marriage. Flip and Blanche kept their secret mainly because they felt it was exciting to have such a secret. She wanted people to think they were living in sin. Flip smiled and went along with it. He went along with everything she wanted. All was well for the balance of the summer. In fact, Flip told me that summer was among the most special times of his life.

It was during the fall of 1920 that things began to change. It was to be Blanche's last year at the university as she'd be a graduate in the spring. She came home to the apartment one day with a flyer from Northeastern. It had been posted outside one of the classrooms. She read it to Flip: Medical Testing Research. Wanted: Females - 18 years of age and older for clinical trials of new medicine with anti aging and intelligence enhancing properties. There was an address given where interested parties could apply.

Blanche said that a girlfriend of hers had heard that the operator of the study was a medical doctor and that he was paying \$100 for any woman who completed the six-week trial. She said she wanted to get all the details. Flip said it sounded like an interesting opportunity and that she should enquire. He also told me one of the biggest mistakes he ever made in his life was not finding out more about the study and not meeting the participants.

During the first week of the study Flip met Dr. Tigar Gomez at a campus gathering, the physician running the clinical trials. Flip found him to be an easygoing and engaging man with high hopes of developing a drug that would enhance human intelligence. However, the trials were the beginning of the end of Flip and Iris. I use Iris at this point because once the study got underway Blanche completely disappeared and the Iris personality became dominant.

During the first week things went well. Iris would visit a small office not far from campus and receive various doses of medication. In the beginning she said she felt no effects at all. Iris's university schedule had her in class until just before noon four days a week that fall. Since her schedule was better suited to the research than many of the other participants, she was chosen for the full six weeks while most of the other girls had been dismissed.

By the middle of the second week Flip began to see changes, at first, positive changes. Iris would come home with great energy and enthusiasm talking about how wonderful and smart she felt and how the medication was sure to be a major breakthrough in learning. No sooner than she arrived home would she turn right around and leave again saying she had obligations related to her theater classes. She was involved in a group that was putting on another play and that consumed much of her time.

Flip wondered about the play at first but it turned out to be true, at least in part. Iris was busy helping produce a play titled, *Distant Cousins*, a drama written by a Northeastern graduate about a disturbed woman displaying dramatic and even violent mood swings. Flip commented several times that it's often uncanny how art imitates life and vice versa.

Each week Iris appeared more frazzled and more on edge. When Flip asked how the study was going she'd say it was the only thing that was keeping her sane and that the demands of school and the production company were the problem. Several times during this period he insisted on accompanying her to production meeting for *Distant Cousins*. Not once did she object. In fact, there were times when she asked him to come and lend a hand in creating scenery and props.

A month after agreeing to be a subject in the medication trials, Iris had become a shrew at home. She was either catatonic at the kitchen table, eyes half shut, dozing off into her food or was bouncing from one room to another in the frenetic pursuit of a missing button or earring or perhaps a scrap of paper with an important note written on it. When Flip questioned her she explained that Doctor Gomez said she'd be back to normal as soon as the testing was complete and that what he was learning from the participants was going to make medical history. Hearing the trials were soon coming to an end offered Flip a small measure of peace.

It was on a Friday, Flip didn't remember exactly whether it was October or early November, that Iris invited her clandestine husband to a *Distant Cousins* cast party. She appeared to be more composed than she'd been lately. They arrived at the party together as they had done for so many social functions.

Everything started innocently enough. Flip knew everyone present. There was no mention of the clinical trials. Iris walked about with a double Scotch in her hand sipping as she mingled. Flip said her behavior was much as it had been when they first got together though now she had dark puffy bags under her bloodshot eyes. Iris continued to drink Scotch. At one point she jumped up to a platform, called out to her friends and classmates and recited her climactic lines from the play in which she'd starred the previous year, *Skyscraper Village*. Everyone present was captivated as she passionately spoke of the blessings and curses of modern living.

She finished to grand applause. But she soon indicated that she wasn't finished. At this point it would be best to interject Flip's version of the story as I believe he has captured it both in spirit and in its full despair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Iris. "*Skyscraper Village* is a play. Though many aspects of the story are alive in our world right here and now. As we are all aware, our society is rapidly

becoming more industrialized, more impersonal, more mechanical. Soon there will be no more quaint villages, only teeming cities, cold, hungry and unfriendly.

“Some of us were born into the curse of rapid and impersonal change. Hell, it’s all around us. We gain more of everything that doesn’t really matter while we turn our souls over to the devil himself. See that man sitting over there,” she pointed to Flip.

“That man, Dudley Steed, is a Scott. He comes from a small village outside of Glasgow, Scotland. That man is also my husband. We were married on July 4th this year. How patriotic, eh?” There was mild applause as Iris’s audience wasn’t quite sure where she was going with her edgy display.

“Thank you,” she said without the slightest hint of sincerity or mirth. “Yes, Mister Steed didn’t know how good he had it back in the old country. I remember just a few months ago when we met. I found him so delightfully unassuming and innocent. A fledgling social virgin, eager to make it in the big city. Like a little puppy he proudly told me it was his first day here and how he couldn’t wait to get down to the business of being an American.

“You should have seen the look in his pitiable gray eyes. I thought it was endearing at the time but now, knowing what I know, I think Dudley is nothing more than a pathetic fool.” Flip opened his mouth to speak but Iris shushed him like a child, saying it wasn’t proper to speak during a performance. She continued.

“Why do I call him a fool? Because he had everything that’s important in life and wanted to trade it all away to be an American, to be admired, popular. To be part of the imperialist machine called the United States of America. And for what? Dudley’s a crackerjack artist and lettering expert. You should see the drawings he gifts me. A guy with real talent. A real guy. But he wants more.

“Dudley has exchanged a meaningful life to be a stooge husband for a make believe actress. That would be me.” Her audience looked to one another uneasily.

“Dudley has one foot in big city life, phony big city life... And one foot up his own ass. But he doesn’t realize that yet. He’s sold out and no longer belongs in either world. Right now my husband is neither a cutthroat American nor a humble, beguiling Scott.” At this point she turned to Flip and said with contempt, “Dudley, if life were a clinical trial, you’d be the fucking placebo, completely neutral and totally ineffective.” With that she began laughing hysterically. Flip sat still, dumbfounded, tiny beads of perspiration forming on his brow. The audience didn’t react immediately. When Iris caught her breath she took a gulp of Scotch and spoke again.

“Dudley and me have a little secret,” she said. The room was frozen in shocked silence.

“We’ve been working together on a screenplay. It’s sort of a moral sequel to *Skyscraper Village*. What you just heard was an impromptu version of the close of the third act. So what’d you think?”

There was some barely audible chatter followed by light laughter. Someone began clapping. Others followed. It wasn’t long before the entire group was cheering and showering Iris with applause. Then one of the men turned to Flip and shouted, “Placebo.” In no time the entire group was shouting Placebo, Placebo, Placebo.

Flip laughed nervously not knowing what to think. The party eventually returned to the lighthearted affair as it had begun. Flip made his way across the room to Iris though he was interrupted several times to answer questions about the play he and Iris were writing. He played along improvising his answers while trying desperately not to lose sight of his woman. Everyone insisted on calling him Placebo. Iris excused herself to the ladies room and slipped out the back door of the building. No one ever saw her again.

Two days after Iris disappeared the Boston police arrested several men for operating a narcotics ring only a mile from the Northeastern campus. They were distributing opium and morphine to kids in their early teens. They were also offering ultra high-dose amphetamines to anyone with the money to pay for them. There was speculation that young women had been tricked into taking powerful narcotics believing they were participating in new medication testing or clinical trials. Several women were missing. There was talk that they'd been drugged and sold into slavery. The police were seeking a man that went by the name Tigard Gomez.

It was at this juncture in the story that Flip allowed me to ask questions. I didn't know where to begin.

"Does Gram know about any of this?" I asked.

"No. And there's no reason she needs to know, either. This happened long before I met your grandmother."

"Of course not," I said. I tried to gather my thoughts but what I'd just heard was a lot to digest. "So my actual name is Steed?" I finally said.

"I suppose that depends on how you look at things," Flip said. "The way I see it, your name is Chester or Chet Bellingus." I was tempted to challenge Flip on this because my name isn't Chet. I let it go though as he'd called me Chet for as long as I can remember. I guess I blew my chance to find out why.

"Do you have any idea what happened to Blanche?" I said.

"I do," he returned. "You'll be hearing about that before we get back to Everett. The reason I suddenly decided to bring this out into the open is that it hurts me to see you down in the dumps. I thought maybe my admission would add some perspective to your own troubling situation. As for names, well, who really cares? I've never been one to place a lot of credence in the sanctity of a name, a guttural utterance."

"I appreciate your concern over my, ahh... lack of enthusiasm lately." I said. "But what happened to you is some major stuff. Right now everything I'm going through, I brought upon myself."

"Exactly." Flip said.

"Exactly?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"Everything we experience we bring upon ourselves. That chilling speech Iris gave at the cast party wasn't just the apex of amphetamine psychosis exacerbated by too much Scotch.

There was plenty of truth in what she said. I did have a wonderful life in Glasgow. I grew up thinking America was the place to be. I was a wreck for years after what happened at Northeastern. I could have avoided all of that had I just stayed where I was. But I had to come here looking to be a hotshot. I got what I got. I think more than anything else I was hurt that she called me on it in front of all those people. I didn't hang around Boston long after that. One of the reasons was that damned name Placebo stuck. Boy, did I hate hearing it."

"I'll bet," I said. "So what did you do?"

"I was very depressed. I continued working for Flynn painting signs and taking freelance jobs until I built up some traveling money. Iris had come here as a young girl of 12 after her mother died in Belgium. Her uncle sent her to the United States and paid for private schooling and boarding up until college graduation. She'd had a fairly generous allowance all through college. He'd died only a year before we married. I bring it up only because, other than myself and a few college friends, no one missed her. I half expected a visit from the police but that never happened. I was so taken with my remarkably good fortune when I arrived, I completely forgot about being an immigrant. Not wanting to get thrown out of the country I went and registered with the immigration people as a foreign national. Then I went on the road.

"The whole thing felt like a nightmare. You know, one of those affairs where you try and run but your legs are just too heavy. Even my life before coming to America felt different. The experience changed me in many ways. I'd been the happy Scotty pup Iris described before everything fell apart. But something happened to that guy. He sometimes peeks up from under the veneer life occasionally provides for us but for the most part he's dormant. I still haven't decided whether I miss him or not." This was a Flip I'd never known. He continued.

"Immediately after leaving Boston I felt like I might have undergone a long course of electro-shock therapy. I was numb. My lovely wife disappeared and I never saw her again. I kept hoping to wake up from a bad dream.

"I know some people call me an airhead. They should have seen me the first year after losing Blanche. I'm not saying I'm unhappy with who I've become though. I'm not. What I am saying is that it took me several years to figure out who I was and to be happy with that."

His comment gave me an opening I was hoping for. "Maybe I need to save up some dough and hit the road like you did, huh Flip?"

"Might not be a bad idea," he said. "You'll learn a lot about yourself."

"So where'd you go after leaving Boston?"

"I was all over. I headed west first. Hitchhiked some. Rode the rails some. I even tagged along with a traveling medicine show for awhile. What an experience that was. It wasn't so bad in the early 20s. The country was pretty prosperous, not a lot of bandits out there. Still, I had a money belt strapped to my left thigh and one to my right, tucked right up there under my nuts. Figured most men aren't going to go looking there. Custom made 'em myself. Never had any trouble though. Just about everyone I met was civil. My first stop was in Pennsylvania. Christmas had just passed. It was 1921. I remember sitting in a little diner thinking that this was about the last thing I'd expected to be doing."

Right then it occurred to me that even though Flip often came across as a madman he had to have had one of the richest, fullest lives of anyone I could imagine. He continued with the story.

“I was in coal country so I began looking for work. It wasn’t hard to find in the middle of winter. I got two dollars a day for swinging a pick and breaking big chunks of coal into small chunks. Man, it was cold that winter. I worked hard trying to shake Blanche’s memory but it was no use. I took a room in another a boarding house and remember crying quite a lot in the early going.

“Once spring came I headed in a more southwesterly direction. I worked on a ranch in Kentucky until fall and then headed west. I got to Colorado in October and fell in with a bunch of guys who were planning on doing some treasure hunting come the good weather. They had a map and needed just one more partner with \$50 to complete their party.”

“Sounds suspicious,” I said.

“I thought so too,” Flip said. “But I felt I’d already lost the best thing I ever had in Blanche. Losing her showed me there’s more to life than a fat bank account. I ponied up the \$50 and they turned out to be great guys. We worked and planned the whole winter. We stayed on one of the guys’ ranch. I was so busy I didn’t have time to fret about anything. There were six of us and we became great friends. I’m the last one alive as far as I know. All but one of them were about 20 years my senior. Anyway, come springtime we drove a small mule team up into one of the many mountains around Glenwood Springs.

“The guys had been teasing me about how I was a lovesick puppy out there trying to forget a woman. They were right about a woman being at the bottom of my woes but they just thought it was simple lost puppy love like we all go through. They didn’t mean any harm. I was tempted to tell them the whole crazy story one night by the fire but it was still too painful. We trudged all around the spot we thought the map had led us to. But we all learned fast that old maps and new landscape didn’t always match up so well. It was me who suggested we were about 15 miles from where we should have been looking. At first they weren’t listening. But after more than six weeks with nothing at all to show we headed farther north.”

“And you found the treasure?” I asked, like a little kid.

“Yes and no,” Flip said. “We were camped close to where we thought it was supposed to be, which was buried at the foot of a huge bolder. But that country’s loaded with huge boulders. We made camp and tied up the mules for the night. It was after ten and we were all tired. It wasn’t very cold so we went to sleep and let the fire go out. Somewhere around three in the morning a coyote started howling nearby. He was spooking the mules and one of them got loose, mine.

“We didn’t notice until sunrise. So I wandered off to find my mule. She hadn’t gone but a half mile. She was grazing near the opening to what looked like a shallow cave. I went over and led her to a Joshua tree stump and tied her off. The cave got the better of my curiosity so I went in for a look. The early sun was in perfect position to light up the inside. I saw what looked like an old rotted saddle. I went over to it and found it was an old saddle. It had three saddle bags

strung to it. They were brittle and cracked. I picked one of them up. Felt like I was lifting a bag of bowling balls. Two of the bags were loaded with silver bars. The other, gold.”

“Holy shit,” I said. Flip looked around the train car but no one appeared to be paying any attention to us. “Sorry,” I said, blushing. “How much loot was there?”

“Worked out to a little over \$15,000,” he said. “Since I was lone man out I was carrying one of three pistols. I fired a single shot signifying I’d found the treasure. Within an hour the others were at the cave thanking me up and down. It wasn’t what we had come after but we each got a little over \$2500, a lot of money back then. We took a vote whether to quit and go back to cash in or to continue looking for the original cache. It was unanimous. We went to Glenwood Springs and cashed in the bullion for greenbacks. The others went back to try and find the original treasure but I headed further west. They all wanted me to stay saying I was the lucky Scott and what would they do without me, etcetera, but I felt it was time to go.

“I wandered around the Southwest for more than three years. In 1925 I found myself in New River, Arizona about 30 miles from Phoenix. I’d been riding the rails. Not that I had to, mind you. I’d grown fond of it. Some of the railroad cops could be pretty mean, some pretty decent looking the other way. I’d gotten off a freight car early in the day. I bathed in Lake Pleasant and just took to wandering. By now I was keeping most of my money in a bank in Denver. Western Union offices were springing up all over the place. When I needed cash I’d have it wired to me.

“I came upon an abandoned hobo camp. Looked like it might have been home to a half dozen or so guys. I built a fire and had a light meal of pears and jerky. Before dusk two guys showed up. They were pretty road worn. I welcomed them to the camp. I offered them what I had left for food. One was thankful. The other refused. There was something about this guy that was familiar. He had stringy hair and a thick black beard. They sat by the fire. The one with the thick beard took out a pint bottle of cheap whiskey and took a long swallow. He didn’t offer any to his friend or to me, which was just dandy. I didn’t drink much then and as you know, Chet, I still don’t.

“With each slug of booze he got more and more comfortable. He asked what I did. I told him I traveled and took work where I could find it. He said he was a chemist. Claimed to specialize in pharmaceuticals. I wasn’t even sure I knew what that meant at the time. He sensed the puzzlement in my face and said with an air of distinction that he supplied pain medication to people in pain. That’s when it hit me.”

“What?” I said.

“Gomez,” Flip said. “Tigard Gomez. The son of a bitch that was running the phony clinical trials Blanche got tangled up with up in Massachusetts.” I think that was the first and only time I ever heard Flip use harsh language in reference to another human.

“All kinds of dreadful stuff was swirling through my head,” he said. “I thought of picking up a rock and braining him on the spot. I knew I wasn’t going to do that but I have to admit, Chet, the thought was more than just a little tempting. It’s a good thing more than four years had passed though because if I had met this guy during the first year I might have acted foolishly.

“As Gomez spoke it became clear that he’d only just met the guy with him that day. He kept on drinking and began telling us of his exploits as a chemist and a doctor. He said that late in the last decade and early in the present one he had a printer friend of his make up certain documents appearing legitimate giving him status as a college graduate, an MD, a chemist, a professor of psychology and other lofty professional distinctions. He smiled a greasy smile as he explained how easy it was to fool people with phony diplomas. I listened knowing that he was going to clarify everything I’d ever wanted to know about Blanche’s last weeks before disappearing. I distinctly remember thinking that I might actually end up using the nearby rock to smash in his teeth or worse.”

I was spellbound and just mouthed the word ‘wow’ without actually speaking.

“Sure enough,” Flip continued. “He explained how he’d started in Albany. He had fake credentials that allowed him to buy large quantities of narcotics wholesale. He’d then network with street hustlers and addicts moving the stuff at a tidy profit. Narcotics weren’t tightly controlled back then and they weren’t all that hard to come by so this guy needed to elevate his operation. He explained how he came up with the idea to advertise as a doctor testing new medication. He spoke like the predator he was.

“He told us how easy it was to get young college women to agree to testing. First he’d give them placebos. I cringed at hearing the word. After a few days he’d give them a mild opiate. Then he’d up the dosage every other day or so. When they got too sedated he introduced them to amphetamines because he could send them on their way sooner. Originally, he just wanted them to become addicted so his street buddies could peddle their drugs to these poor girls. But then he had an idea.

“He explained that in New York City he’d been invited to a private movie showing. He went into details that I will forgo but what he described is now known as pornography. It occurred to him that stupefied young girls might be willing participants in making these movies. He approached the operator of the private theater in New York and enquired about getting a camera man to come out to a particular location and shoot some blue movies, as they were called back then.

“He told us about the first fake clinical trial. He’d get the girls through small ads in college papers. As before, he’d start them with placebos and gradually introduce them to narcotics. Within a week they were ready for dosages that would completely eliminate any and all of their inhibitions. That’s when the camera people would show up. And it was him who would star in his own dirty movies.”

“It must have been torture listening to this,” I said.

“It was, my boy. I came close to jumping him once or twice but I wanted to hear the whole truth.”

“You’re a better man than me,” I said.

“He ran this game for nearly six months in New York before it got too hot,” Flip said. “He claimed his movies actually got a following. He billed himself as Mighty Tangora, The Sex Serpent. Said he wore a black bandit’s mask over his eyes and a painted on mustache. Producing

porn was far more profitable than selling narcotics. I guess back then there weren't many people doing it. He said he barely got out of New York alive. Not because the law was on to him but because a bunch of angry girls' fathers nearly caught up with him. The guy he'd come into camp with didn't seem very interested in the tale. Neither he nor I encouraged him. But that didn't stop him.

"He said that with New York so hot he felt he might continue his mischief in Massachusetts. He arrived in Boston flush with cash from the New York operation. He immediately assembled a film crew and opened an office. He had brand new credentials printed up identifying himself as a medical doctor. Then he put out his ads for the clinical testing of college women over the age of 18. He said that Boston had been very good to him. He spoke of a young woman who was already an actress. I sensed he was talking about Blanche. I bit my lip and allowed him to keep talking.

"When he said this gal was a tough cookie I knew he was talking about Blanche. He had several women he drugged almost immediately and quickly produced his trash. That's when he referred to the tough cookie by name, Iris. He paused briefly before explaining how she believed she was legitimately involved in the testing of intelligence enhancing drugs. That's when he admitted to upping the dose enough that she'd play along with anything. He said to keep her manageable she needed large doses of morphine followed by smaller doses of amphetamine. He sounded angry and disgusted that she wasn't cooperative and cursed her because she was such a fine looking woman whose films would bring top dollar. I had all I could do to keep from splitting his skull right there on the spot.

"He said several times that Iris was difficult to manage but that her films were in great demand. He explained that he only had a short window of opportunity in Boston because a couple of parents had gone to the cops. He ended by telling us he escaped arrest by only a day. I'm sure he was referring to the police raid."

"But what about Blanche?" I said. "What happened to her?"

"I was so angry at hearing what happened I was speechless for a few minutes. Finally I got up and added some wood to the fire that had nearly died out. As I did I had a moment of complete clarity. While he told the story I thought I might easily kill the bastard. But that's not who I am or who I want to be, not ever. I recognized that this had all happened in the past and that nothing I might do could change any of it. When I sat back down I asked him what became of this Iris. I'm sure my voice quivered and cracked as I spoke. If it did Gomez didn't seem to notice.

"Of course, Gomez wasn't his real name. As I sat there in the darkness waiting for his answer, the light of the dwindling campfire flickering off his dirty brow, I thought back to the time I'd met him in Massachusetts. I took him for a respected physician. Blanche had been right. I was very naive. I remember shaking the guy's hand and wishing him luck with his experiments. Ugh. Makes me woozy to think about it.

"He gazed up at me through squinted eyes and took a swallow of his whiskey. He said she came to him the night before he took off and asked for a bottle of pills. She said she was

going to hide out somewhere and wean herself off the addiction. After that she was going to return to Belgium and resume the life she'd begun before coming to America. He said he'd always admired her spirit so he gave her what she wanted and that was the last he'd seen of her."

"Wow," I said. "Sounds like she took a dose of the medicine she dished out to you at the cast party."

"Yep," Flip said. "My guess is that she said her piece, left that party and went directly to see this scumball. After he finished gloating I was really tempted to call this guy by the name he'd used back at Northeastern but by then he was so drunk there would have been no point to it."

"Did you ever think of contacting Iris again after hearing she went back to Belgium?" Flip was reflective for a moment.

"She was never really Iris, Chet. Iris was the American version of Blanche. I'd bet my last nickel she went home and reverted back to being the sweet girl she so often showed me. And yes, I did think of trying to contact her. I thought of nothing else for nearly a year. I ended up thinking better of it, though. We had our special time and then everything changed. We were both casualties of the American way, for better or worse. No matter how hard we tried there would never be a way to return to those giddy days at Northeastern. I was fresh off the boat, literally. She was a seasoned foreign national showing me the ropes. For a time we were in love. Could that have lasted? I like to think so. But it didn't work out that way."

Even with all the years that passed I sensed Flip still wondered what might have happened had he found Blanche. By now we'd settled into our hotel room in Rockport. We went to the dining room and had crab salad sandwiches and coleslaw, Flip's favorite. I didn't ask any questions as we ate. Before heading for supper Flip said he'd continued traveling for several years before gaining any measure of peace or direction. He promised he'd continue the story when we returned from the dining room. I wanted to hear more. I had all I could do to not wolf my food down like a starving dog.

As I've worked on Flip's history I've often commented how remarkable some of it was. I must admit I've had my doubts about some of his tales too. This one, however, was weird in other ways. It challenged what I'd believed about my own lineage.

My real name wasn't Bellingus. My grandfather had been in love and married before meeting my grandmother. Flip had been a vivacious campus character at Northeastern University in the early 1920s. As fascinating as it was, none of it was making much sense to me. But as I would soon learn, there was more startling stuff in store, lots more. I feel Flip's firsthand account of the story does it the most justice. From what I've begun to call The Flip Files:

I was more than just a little upset at meeting the man who'd changed my life so dramatically. I thought I had gotten over most of the grief of my days with Blanche at Northeastern. Meeting Gomez face to face once again turned it all into a stomach-churning jumble. I wondered if I would ever be at peace over the matter.

But I carried on. I headed back toward New River. I came to a small ranch with a small herd of cattle and a few mules. I was able to talk the rancher into selling me one of the mules. I needed company. I named her Clara. I'm not sure why as I've never known a Clara and I'm not particularly fond of the name. She turned out to be an excellent friend and listener as I told her my dismal story of misfortune in the United States of America. Clara and me made our way west from Arizona into California. After a week of casual walking we stopped in the border town of Blythe. There wasn't much to Blythe in 1925. There was a single gas station on the main road. Across from it was a rundown general store.

I headed for the store. I bought some fruit, a small amount fresh meat and jerky and some oats for the mule. There was a faded rickety picnic table sitting in the shade to the side of the building. I led Clara over to the shade where she meandered about grazing while I ate a few peaches. I didn't know what I was going to do next. I was thinking of getting on a train heading back to the northeast and then finding the first steamer I could going back to Scotland. But that wasn't to be.

After about an hour an old model T truck pulled up and parked in front of the store. There was a man about my age sitting in the back of the truck. He got out and went into the store. The driver, an old Indian, left the truck by the general store and walked across the road to the gas station and went inside. The younger man came out with a candy bar. He walked over to where I was sitting, looked at me and pointed to the table as if to ask if it was okay if he sat. I stood up and expended my hand.

"Dudley Steed," I said.

"Henry Smith," the stranger said. His handshake was weak. "Actually my name is Waya Smith but life is much easier for me if I go by Henry." He smiled.

"Why is that?" I said. Henry looked at me for a long moment. "You aren't from around here, are you friend?" he said.

"I don't feel like I'm from around anywhere these days," I said. By this time my brogue was nearly gone. It was only detectable during times of fatigue or stress.

"I know how you feel, Henry said. "Is that your animal?" He pointed to Clara.

"Sure is," I said with a trace of pride. Henry sat and offered me a piece of his candy. I accepted it and gave him a peach.

"Mind if I ask where you're heading?" Henry said.

"I guess I'm heading to the Pacific Ocean. I've never seen it. Have you?"

"Can't say I have," Henry said.

"You from around here?" I said.

"My family has a small ranch north of here. We came from Oklahoma about 10 years back. Lived on the reservation near Tahlequah for a time and made our way west. Before that my

people lived in North Carolina. One or another of us has been heading west for the past 100 years.”

“Reservation?” I said. “You an Indian?”

“Yes,” Henry said. “I’m half Cherokee and half white.”

“I’m from Scotland. Though more recently from Arizona and a half dozen points heading northeast back to Boston. I’ve been traveling for going on five years.”

“You must be looking for something,” Henry said.

“My soul,” I said without thinking. Henry smiled.

“You think it’s on the Pacific shore?”

“Would be as good a place as anywhere to find it,” I said.

“So you and the mule are going to the coast? Maybe you should get yourself a small cart and you can ride some of the distance.”

“Know anyone has a cart for sale?” I said.

“My uncle might. He’s across the way talking to Jake, man owns the gas pump. You can ask him when he gets back. Would you be interested in having company on the way to the coast? I could use a change myself.”

“I hadn’t planned on company but you seem like a right fellow. Sure, you can come along if you like. You looking for something on the coast?”

“My heart,” Smith said. “Lemme go and fetch my uncle. See if he’d be willing to sell his cart. Can’t see why he wouldn’t. Doesn’t have a horse or a mule or even a cow that can pull it.”

“I’ll wait here with Clara,” I said.

Henry returned with his uncle. He said he’d be willing to sell the cart. He also said that since he would be my guest that he’d pay for the cart. It was mid afternoon, too late to head back to his family’s ranch, retrieve the cart and start west. Henry said he’d walk with me and Clara back to his ranch six miles north of the general store. I would stay with him that night and we’d get an early start in the morning. With that in mind I bought a few more things at the store for the trip. Henry’s uncle drove off and Clara, me and Henry began walking north out of Blythe into the desert.

As we walked I learned that Henry’s mother had been the daughter of a kidnapped white girl, Bessie Warner. Apparently there were renegades in his clan years back that would run raids on white settlers in Oklahoma. It was interesting to learn that his grandmother, the woman who was originally taken from her family, had the opportunity to return to them only a month after being snatched from her home near Vinita, Oklahoma. A Craig County, Oklahoma sheriff, along with a deputy and the girl’s father rode peacefully into the Cherokee settlement where they were holding the girl and demanded her back.

But it wasn’t to be. Bessie said she wanted to stay with the Indians. Her father was incredulous and insisted she return. She refused, saying her new family treated her with more love and kindness than he had. He left with the lawmen. The story got out that his daughter chose the Indians over her natural family and was an embarrassment to the entire Warner clan.

But it was likely far less an embarrassment than the truth would have been. Bessie was pregnant at the time she was taken. She was only 14 and had been sexually intimate with the preacher's son, Lyle Kinley. No one was aware of this at the time and word never got back to the Warners because her new family was constantly on the move. By the time she gave birth to her blonde daughter her new family was nearly 200 miles northwest of Bessie's natural family. Bessie eventually took the Indian name Galilani, which translates to "Friendly" in Cherokee. Her new daughter was called Adsila, meaning Blossom. Bessie had three more children by a young Indian brave. They stayed together for nearly 50 years. Henry was Adsila's son and looked like a white man with nearly no resemblance to an Indian.

That afternoon we made some repairs to Henry's uncle's wagon. It was flat and rectangular and sturdy. It measured five by nine feet. Both Henry and I were able to sit up front on a hard bench with plenty of room behind us for supplies. I grew fond of Henry quickly. He wasn't like most of the people I'd met in the states. He had a very dry sense of humor and was quite a philosopher to boot. I told him the whole story of my arrival to America right up to meeting Gomez. He simply listened. I talked for a few hours as we slowly rolled through the prairie and rolling hills. When I finished speaking he had only two words. "Wicked shit," he said.

"Yep," I said. "Wicked shit for sure."

"Eerie too when you think about it," Henry said. "What do you suppose the chances are of meeting up with that cerote so far from Boston?"

"Cerote?" I said. Henry smiled.

"It's Mexican slang for a hard packed turd." I was growing fond of Henry.

"Ah, that would describe him. I've thought about the chances of seeing him again and figured they were about zero. I kept wondering about Blanche though. I began to pray that I'd one day find out what happened to her. Word was, some of the girls mixed up with Gomez were sold into slavery. Never thought to look into that. Guess I was afraid of what I might find. But I did pray for finality on the whole thing. That's the only explanation I can come up with about running into Gomez out on the road, God giving me a measure of peace. I thought I hated the man but seeing him drunk, teeth missing and all worn out was sort of sad."

"You've got a good heart, Dudley," Henry said. We were quiet for a spell.

"It's no wonder you're looking for your soul," he said after about a half hour of silence. "You already know it's not in California though."

"I know," I said. "I just need time."

"True," Henry said. "Time heals everything and makes men wise."

"What makes you want to wander, Henry?"

"I'm out to make my fortune, like you." He said.

"What have you been doing up until now?" I said.

"I worked in a print shop. The government set our people up with a print shop. Maybe they felt guilty for taking all of our land so they thought they'd make it up to us by teaching us a trade. One by one they sent us to Oklahoma City to apprentice in a shop in the state capital. My

cousin was the first to go. By the time he returned we were waiting for delivery of ink and paper. A brand new press was already installed in the shop the government men built. We even had some printing orders from the War Department.

“Of course they were picture books for various reservations. Books that showed Indians how to behave properly. Ugh. My cousin returned with a man who had been a printer for almost 40 years. He stayed around for a few weeks until Jeffrey, my cousin, was able to manage by himself. I worked in the shop during that time and after as well. The tribe wanted to send me to the city to get trained formally but I didn’t want to go. I believe in staying as far away from government men as possible.”

“Printing is a good trade. Lots of call for printers in the city,” I said.

“Yeah, the city.” Henry said. “Maybe someday but for now I feel like I belong out in open country. Plenty of opportunity everywhere. I look at my people and see they’re dying. Most of them have lost their spirit, their souls. But I’m one of the lucky ones. At least that’s what they tell me. I can pass for white easily. But hell, I don’t feel like a white man and don’t want to be a white man. No offense, Dudley.”

I smiled. “I never take offense when none is intended.”

“I know,” Henry said. “You’re not much like any white guy I’ve ever met. My people used to go on about how I could go to the city and do anything I wanted because I could pass. It’s like I’ve got one foot in one world and one in another.”

“I understand,” I said. “That’s the point Blanche made the night she disappeared. She called me out in front of our friends. She said I was all hot to trot about being a new American while being stuck as a goody two shoes Scott. And she would know because she came from Belgium eight years before with stardust in her eyes wanting the exact thing I was looking for. Why do you suppose people are so displaced, Henry?”

“It’s the nature of being human, I reckon.” Henry said.

We rode and talked for days. At times we’d give Clara a rest and just walked along with her pulling the cart. Henry and me got to know each other pretty well. We encountered nothing but small towns as we went. We bought food when we could. The weather was mild. We slept on thick blankets under the stars and pondered life. Henry told me he had an interest in science. He talked about our solar system and atoms and how they were both constructed exactly alike, the only difference being size. He said he thought the earth was a proton and that Mars was an electron and that the various moons orbiting the planets were likely to be neutrons. I wasn’t sure what to make of any of that but figured, why not?

After about a week we were getting close to Palm Springs. We planned on getting a room and cleaning up. A few miles to the east of town we came to a warehouse. Trucks were coming and going. A hundred yards or so behind the warehouse was a brick building with a tall chimney. Gray smoke was rising from the chimney and there was a pleasant odor in the air. It was familiar but I couldn’t quite place it. Henry said it was peanuts roasting.

We stopped at the warehouse to see if there was any work. A burly man looked us over and said he had nothing. He headed back to his office and stopped in his tracks. He turned and said we should walk over to the brick building and ask about work there. So we did just that. There was a truck around the back of the roasting house loaded with raw peanuts from Georgia. There must have been two or three thousand pounds of peanuts.

Two men were unloading the truck onto small trolleys. When one was full someone from inside would come and drag it into the building. We watched for a few minutes. Finally, a man came over and asked what we wanted. We told him we were looking for work and that the warehouse boss sent us. Actually, Henry told him that making it sound as though we'd been deliberately sent by the warehouseman. The man looked us over and said he had about two days work and he'd pay us \$5 each and all the peanuts we could eat. I led Clara and the cart over to the shade and asked the man for a bucket of water for her. Then Henry and I went to work roasting peanuts.

When we weren't working we slept in a makeshift bunkhouse. Two other men worked during the nighttime hours and we in the daylight. We did it all, from unloading 50 lb bags of raw peanuts from trucks to setting them up for roasting. Once a loaded trolley was inside the roast house we opened up the bag and dumped raw peanuts onto a steel conveyer. The conveyer was constructed from steel framework that extended from the mouth of the oven, through the inside and out the back. It was our job to keep everything moving. Henry worked the loading end while I worked the unloading end. Every half hour or so we'd switch positions.

The roasted peanuts went back into the rough hemp sacks from which they'd come and back onto another smaller truck. Whoever sealed the bag would cross out the word "raw" and replace it with the word roasted. When that truck was full a driver took off with the peanuts. We were also responsible for keeping the oven fire good and hot. There was a pile of old wooden crates along with hundreds of pounds of desert scrub brush piled near the oven with tons more just outside. It was hot by the oven. We must have drunk two gallons of water each day we worked. Neither of us was afraid of work. It was very physical but we enjoyed doing it.

The time flew by and before we knew it the man who hired us was counting our pay. We each received \$7 because he said we did the work of four men. He said he had another load of raw peanuts coming in a few days and that we were welcomed to work that load as well. We thanked him for the offer but left and headed for Palm Springs.

Henry and I had looked forward to seeing Palm Springs. It was actually like two cities. One was for regular folks like us. The other was like a posh set from the movies. There were several upscale streets lined with mansions. We decided to avoid the country club neighborhoods as we were drawing a lot of attention with Clara pulling our cart through the streets. We did locate a modest inn on the west side of the city where we took a room for two nights. Clara was more than welcomed.

I was feeling much better about myself with Henry as a companion. It was early afternoon when we checked into the inn. We bathed and ventured out to find a place to get a full meal. I picked up a newspaper to read that evening. We returned to our room stuffed and content.

The innkeeper had made friends with Clara. He told me she reminded him of a mule he had as a boy. She really took to him. I sat on my bed and went through the newspaper.

There was a half page at the back with classified ads. I went through them thinking there might be some work for two healthy men. I was about to put the paper down when I saw an ad that made the hair on the back of my neck bristle. It read: Clinical Study. New Medicine. Find Inner Peace. There was an address listed. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. I turned to Henry who was sitting by the window enjoying the view.

“Is life a cruel joke?” I said. Henry grinned.

“Of course,” he said. “I thought you’d figured that out by now. Why do you ask?” I got up, walked to the window and handed him the newspaper, pointing to the ad. He read it and immediately tweaked his eyebrows a couple of times like Groucho Marx.

“What do you suppose it is?” he said.

“I don’t know but I plan to find out.” I took the paper from him and walked to the hotel office. Henry followed. The innkeeper was sitting on a wicker chair out front. I showed him the ad and asked if he knew the address. He smiled and said it was only two blocks away and that the man running the ad worked as a clerk on weekends at the pharmacy in town. Said he was a friendly, engaging fellow. I turned to Henry and pointed in the direction the innkeeper had indicated. We walked.

The address was a cottage. The front door was wide open but no one appeared to be around. I walked up a couple of steps onto the porch and knocked on the open door. Henry walked around back. I got no answer so I followed him. Henry was standing under an avocado tree looking up. I could hear a man talking. It was coming from the tree.

I went over and stood by Henry. The man tossed down an avocado and Henry caught it. Then he dropped one into my open hands. Before he was finished we had seven good sized avocados. The man in the tree stepped sideways a couple of feet to the roof of a garage. He sat on the edge of the roof and jumped down. He couldn’t have been more than five feet tall. He had a friendly face with a deeply receding hairline. The hair he had was long, tousled and coal black. He wore silver wire spectacles, a white business shirt with cufflinks and ill fitting wool trousers with suspenders.

“Thank you gentlemen for catching my fine fruits,” he said. “This tree produces such wonderful avocados. It’s a shame to let the rats get them all. Would you care for a toasted avocado sandwich?” Henry smiled.

“We just had a big dinner,” he said. “I won’t speak for my friend Dudley here, but I couldn’t eat another bite. May we take a couple with us?”

The man looked at me. He appeared completely harmless, almost comical. I just smiled. “I’d like to taste one if you don’t mind,” I said. “Don’t think I’ve ever had avocado.”

“You’re in for a treat,” the peculiar man said. “Follow me gentlemen.”

We entered the cottage from the back. The furnishings were modest. There was a plain rough hewn oak table sitting in the kitchen with four pine chairs around it. The man put three of

the avocados on the table. Then he opened an ice box and put the other four inside. "Have a seat," he said.

He took a plate and a sharp knife from a cabinet and put them on the table. He opened another cupboard and took out a half loaf of dark bread wrapped in butcher paper. He put the bread on the plate and cut two slices. He went to a small counter near the kitchen sink and placed the sliced bread into a toaster and pulled the lever down. He hummed merrily as he did.

"We'll have toast in three and a half minutes," he said as he sliced one of the avocados handing me a piece. I took a bite. At first I wasn't sure what to think. I began to chew and discovered I liked the taste. I took another bite.

"Quite good," I said.

"Wait till you try it with the pumpernickel," said the short man. I continued chewing. I found it odd that he hadn't yet asked why we were there. Finally, I took the folded newspaper out of my back pocket and placed it on the table open to the classifieds page. Our host didn't seem to notice. I stood and extended my hand.

"My name is Dudley Steed and this is my associate Henry Smith." The man turned to me and shook my hand barely clutching it at all.

"Leon Fletcher," he said, "At your service." The toast popped up. He brought it to the table and cut a few more slices from the avocado placing them on the toast. He took a bite. "Delicious," he said. "Help yourself."

Henry and I both declined. I waited until he'd taken a couple of bites before asking him about the ad. When I did his eyes lit up.

"You two must be from out of town," he said.

"We are," I said. "We're heading to the coast and stopped here for a little rest. I found your ad interesting." Leon Fletcher smiled.

"Are you seeking inner peace?" Mr. Steed?"

Henry spoke. "Aren't we all?" he said.

"I'm sort of interested in the clinical trial you mentioned in your ad," I said. "See, I had a friend who got involved in something like this and it didn't turn out well."

"Narcotics, no doubt," Fletcher said as he swallowed. "That or amphetamines. Nasty stuff. This has nothing to do with opiates or amphetamines. No sir. You won't catch me near either one of them except to dispense them through proper channels."

Fletcher had a smooth, confident manner. I found him disarming. I also found myself a little disappointed that he seemed to be sincere.

"So exactly what type of study are you running?" Henry asked.

"A study of the mind, the soul," he said. "There are naturally occurring medicinal compounds that when ingested, allow humans great insight, great learning. There are mushrooms, cactus, various seeds and other vegetation and its derivatives with these properties."

"Peyote, perhaps," Henry said.

"Peyote, indeed," Fletcher said. "Are you familiar with Peyote, Mr. Smith?"

"Only at arm's length," Henry said.

“What’s Peyote?” I said. Fletcher looked to Henry for an explanation. Henry deferred back to him.

“Peyote is a cactus. One containing psychoactive alkaloids, particularly one known as mescaline. It grows wild in the Arizona and Mexican desert. Mescaline has been known to help men get in touch with truth.”

“Get in touch with what truth?” I said.

“The true meaning of life,” Henry said.

“Have you partaken of mescaline, Mr. Smith?” Fletcher said.

“No. But I know of a few men who have. And they would probably agree with your assessment. They too claim it is something very special.” I felt like I somehow didn’t belong in the conversation.

“Special indeed,” Fletcher said.

“So is this what your study is about?” I said. “Peyote?”

“Not exactly,” Fletcher said. “Peyote is only a reference point.” He got up and went into the other room. He returned with a homemade pamphlet made from typed sheets of paper stapled together. He placed it on the table in front of me.

“You can read about several psychoactive drugs in that little guide,” he said as he picked up a piece of avocado and took a bite. “But the clinical trial isn’t about any of those. No sir. I believe I’ve discovered a new psychoactive compound that is far more powerful than anything men have ever experienced. I’ve made a study of rye. Not rye whiskey but the grain. Over the last few centuries there have been various reports about strange and unusual physical and cerebral anomalies developing from people eating tainted rye products, especially bread.

“Rye left unprotected will often develop mold. The mold is called ergot. Ingesting ergot produces experiences similar to Peyote and other like substances. Though depending on how long it has been incubating, the experiences brought on by ergot have been reported to be quite frightening. That’s because left to its own devices in nature ergot becomes quite like a poison. But nurtured along using the scientific method under sterile conditions in a laboratory, ergot becomes psychoactive ambrosia.”

“And you know this...” Henry began to ask but Fletcher interrupted.

“I know it sir, because I have produced a compound derived from the finest rye grain under sterile conditions that is far superior to any naturally occurring psychoactive matter. I know it because I have tasted it and it has shown me heaven on earth. I have learned more about myself, the nature of humanity, the universe and the connectivity of all living things than every philosopher and wise man in history combined, with the exception of Jesus, of course.”

“That’s a strong claim,” I said.

“Damned right,” Fletcher said. “I stand by it though.”

“And that’s what you’re offering?” Henry said. “An experience with this purified ergot?”

“Technically speaking,” Fletcher said. “It’s not ergot at all. Ergot is a dark, foul tasting gritty sort of substance. It’s actually a fungus. It’s no wonder people went mad ingesting it.” He got up, went to the ice box and removed a small glass jar from atop a large chunk of ice inside.

He placed it on the table. Inside there appeared to be a couple of tablespoons of fine white powder looking like corn starch or baking soda.

“This is it. It’s completely odorless and tasteless. I had no idea how powerful this stuff was when I produced it. An amount approximately the size of the head of a match is enough for a very profound experience. I ingested four or five times that much the first time. Quite extraordinary, indeed.”

“So what exactly are you offering?” I said. “In other words, what’s in it for you and what’s in it for...” I looked to Henry. He nodded ever so subtly. “What would be in it for us if we were to agree to participate?”

“First let me say that this opportunity isn’t open to everybody,” Fletcher said. “I’ve had a dozen townspeople inquire and I’ve turned them all away. I’m looking for folks with a certain level of, how should I put it... intellectual development. People who are able to see beyond accepted appearances. Introspective people. Of course, I don’t know you two but I do have a fairly developed intuitive nature. You men seem to be quite a bit more alive than average.

“I’d guess you’re both educated. I’d guess that even though you’re young men, you’ve done some living. To put it plainly, you’re not every day dullards. I’m certain you men would be able to articulate your experiences. That’s what I’m looking for. It would be a pleasure to have subjects such as you two fellows. And to answer your question, all I’d want from you is to be able to personally witness your experience and later to ask you some questions. I’ve had this compound and would act as sort of a guide.”

“That’s all?” I said. “Questions? Witness?”

“That’s all,” Fletcher said.

“Have you given the stuff to anyone else?” Henry said.

“Yes, my older brother, Phillip.” Fletcher said. “Like me, he too had great revelations. He felt the need to return to San Diego. That’s where we’re from. There has been bad blood and hard feelings between Phillip and my father since he was a young man. After taking this,” Fletcher picked up the jar and returned it to the ice box, “he was strongly compelled to visit Dad and make things right. He’s the only other one so far. He had absolutely no ill effects from the compound. I would be happy to allow you to read the transcript of my interview following his session.”

“I’d like to see that,” Henry said.

“How long does the experience last?” I asked.

“For me it lasted nearly 24 hours,” Fletcher said. “But that’s because I took far more than necessary. For my brother, it lasted just over 10. I took a smaller dose a second time and it lasted 12 hours almost to the precise minute.”

“Would you mind excusing us?” I said, pointing to the back yard. “I’d like to have a word with my friend.”

“Not at all, gentlemen. Take your time. I’ll fetch the transcript of Phillip’s experience if you’d care to see it. Take all the time you like.”

Henry and I walked out into the back yard. I stood under the avocado tree while Henry reached down, plucked a long blade of grass from the ground and put it in his mouth as he leaned against the garage. He had the tranquil smile he often wears. "So what are you thinking, Dudley?" He said.

"This guy is nothing like that viper Gomez. I guess I got the idea that any scientific study concerning medicine would have to be suspicious. I actually like the man for some reason."

"I do too," Henry said.

"What do you think of that stuff about us being intelligent, introspective, educated people? Think he's pulling our leg?"

Henry grinned. "I think the man is obviously a fine judge of character."

I chuckled. "I thought you might say something like that. I'm guessing you're for it, huh?"

"I have an uncle," Henry said. "Full blooded Cherokee. Looks like a hostile Indian. Copper skin. Intense eyes. Scowl. Calls himself Ozzy Stillwater. He's not hostile at all, not anymore at least. He's actually quite a sweetheart. Do anything for you. He's traveled all 'round the South and Southwest. None of the tribes are really aggressive toward one another these days so he visits wherever he's welcomed.

"He's sat in on a few Peyote rituals. First one was with a Texas tribe, the Carrizos. Ozzy came back a different man. Told me and my cousin Jeffrey all about it. Just like this Leon Fletcher fellow, says. Great self-revelations. Ozzy says he talked to the Great Spirit through Peyote. I wouldn't believe that coming from anyone else. He didn't use these exact words but he said the Peyote helped to put all of his life and the lives of Indians and all other men into perfect perspective.

"The reason he looks hostile is because he used to be very hostile. Hated white people. Hated himself. All that's gone now. He's a changed man, though after many years the lines of anger in his face still show sometimes. Says Peyote made him see beyond the hate. Fletcher says his brother patched things up with his father. Maybe the white powder is anti-hate medicine. Fletcher could get rich selling something like that.

"Ozzy spent six months with the Apaches in Oklahoma a little over a year back. Shared Peyote with them too. Gentle as a pussycat but I'm sure he's still a lion if he needed to be. Peyote isn't something usually offered to young men, at least in Indian circles. When we met you told me you were looking for your soul. I said I was looking for my heart. You realize that we are both looking for the same thing. We both knew it the moment we began speaking last week. The word for heart and soul is the same in many Indian dialects. I'm willing to give it a try."

"I am too," I said. "It's a bit late to start now though. Fletcher might be busy. But if he's free tomorrow we could do it then."

"Let's ask him," Henry said.

Fletcher was free the next day and was willing to administer the powder. We read over his brother's experience and there were many comments where Phillip claimed to have discarded an

old version of himself. Henry said many of the remarks were consistent with what his uncle Ozzy said about his Peyote experiences.

The following morning on Fletcher's suggestion we had a light breakfast of eggs, toast and orange juice. We led Clara and the wagon two blocks from the hotel to Leon Fletcher's cottage. We had some water, fruit and crackers packed for the day. Fletcher took a small corked bottle from his icebox along with a large pickle jar filled with lemonade and ice and a couple of coffee mugs. He also brought a thick pad of paper and several pencils. We walked about a half mile out to the edge of town. There were no people around. There were several shade trees about. We brought the wagon to a halt under an old willow. There was a dry well about a hundred feet away. The feeling of anticipation was both exhilarating and frightening.

Fletcher told us this was where he'd had his first experience with the powder. It was peaceful enough. Clara was in the habit of staying close by so we let her graze at her leisure. The three of us moved to the back end of the wagon and sat. Fletcher passed Henry the lemonade and cups. Then he took the small bottle containing the powder out of his shirt pocket and placed it on the wagon. Next he brought out a thin metal stick flattened on one end. He opened the bottle and scooped out a small amount of powder and tapped it into an empty cup. He repeated his efforts with the second cup and told Henry to fill both halfway with lemonade.

With that done he handed us each a cup and told us to drink. I picked up one of the cups and held it out. Henry did the same. "To heart." he said.

We clinked and I said, "To soul." We drank the lemonade.

Fletcher made light conversation asking about our travels, our backgrounds, our likes and dislikes. For 10 minutes or so we simply had a pleasant lighthearted chat. Not knowing exactly what to expect I commented that the morning sky seemed inordinately blue. I had a big grin on my face. It must have been contagious as Fletcher smiled brightly. Henry lit up with a grin of his own and concurred. Clara wheezed loudly as if to join in agreement. I chuckled and told Henry that Clara agreed. I didn't realize it then but the drug had begun to take effect.

We continued talking. The conversation turned to our childhoods. We each gave accounts of our days growing up. I'd had a very pleasant time of it as my parents were loving people. Henry spoke of his mother and grandmother spending a lot of time with him early on teaching him arithmetic and reading. He explained that during his entire life the Cherokee Nation was in a major transition period, which had his father troubled because Indians everywhere were being taken advantage of by white settlers.

The conversation meandered over numerous topics. I don't remember all of them. I don't know how long we sat talking but do remember Henry and me wanting to get up and move around. Fletcher began to walk over toward the dry well and we followed. For a time we ran and shouted and sang songs and cried and laughed and laughed and laughed. The world had become a lovely, vibrant place full of possibilities. Thinking and reasoning was effortless as ideas flowed in and out of my consciousness. I mentioned this to Henry and he said the same thing was happening with him. Fletcher was right there with us the whole way.

It was actually a blessing that he was because our minds were racing so fast it would have been impossible to remember everything. Henry must have commented a half dozen times how lucky we were to have him taking lots of notes. He would occasionally ask questions but he seemed to want to leave us to ourselves. I remember sitting under the Willow. I was thinking about peanuts. I don't know how or why but when I closed my eyes I would see the molecular symbol for peanut fiber. I told Fletcher and he had me draw it on his pad. I envisioned using the fiber for all types of industrial applications.

Henry had a similar experience only his was oriented to atomic theory. He also had a vision of him and me and Fletcher and several people from his tribe crossing a frozen tundra hiding from woolly mammoths and saber tooth tigers. Then somehow that scene evaporated into atoms and molecules then planets and stars. Much of the early part of Henry's experience was related to physics.

I remembered being able to see individual cells of the various systems of my body. It was like my intellect was inside my body inspecting things. My heart cells were like little jazz musicians keeping beat to my heart. I'd intentionally breathe in and out quickly and they'd pick up the beat and play lively music. I tapped my feet to the beat for a while. I wish I could have somehow recorded the music as it was amazing. After a while I was able to look at the cells of my liver, kidneys, skin, brain, just about every system as I recall. They were communicating with each other in several different ways.

Some of them actively spoke in a language I didn't understand entirely. Sometimes they communicated telepathically using my brain as a transmitter and receiver. I was privy to all of those communications. Every message had a distinct purpose. Their business was keeping my body functioning properly. Before this phase of the experience was over I received a report from a representative of each system. Each one told me how well I was doing in keeping my body alive and healthy. Several had suggestions on how I could improve. One was to add more joy to my life. I was able to relay some of this information to Fletcher who was doing his best to accommodate Henry and me while also keeping an eye on Clara.

Henry had an experience where he was sitting with a gypsy fortune teller. He said the woman was young and pretty. He said if it wasn't for the experiment he would have stopped and asked her to go on a date. We all laughed. He would ask her a question and she would consult with a tiny orange cat sitting on her shoulder. The cat spoke to her in a language Henry wasn't able to decipher but the gypsy translated for the cat, whispering the answers to Henry.

Fletcher was only able to capture some of this fascinating exchange. One part of Henry's experience with the gypsy and her cat was quite remarkable. She told him that from time to time the spirit of recently deceased humans would inhabit the bodies of moths and butterflies. They did this so they could look in on their loved ones still among the living. Sometimes they'd let them know they were there and other times they'd keep it a secret while fluttering about looking at the world they'd recently left. She said that some very perceptive humans were able to sense the presence of these spirits on their own.

What was interesting about this bit was that I had received the identical information about moths and butterflies. The information didn't come from a gypsy via a cat though. While sitting under the willow I picked up a luminescent green caterpillar. Rays of beautiful green light emanated from the creature. It somehow communicated with me without speaking, saying that it hoped to be chosen to be inhabited by a human soul.

I remember thinking that a human soul would be too big for the tiny creature. But then the message came from somewhere that our soul energy was present throughout all of creation and was easily accommodated in the body of the caterpillar. Essentially it explained the same thing that the gypsy told Henry. We'd somehow received the same message. Well after the experience Fletcher told us that he himself felt telepathic during his brother's experience as they shared information that they couldn't have gotten in any other way.

At some point in the day Fletcher took out a harmonica and began to play. Henry ducked immediately brushing his head, shoulders and his arms as though to repel something dangerous. Fletcher stopped playing and asked what Henry was doing. He said that he could actually see the sounds the harmonica was making. They came out of the instrument and flew past him while some actually landed on his body. He said he could both see and physically feel sounds as Fletcher played.

Fletcher put the instrument back in his pocket but Henry asked him to take it out again and play something gentler. He did as asked. Both Henry and I enjoyed the music. I too was able to see and feel sound. To me it looked like silver and white flowing streamers drifting by my face, my head and body. Some touched me and left me with a powerful feeling of good will. Henry simply laid back on the wagon and enjoyed the music with a big smile on his face.

After we'd grown accustomed to Fletcher's playing we began to sing to the music. I remember singing solo, *If You Knew Susie*, *Swanee*, *Old Man River* and several other popular tunes of the day. Fletcher and Henry both applauded and told me what a wonderful voice I had. This came as a surprise because I'd never been fond of singing. Maybe that was because I'd been forced to sing in the church choir back home. Maybe they were just humoring me.

In keeping with his interest in physics Henry sat cross legged Indian style with his eyes closed and spoke about matter and energy being one and the same. He said that there was a powerful and benevolent energy that animated all of creation. He said that since matter and energy was the same stuff, all things in all of creation are connected. He said that with his eyes closed he witnessed God shaking hands with science and that with their agreement more people would experience the truth.

Henry went into detail on his observation that galaxies, solar systems and atoms all had the same basic design and structure. He said that there was far more unoccupied space in the universe than there was observable matter. He said this was true of the heaviest rock to a grape, and that each was comprised of far more empty space than physical substance and that its actual appearance to humans was misleading.

He continued by saying that the appearances of most things people accepted as real were more often false than accurate. He expounded on this topic for what seemed to be more than an

hour. Fletcher wrote furiously as he spoke. I was able to follow along logically with much of it but became distracted several times seeing white doves flying about that might have not actually been there. Perhaps I should have asked Fletcher.

When Henry finished he sat quietly for several minutes. The three of us were sitting in a close triangular pattern. No one spoke. Finally, Henry asked Fletcher if he might ask him a philosophical question. Fletcher nodded. I don't know why but I sensed something astonishing coming. Henry asked Fletcher if he thought that a Jew might ever want to convert to Christianity. Fletcher thought for a moment and said it was likely that many Hebrews had done that over the years. Henry pondered the answer.

Then he asked what might happen if someone who'd converted from Judaism to Christianity was unhappy with his choice. Fletcher didn't seem to understand the question so Henry rephrased it.

He said, "What if a Jew who'd converted to Christianity didn't feel comfortable with his new faith so he converted back to Judaism. What do you think of that, Mr. Fletcher?" Fletcher looked to me and I simply shrugged.

"I guess it would be fine, if that's what a body wanted," Fletcher said.

"Good," Henry said with a smile and a wink in my direction. Fletcher was busy writing.

"One more question," Henry said. "Do you think it would be fair to say that such an individual has been rejuvenated?" I broke into uncontrollable laughter realizing my friend was pulling our legs. Fletcher had been caught off guard and had to think for a moment and he too began to laugh.

At that point in the experience the effects of the powder appeared less intense. The sun was now in the afternoon sky. Clara had been eating all day as Henry and I couldn't resist feeding her and watching her chew. We were in agreement that there seemed to be something holy about it. We remarked over and over what a beautiful piece of work Clara was. I remember crying over it several times.

We'd been experiencing the effects of Fletcher's compound for slightly more than 10 hours. We were still sitting together on the ground when Henry proclaimed that he felt himself again. Fletcher confirmed that in his own experiences and that of his brother the effects did cease abruptly. About a half hour later I also felt completely free of the effects of the compound. Fletcher began to ask us questions.

It was good that he did because we were able to answer while the memories were fresh. At dusk we made our way back to his cottage. We went inside and continued documenting the experience. By ten o'clock we were exhausted. Fletcher explained that was to be expected. He'd told us to anticipate extreme fatigue following the experience the previous day when he briefed us on what we might expect from the compound.

Fletcher offered us bed rolls and the floor for the night. We secured Clara to the avocado tree and went to sleep. I had some deeply profound dreams. Henry reported the same the following morning. We awoke to bacon, eggs, toast and coffee and ate ravenously. We stayed until early afternoon answering questions and simply chatting as friends about our experiences.

Fletcher commented several times how grateful he was that we participated in his study because we reported many of the same types of things he and his brother had encountered.

Henry and I felt equally drained of energy but otherwise fine. Fletcher said he and his brother had been exhausted after taking the compound and that his normal energy had returned the following day. He asked if we would be interested in repeating the experience. We talked about it a bit and agreed the experience took a lot of energy. I said I thought I might want to repeat but not any time soon.

Fletcher told us he was going to type up everything he'd recorded about our time together and make copies for us. There were so many things I wanted to ponder and explore about the session before thinking about doing it again. Henry felt the same but we both agreed to leave the door open. Fletcher again expressed his gratitude and said he'd intuitively known we'd be great subjects. He said it would take a day or so to sort through all of his writing and have it typed. We thanked him for the experience and his hospitality and returned to the inn. Henry said he was restless and felt like doing something physical.

We were still quite tired but agreed that we would go back to the peanut roasting operation and ask if they still needed help. We reasoned that hard work would be just the thing to help us process what we'd experienced. We ate a big dinner at the inn upon our return. We told the innkeeper we were thinking of heading back out to the roasting house to see about work. He said the owner was a friend and called him on the phone. The roasting man said our timing was perfect as he was expecting a shipment of raw peanuts the following morning. The innkeeper offered to keep Clara for the four days we'd be gone. I agreed it would be best if he did.

Working at the roasting house turned out to be a good idea. Flip and Henry were able to contemplate their individual psychedelic experiences while performing very physical yet simple tasks. They felt they'd gained as much insight working as they had actually participating in Fletcher's study. They worked diligently and had almost no time for talk when it was their time to sleep. They eagerly anticipated receiving their typed transcripts of the session from Fletcher. Flip continued to envision the molecular diagram for peanut fiber and many possible uses for peanut shells, though not as profoundly as he had during Fletcher's experiment. The time passed quickly and before they realized it the two friends found themselves walking back into Palm Springs

Their first stop was Leon Fletcher's cottage. The man was pulling weeds in a small garden by the side of his garage. When Henry and Flip appeared he broke into a wide grin and welcomed them into his home for a drink of lemonade. Henry and Flip were playfully cautious of any more of Fletcher's lemonade but he assured them that it was 100 percent lemonade and nothing else. They went inside.

Sitting at the kitchen table with Fletcher they reviewed the transcripts he'd prepared. They told him that working at the roasting house had added a great deal of new perspective to

their experiences. Thumbing quickly through the notes they were reminded of even more eye-opening memories. They told Fletcher that he had delivered on the promise in his classified ad and he had indeed provided them with a means to experience inner peace. Flip surprised himself by briefly describing his time with Blanche and how it had gone so terribly afoul. He left out the gritty details involving Gomez but still managed to convey his sorrow of having lost someone he dearly loved.

Flip said Fletcher's compound helped to put the experience into perspective. He also said that even though there had been willful fraud and manipulation involved in what had happened, he no longer felt anger or even remorse. He opined that people went through life and created their own realities based on their thoughts, attitudes and emotions. He ended his comments with a profound statement of his own. It was, "We make ourselves heroes or we make ourselves victims. The effort required for either is the same." Both Henry and Fletcher commented that the statement was quite insightful and true.

There was a brief discussion of perhaps returning at a later time for another round of enlightenment. Wanting to leave that opportunity open, Flip and Henry said they were agreeable to it but it went without saying that it was unlikely they'd do it again. There were back slapping hugs all around and the two travelers returned to the inn.

Flip went around to the back to visit Clara who let out a wheezy whinny and scuffed the ground before her as he approached. He spoke to the innkeeper telling him they'd be staying the night but were yet uncertain if they'd stay much longer. They ate dinner and retired to their room to discuss their next move.

Flip had been thinking that he no longer had the desire to travel any further west. He didn't want to mention it because he felt Henry had his heart set on it. But Henry secretly felt the same and brought it up almost immediately. He said he didn't quite know what he wanted to do but knew traveling west was no longer appealing. Flip said he wanted to further investigate peanut fiber. He said he had an idea that simply wouldn't let him rest.

He explained that he was certain peanut fiber could be used to produce many of the products wood pulp, cotton and hemp were presently being used for. He said that as a kid he'd seen a demonstration where a man had come to his school and showed the kids firsthand how paper was made. He was impressed with the process and had never forgotten it. He felt that perhaps peanuts might be a good or even better substitute for wood pulp. Henry said it sounded interesting.

Thinking out loud Flip wondered if there might be an industrial or commercial space for rent where they might conduct some experiments. Henry casually suggested they return to his ranch in Blythe. He said he had a barn and other spaces where Flip could experiment all he wanted. Flip was thrilled at the suggestion saying ideas were flowing copiously and that he hadn't felt so alive since the day he first arrived in Boston. Both agreed that there was no longer an emptiness about them, that what they had been looking for had always been present.

Flip wondered whether he'd be able to get raw and roasted peanuts in large quantities in Blythe. Henry told him there was a dry goods distributor outside of town who was able to get

any and all grocery and household items. Flip smiled and said they should probably ask the man at the peanut roasting operation where they might buy the goobers in bulk. The bags they unloaded were marked with a Georgia address but that didn't necessarily mean they'd come directly from Georgia in one trip. Henry said it was more likely there were one or more depots in the chain from Georgia to points west. Then it appeared to dawn on them at the same time. Flip didn't need peanuts as much as he needed the discarded shells. Maybe they could find a source. And so began Flip and Henry's peanut adventure.

Albert Hoffman, a Swiss scientist, synthesized LSD in November of 1938. Flip and Henry met Leon Fletcher in the spring of 1925. Fletcher spoke of producing an odorless and tasteless white powder from ergot under sterile conditions. Flip and Henry had no way of knowing exactly what they'd swallowed with their lemonade that spring day. Neither man had taken psychoactive substances before so it was impossible for them to compare their experience with any other.

According to research, the process of refining ergot under sterile conditions could result in the production of several compounds very similar to LSD. Obviously we have no way to know what it was our travelers ingested. There is no doubt, however, that the powder was a powerful mind altering substance that aided in changing both men's perspectives on many matters.

If we are to accept Flip's recollections as fact we'd also have to believe he was inspired to explore various alternative uses for peanuts and their byproducts. The next section is a remarkable account of just that.

The following is taken from Flip's account of their return to Blythe.

Henry and me set out for Blythe the following morning. We stopped at the roasting house and asked the operator where we might find peanuts wholesale. Dave, the roasting boss was hesitant thinking he might be talking to a couple of upstart competitors but I set him straight immediately. I explained that I had several ideas that would put peanut shells to good use. The man looked at us like we'd gone loco. He told us the only good use for shells was as fertilizer and most peanut operations couldn't be bothered to expend the effort even for that. He said poor folks would sometimes arrange to take peanut shells and burn them for heat.

I was polite and told the man we had an idea to take the fiber and produce a coarse fabric and perhaps a low grade paper. The man motioned for me and Henry to follow him into his dingy office. The walls were plain and bare except for a faded black and white photograph of a boy standing by a horse. There was a desk with a phone and two chairs. The peanut boss sat behind the desk while Henry and I stood. He mumbled something about wasting his time but since we'd been such good workers he'd try and help us. He opened up a drawer and took out a leather-bound ledger. He turned to a page in the back where there were a dozen or so hand written addresses.

“Most companies selling shelled peanuts are in the candy business,” he said. “Candy and salty snacks, that is. There are maybe five or six of them in and around Chicago. There are a bunch up in the Northeast, a dozen or more. Maybe two in Atlanta though I think there’s a new one starting up. One in Oklahoma City. Hell, I don’t know all of ‘em but I’d guess any one of them would be happy to have someone dumb, er, I mean, someone enterprising enough to take the shells off their hands.

“Right now none that I know of is doing anything with them but spending money to have them buried somewhere or incinerated. Getting rid of the shells is an expense to every company I know of. If I had a place to get rid of the shells I’d get myself a half dozen shellers and open a line of roasted and shelled nuts.”

“Why don’t you take the shells and use them as fuel for roasting?” I offered.

“Thought of that,” he said. “Even tried it. But the damned shells are too light. They burn too fast. Can’t get enough of them in the oven fast enough to produce a steady heat.”

“I know!” I said with gusto. The man stared at me with a puzzled look.

“And how would you know that, Dudley?” he said.

Henry turned to me with that smile of his.

“Well,” I said. “I don’t exactly know. But I’ve done a lot of thinking about this. I even had what you might call some visions of how it might all work. I thought of your business and how you might make more money if you could sell roasted, shelled nuts.

“I was thinking of how your operation was set up. I don’t have the figures on your costs so it was all guesswork. I know that oven gets hot. Really hot. I know it would take a couple of guys to feed it with shells. So here’s what I came up with.” Henry was all ears as I hadn’t mentioned any of this to him yet. It all came to me during our session with Fletcher.

“If you were to get some sort of grinder... Maybe something like the hand cranked shellers on the market only designed to bust the shells up really small. You could have someone doing that while someone else took the crushed shells and put them into water.”

“Why would I want to do that?” The peanut boss said.

“Because once they’re ground up small and wet you’re going to add a little sap from all the milkweed around here and then let them sit out in the sun for a few hours. They won’t be like regular logs but they’ll be dense enough to burn and they won’t burn all that fast.”

“Too much bother,” the boss said.

“I thought you might say that,” I said. “Right now you’re fueling the ovens with what? Scrap wood, right? Where does that come from?”

“Anywhere I can get it,” the man said.

“And you get it for free, right?” I said, knowing he paid for it.

“The hell I do,” the peanut boss said. “That wood is the most expensive part of this operation next to the peanuts themselves. Sometimes I get lucky and snag some scrap someone wants to get rid of but most often I gotta pay for it.”

“So,” I said. “If you could turn shells into burnable chunks by grinding them and then pressing them you’d need another guy, right?”

“Don’t know,” the boss said with a smile coming over his face. “So how would I get the ground up shells to stay together? You said milk weed. You think there’s anything else that might work?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know just the thing.”

“So you gonna tell me,” the peanut boss asked. There was no doubt. I definitely had his attention.

“Before I do,” I said. “Would you agree that there may be something worth investigating with peanut shells?”

“Sure,” he said. “It’s just that I don’t have the time to sit around dreaming about it like some guys. So what the hell would hold these peanut logs together? It would have to be something cheap.”

“It is cheap,” I said. “It’s alum.”

“Alum?” Henry and the peanut boss repeated the word in perfect harmony.

“That’s right, I said. “Stuff is dirt cheap. When you add a little flower to it it’s like glue. You’ll have to play around with it do get the proper proportions but it should be perfect to hold your shell logs together. I haven’t worked the numbers but I’d bet you could produce enough peanut shell logs using a single guy to be rid of a wood fueled oven within a month. Here’s the question you need to ask yourself. How much money would you have on hand at the end of the month if you didn’t have to buy fire wood? The next question is this. Would that amount be enough to hire someone to grind shells and make peanut logs?”

“Hell,” the peanut boss said. “I could pay three, maybe four guys for that amount and still buy my groceries. You sure this would work, Dudley?”

“No,” I said. “But I think I could make it work if I put my mind to it. You’re buying wood every month and burying peanut shells. But peanut shells are pretty much the same thing as wood. They’re just in a different form, not quite as dense. So the thing to solve that makes them as valuable as wood is to make them denser. You could probably get milky glue or alum or flower paste to hold them together and still be profitable.”

“I’ve liked you two since you first showed up,” the peanut boss said. “Now I like you even more. I think you’re on to something, Dudley. I really do. I’m only trusting you guys because the two of you have showed me you’re honest and hard workers. Not just that, you’re smart. Tell you what. I’ll give you two guys a hundred bucks if you stick around here and come up with a peanut shell log that will burn properly. I’ve already got a sheller. Don’t need to use it very much. I’ll send it into town and get it refitted with finer teeth. You just let me know how small you need the shells to be to make workable logs. Let me know what you need to make it work. Flour, glue, alum, whatever you want. I really don’t want to have to screw around with milkweed though. What do you say?”

“This is quite unexpected,” I said. “We were on our way back to Blythe. Allow me to confer with my partner, Henry Smith if you would.” The peanut boss rolled his eyes at my playfully formal tone.

“Confer all you want,” the man said. Henry and I stepped outside.

“Man, Dudley,” Henry said. “You are smooth. Where’d you come up with that peanut log stuff?”

“I feel smooth,” I said. “It came to me as the conversation unfolded.”

“I thought so,” Henry said. “You think it will work?”

“I think two smart guys like us can make it work. I’m telling you, my friend. I had dozens of ideas swimming through my head from Fletcher’s white powder. I’ll bet we could have something that would work within a day or two. Pretty easy hundred bucks. But we won’t count it until we earn it. One other thing I want from Dave before we agree to do this. I want him to put us up at the inn. It’s one thing sleeping in that dirty little space when you’re dog tired and can’t keep your eyes open anyway. But we’re not going to be getting dog tired. I’ve got a feeling our dog days are over, Henry.”

“I like that,” Henry said. “It’s only \$2.25 a night for the inn. I’m guessing he’ll go for it. Maybe you should squeeze him for another hundred.”

“I thought of that,” I said. “But let’s not get cocky. Besides, if we come up with something decent maybe we can go into business selling it. I’ve got other ideas for peanut shells too. I know I can make a decent grade paper out of them. I just don’t know why no one has done it yet.”

“Okay,” Henry said. “Let’s tell him we’re on. I’ll leave it all to you.”

We went back inside and told Dave the peanut boss we’d give it a go. If we came up with a log that was dense enough and held together he’d pay us \$100. We told him we’d work on the project only if he’d foot the bill for our room and board at the inn. He picked up the phone and called the inn explaining that we would be staying there for a week or so and that our room and meals were on him. Finally we asked him for \$20 to pick up various supplies in town.

He pulled two ten dollar bills out of his pocket and handed them to me. I asked Dave to hold off on sending his peanut sheller to the machine shop until we got back as I wanted to get 30 or so pounds of shells small enough to possibly make some test logs when we returned. Henry and I walked to the cart and Clara pulled us back into town where we headed directly for the hardware store.

The solution turned out to be almost too easy. Alum was out. It was wallpaper paste. Fifteen cents for a two pound box. And the beauty of it was that it didn’t have to be mixed to the thick consistency necessary for wallpaper. After three days of experimenting we found we could make 40 two foot logs using a single box of paste.

The peanut boss sent his hand cranked peanut sheller into town for retooling but not before he personally ground up 30 pounds of shells for our test. Since it was designed to break the shells and leave the peanuts intact he had to run the shells through two or three times to get them the right size. The pieces were still slightly too big but were workable. It was clear to us that Dave was excited about the possibilities of my idea.

Our biggest challenge was coming up with economical molds to form the logs. Henry figured that out. I had gone into the hardware store alone. Henry went off by himself to ponder what we might use for molds. I asked the hardware clerk what types of glue he had on hand.

Aside from homemade kid's white flour paste there were few other choices in the way of adhesives. Most of what he had were oil based preparations and they weren't cost effective as they'd have to be used in large quantities.

I walked around the store thinking I might find something I could use. There was a pretty lady with two children sitting on a bench by an enormous window with the sun streaming in. They were going through a very large book. It turned out to be wallpaper samples. That's when the idea struck me. I remembered that wallpaper paste was actually a cellulose preparation made from starch or sugar and a very reliable adhesive. There was no question in my mind that it would work. I knew we had a winner.

I went outside and found Henry walking around. He said he hadn't come up with an answer to the log molds yet. We'd already ruled out metal pipe as they were far too expensive and would require lots of cutting to size. We thought there might be cardboard tubes available and left that option open.

We returned to the roasting operation with the wallpaper paste and some large buckets for mixing the shells. It was only two in the afternoon and I wanted to see how well the paste would hold the shells together.

The peanut boss greeted us upon our return. Henry and I were pleased that Dave had taken the initiative to have shells ready for us. Even though the shells weren't the optimal size I just had to get started. All three of us were energized. I showed him what we'd bought and handed him a receipt for it. He urged me to hold on to the balance of the \$20 as he was sure there would be more expenses. It was clear that he'd been thinking the entire process through.

"Have you guys any idea what we'll be using for molds?" he said. "I was thinking metal pipe but that could run into some money. I suppose it would end up being a good investment but I was hoping you'd come up with something cheaper."

I was about to answer him when Henry spoke.

"We've got it figured out," he said as though he were speaking of simple arithmetic. I was a bit surprised while the peanut boss just smiled.

"Pretty sure it won't cost much at all," Henry continued. "I was out and about while Dudley was in the hardware store. I noticed a house that had had a serious fire two blocks from the hardware store. There were some men inside. I think they were taking out scrap copper and lead pipe and anything else of value. I looked up at the roof and noticed red curved ceramic tiles. Probably made of baked clay and mud. Lots of houses in town have them. They'd be perfect, especially if you could get them on a salvage deal."

I didn't know exactly what Henry was talking about but the idea was brilliant. The peanut boss liked it too.

"That house belongs to a friend of a friend," Dave said. "My understanding is that they're going to have it down by Friday. Don't know if they have plans for those tiles but I can find out right quick." He went into his office.

"I thought you drew a blank on the molds," I said.

“I did,” Henry said. “Right up until Dave asked about it. It just popped into my mind. Maybe creative thinking is contagious.” I smiled. The peanut boss came out three minutes later laughing.

“The man who owns the house is going to tear it down,” he said, “and would have been hauling the debris to the dump just out of town. I asked if I could have the tiles. He said they were old and wouldn’t do for a proper roof. I told him I was thinking of using them for a border in a big rock garden. Don’t know where that came from. Just sort of popped into my mind.” Henry and I laughed.

“Go ahead and laugh,” he said. “But I don’t want anyone to know what we’re doing. Someone else might want to grab this idea. Wouldn’t do to be creating my own competition.” Henry and I nodded in agreement.

“I don’t have any peanuts coming till the day after tomorrow,” he said. “I do have two guys who could use the work though so I’m sending them to town to take those ceramic shingles. Must be five, six hundred of them. That should be plenty of molds.”

“I’d say so,” Henry said.

The peanut boss was happy. “I just sent the peanut sheller to the machine shop with instructions to fit it with teeth that will shred the shells rather than crunch them up. I hope that will work.”

“It should,” I said. “I’ve found a cheap glue. It’s wallpaper paste, actually. I think it will be an excellent adhesive. I’m glad you ground up some shells before sending the grinder to town. I want to do some experimenting. I figure we can piece together a few molds out of some of the scrap firewood around here. That’ll have to do until we get the tiles.”

“Sounds great,” the peanut boss said. “I think this is going to allow me to go into the snack business. I’ve just got a feeling. I sure am glad you guys showed up.”

The peanut boss’s men returned later that day with more than 150 curved ceramic roof tiles. There were still several hundred more in town. Dave told them to stack them where the firewood was. We figured he anticipated not needing nearly as much wood as he’d been using once we had the peanut shell log puzzle solved. We had the sheller back by noon the following day. It was much better than it had been at the start. I suggested to Dave that taking it down a bit more would make it perfect.

He sent it back to the machine shop right then and there. We’d already taken about 50 pounds of near-perfect ground shells and began to test them with water and paste. Within four hours we had what we thought would be decent peanut logs. The only thing we had to do was wait until they dried. Dave was so excited he wanted to fire up the roaster using wood for fuel and dry the peanut logs that way but I said they’d be ready soon enough as they were sitting outside in the 90 degree heat, another advantage of having such an operation in Palm Springs.

Our tests went well. We discovered we didn’t have to use nearly as much water as we’d originally thought to get the logs firm. We were using buckets for our testing. It became clear that Dave would need to construct a dozen or so shallow troughs for mixing the shells and glue to produce logs en masse.

Two and a half days after we'd started we had viable logs. Henry was keeping records of everything we did. Of course, before leaving we were going to provide Dave with detailed written instructions for carrying on with this enterprise. And since we never promised him exclusive rights to the process we hoped to be able to market the idea as well.

Our first logs burned hot and long. A success. Henry and I made some minor adjustments to the formula and recorded our changes. The second batch was even better. We found that the finer we ground the shells the better the product. The peanut boss contracted with the machine shop to produce a dozen sheet metal troughs, each eight inches deep, two feet wide and six feet long. They'd be able to process ten to twelve logs per trough. He also said he was going to be ordering another shell grinder.

Henry and me were having a great time. It wasn't at all like work. Two days after starting Dave got in a huge load of raw peanuts. We were still refining the log recipe. Two days later we felt it was as good as it was going to get. We'd built a small fire pit outside the roast house for testing and kept several peanut logs burning during daylight hours, sort of an ongoing experiment in quality control.

By then Dave had stacked all of the available roof tiles. They worked as though they'd been custom designed for creating peanut logs. At first Dave wondered how they were going to end up round like natural logs. We explained they didn't need to be round. We took the mushy peanut pulp and mashed it into the tile leaving the top open and flat. The open tile allowed the log to set up faster and the flat edge made them easier to stack. Dave must have commented a dozen times during the week what geniuses we were.

Our work was essentially done. Dave had the recipe for the logs and had stood by watching us produce nearly 100 of them. He said he could do it in his sleep. Better yet, he felt just about any unskilled worker could learn to do it inside of a few hours. Even though we had met our obligation Henry and I hung around and spent a day creating logs while his workers roasted the last of the raw peanuts in the wood-fueled roaster.

Dave held back on several hundred pounds of nuts to try roasting them with the new peanut logs. By then there must have been close to 400 hundred of them. Dave wanted to start the entire operation from scratch so he let the wood fire in the oven die down on its own. He then had his men shovel out the coals and extinguish them with a hose. It was hot work that Henry and I were glad to have been excused from.

With the oven empty we loaded in about 100 logs and set them afire with kindling. Dave made a note to make some smaller logs exclusively for getting fires started. Good idea. Within an hour the oven was as hot as ever. The peanut men began roasting the last of the raw nuts from the latest load. They commented how much easier it was handing small, uniform logs in contrast to having to break up scrap lumber, branches and other random wood fuel. We could see Dave was pleased. He commented that he felt the fire was burning in a steadier, more consistent manner. After watching how smooth the operation was running he called us into his office. He was a happy man.

“I’ve got \$82.16 into material for this new venture,” he said. “That includes the new sheller, the troughs, glue and all the miscellaneous stuff. \$82.16. I owe you two \$100. But I’m not going to pay you \$100.” Henry looked my way with a blank stare. I refrained from commenting.

“Nope,” the peanut boss said. “I’m going to give you each \$100. Wait,” he said as though he’d rehearsed it. “Make that \$150 each. You friggin’ guys are friggin’ amazing.” We smiled.

“I don’t know if you two realize what you’ve done. I’ve actually debated with myself whether to even mention it. But I’m going to anyway. I took a pencil to this project last week when you guys took off for the hardware store. I figured I could roast nuts and then shell ‘em and then use the shells for fuel. That was the idea. Sort of like, what do you call it? A particular motion machine where the process kind of feeds on itself.” Henry cleared his throat. “I think you mean perpetual motion,” he said.

“Right, Dave said. “That’s the word. Anyway, being able to do that allows me to enter an entirely different market. The most profitable market in the peanut business.

“But that’s not even the best part of it. The best part, as I figure, is that I can do it cheaper than anyone else in the United States, Canada or Mexico. That, gentlemen, is because of you and your crazy idea. Who would have thought to use the shells to fuel the roaster? It’s been tried and tried and tried again. But no one was able to load loose shells into their ovens fast enough to keep the heat steady. When you brought it up I thought you were dreaming. You’ve done something others have been trying to do and you did it inside of a week with only a foggy idea it would even work.

“I know this started out as a theory. And what a theory. Not only did you figure out how to make firewood out of peanut shells. But I was able to save hundreds if not thousands of dollars with your brilliant roof tile idea. Amazing, just amazing. If I wasn’t so dammed old I’d name my next kid after you two. Dudley Henry or Henry Dudley. ”

The peanut boss was almost giddy. He stood up, reached into his pocket and handed Henry \$150 and then handed me \$150. He said that wherever we ended up he wanted us to stay in contact with him. He said that if we ever had another brilliant peanut idea we should come to him with it first. He said that he’d recently been offered an unbelievable deal on an old brick warehouse nearby but didn’t have enough demand for roasted peanut to take advantage of it.

With Dave the peanut boss’s costs so low to produce roasted, shelled nuts he would now be able to undercut the wholesaler offering the absolute lowest prices. He said he knew he’d be able to buy and make the most of that old warehouse with his new product. And he had us to thank for it.

I’m not sure why any of this surprises me because ever since I can remember Flip’s stories have been very amusing and entertaining. Other family members would dismiss what he said out of hand though they never did it openly or in an offensive way. Ever since I was a young child I

looked forward to listening to my grandfather's yarns. I've always been fascinated with them. And I never expressed even the slightest bit of doubt. My father, Flip's oldest son, often warned me that I should take everything his father said with a grain of salt.

I think I've had a different take on life from the very beginning though. My approach in life has been to accept anything anyone had to say unless it was somehow costly to believe it. What I mean by costly is that if I were to put my faith, my hopes or my money on the line in believing someone, then I would obviously need to be a bit more discerning. This has never been the case with Flip's stories. At their very worst they were entertaining. I believe my open-minded approach with people has paid great dividends in my life.

If Flip and Henry's adventures with peanut shells ended with them creating a profitable new process for Dave the peanut man of Palm Springs, I think they would have learned a lot about not dismissing ideas out of hand simply because they hadn't been tried before. But their peanut adventure wasn't over. In fact, it was just starting. Flip insisted that he had an idea for making paper from peanut shells along with several other products. He and Henry were becoming fast friends too. They seemed to be intuitively tuned to one another. Did this come about as a result of Fletcher's compound? I asked Flip and he didn't have an answer.

He did say that for several months following their experience with Fletcher that everything just seemed to make more sense. His experience with Blanche was no longer a "nagging hole in his heart," to quote him directly. Henry had also benefitted from the experience. He'd admitted to Flip that a large part of him was bitter because of the way American Indian's had been treated over the years. As a boy he listened to his father and grandfather's tales of wickedness and cruelty at the hands of not just white citizens, but government representatives as well.

He'd naturally absorbed much of their bitterness. Near the end of his life, Henry's grandfather had somehow made his peace over the plight of his people. He'd taken Henry aside many times and explained that the ways of the Great Spirit were not a secret and it was very obvious to those with their eyes open. He said that what a man or group of men does eventually returns to him in kind. He explained the concept applied to both good and bad deeds.

He said that the white man, in his lust for keeping slaves caused much pain and sorrow to many thousands of innocent people for many years. He said that in the process of abolishing slavery many innocent whites perished as anyone with true knowledge of the Great Spirit would expect. The wise man often reflected that all things in life run in cycles and no one can escape those cycles. He emphasized again that such predictable results manifested to entire groups and that one day the white man would be callously displaced by merciless and unfeeling interlopers telling tales of how their wickedness was in fact blessings.

It was hard for Henry to understand this and even harder to believe it when he finally understood. It gave him little relief. But as it had happened with Flip, Henry too had been able to find solace in the Indian's situation after experiencing Leon Fletcher's compound. Henry and Flip both agreed that Fletcher's white powder had served more as a key that opened mysterious

and magnificent internal resources that had been lying dormant perhaps since birth. It seems that for both men forgiveness was the blessing that restored their balance in life.

With Dave's new enterprise operating efficiently Flip and Henry left Palm Springs for Blythe. The Palm Springs peanut boss had given them the names, addresses and telephones number of every peanut operation he knew of. Flip was more determined than ever to try his hand at turning peanut shells into paper and other products. With the majority of companies in the peanut trade seeing the disposal of shells as an expense, and with the contacts Dave had turned over to them, the two men felt it wouldn't be difficult coming by enough free raw material for whatever enterprise that might seem feasible.

There was certainly more urgency in Flip and Henry's return to Blythe than there had been in their departure. They made good time and completed the trip with Clara pulling the wagon in just over three days. With one exception little had changed at Henry's family's ranch since their departure. The exception was that Henry's cousin Jeffery had been chosen to lead a trial program where a group of Indians would run a printing operation in Oklahoma City.

In an effort to improve Indian relations President Coolidge was going to have one operation of the United States Government Printing Office run entirely by Indians. The forerunner to this program had been the training of more than 100 Native Americans for the three previous years. Henry's cousin was a graduate of that program. Henry had also benefitted from the program though he never formally attended.

Because of its proximity to "Indian Country" the Oklahoma City government printing office was chosen as the one to be staffed by Native Americans. Because he'd done so well during his training, Henry's cousin Jeffery was chosen to oversee the office. Henry was tempted to openly scoff the program but felt he needed to remain silent with a wait and see attitude. His restraint demonstrated a major change in character which Henry attributed to the wisdom he'd gained on the road with Flip.

Once settled in, Flip and Henry arranged for the delivery of 100 pounds of peanuts through Perkin's Products, Blythe's dry goods distributor. 50 pounds of the shipment was raw peanuts, with the other 50 being roasted. Flip felt roasted shells would not contain moisture and would easier to turn into pulp. However, he found it made little or no difference.

Without the benefit of having a hand operated peanut sheller Henry, Flip and several children ground the shells on an old flour grinder. As it turned out, this brought the shells to the perfect consistency for paper. Flip tried to remember exactly what the man giving the paper making demonstration to his class had done. As he recalled, the man actually demonstrated two ways to make paper. Flip recalled him using a grinder, but it was one that resembled a hand cranked meat grinder. Flip was certain it was tooled for much finer grinding though.

Henry and Flip worked for more than two weeks and managed to produce a fairly decent grade of paper. The first sheet was the toughest. The breakthrough came when one of the kids said they should try flattening the pulp out with a rolling pin. It worked. They later constructed several wooden frames and stretched fabrics such as silk, cotton, light wool and others across them. They had the most success with triple layered bandage gauze.

It was obvious the experiments weren't going as well as Flip had hoped. Henry suggested they stick to the peanut log business, a proven winner. But Flip wasn't ready to quit just yet. They spent a lot of their time at the county library in Blythe. The library's most valuable resource had been a 1922 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Flip read all about primitive methods of producing paper. He found little he hadn't already discovered on his own. He then directed his attention to large paper mills. There was a section in the encyclopedia listing the largest mills in the United States by region. There were two large paper mills in Phoenix. He was immediately inclined to go to Phoenix and ask for a tour of one or both of them.

Henry wasn't especially thrilled with the idea but his intuition told him to be supportive. Phoenix was just over 100 miles east of Blythe. Flip wanted to leave right away. With nothing better to do Henry agreed to go too. But rather than travel with a mule and cart Flip sprung for two one way bus tickets to Phoenix. They packed some clothes and left.

With numerous stops along the way the trip took the better part of the day. One of the mills was only a mile from the bus station in an industrial part of Phoenix. The men got directions and walked to the plant. It was an old, dark and unfriendly building with steam billowing up out of one stack and dark smoke from two others. Workmen formed a queue along one side of the building. At precisely noon a loud whistle sounded from somewhere nearby and the men filed slowly into the building talking amongst themselves as they made their way inside.

There was a guard shack not much larger than a phone booth in front with a tall, lanky old balding man inside. Flip and Henry approached the shack. Flip asked if the factory offered tours to the public. The guard looked at him as though he'd asked to borrow lunch money. He said the mill was a business and that once a year they gave a tour to local school kids and that was it. Then the guard looked around as though to make sure no one was listening and confided in his visitors that the only reason they had tours for kids was to make mill life look appealing. In other words, it was an effort in recruiting employees rather than an informative outing.

This gave Flip an idea. He asked if the mill was hiring. The guard said they were almost always hiring unskilled men. He thanked the guard and he and Henry began to walk back to the main walkway and off the mill's property. Henry had read Flip's mind. Flip asked his friend to humor him and apply for work in the mill. Henry agreed. Flip reasoned that once he had an idea of what it took to produce paper on a grand scale they'd leave. They met the afternoon foreman an hour later and began working on the swing shift the following day.

Inside of three days Flip had the answers he needed to produce a decent grade of paper. He also had the knowledge to produce a high quality product but hadn't yet figured how it would translate from state of the art paper mill production to a modest homemade operation. Having been with Flip every step of the way in the paper project, Henry also recognized what had been missing in their efforts. And although they had the information they needed within a few days they agreed to stay on for two weeks thinking they might yet discover additional tricks.

Henry wondered what would come of it all. It was clear that they wouldn't be able to produce large quantities of paper at his ranch. He would delicately bring this up to Flip during their breaks and at their room at the Phoenix YMCA but his friend seemed preoccupied. This

apparent preoccupation with ideas known only to Flip would become his trademark. When he did address the question he'd reference the serendipitous process in which they'd made peanut shell logs and said that whatever they needed would find its way into the mix. Henry loved Flip's optimism.

Flip also said it wasn't likely they'd be able to produce paper in bulk for a while. He suggested that when they returned to Blythe they should look into setting up a peanut shell log operation similar to Dave's in Palm Springs to determine if there was a market for inexpensive firewood. This idea made far more sense to Henry than producing paper. Both men wondered where they might get bulk quantities of shells for logs.

While in Phoenix Flip remembered there was a midsized peanut processing plant there. He distinctly recalled Dave the peanut boss of Palm Springs mentioning it. Dave said the operation was focused more on confectionery items than peanuts. Flip decided it would be a good idea to pay the plant a visit just the same since they were there.

When the two men were free of their responsibilities at the paper mill they visited the peanut company. Upon their arrival they immediately realized it was unlikely the plant would be offering tours and neither of them wanted to take jobs there. Henry suggested they pose as buyers from "back west" who might be interested in carrying some of their products in the stores they were planning to open. Flip thought that was deceptive but Henry reasoned that the way things were going it wouldn't surprise him if they did, in fact, end up with stores of one kind or another. That was good enough for Flip. They went to the plant's front office and asked if the company had a catalog of their products.

A pretty woman sat behind a counter and explained that the company only produced seven products so there was no need for a catalog. Flip said they were looking for items containing peanuts. The woman said that all but one of their products had peanuts in them. Henry began talking about the importance of cleanliness in food processing and how most food processing plants cut corners when it came to keeping their facilities clean. As he spoke in his melodic voice he leaned forward on the counter and smiled at the woman. Her eyes were fixed on his. She got up and came out from behind the counter. She asked Henry if he'd care to have a look at the plant. She led Flip and Henry on a brief tour of the manufacturing facility, which was in fact very clean.

As they walked through the plant Flip asked what they did with peanut shells. A curious look came over her face. She said disposing of shells had only recently become a problem. The company had been waiting until they had ten tons or more before loading them into a large incinerator. But surrounding plants, businesses and even homeowners had been complaining about the smoke saying it was foul smelling and unhealthy. As they made their way back to the office a man joined them and introduced himself as the plant manager. Flip took the lead and told the man he and Henry were there about the peanut shell problem. This immediately made the man defensive as he began explaining they were working on a solution.

Flip told him they weren't there to complain but to help. He said that he and Henry might be willing to take the shells off his hands. The man said they had no budget for disposing of the

shells. Flip smiled and made it clear that they might be willing to take the shells at no cost to the plant. The plant boss appeared surprised and asked what they wanted with tons of peanut shells. Henry was about to answer but Flip cut in abruptly and said they were planning on making paper. By now Flip and Henry had gotten good at reading each other so Henry simply backed off and let Flip continue.

The plant boss laughed and said that he personally knew people who had tried to turn peanut shells into paper and that they'd had only limited success. He said the best anyone had ever done was to produce a coarse grade of paper that was unmarketable for all but a few purposes. Flip listened carefully. He told the man that their intentions were exactly that, to produce a coarse grade of paper that would be used on Indian reservations to aid in educating children. The plant boss smiled. With that information he told Flip they could have the shells at \$15 per ton. Flip extended his hand and the plant boss shook it heartily. Flip thanked the man for his time and said he wasn't prepared to pay for the shells. He and Henry turned and began to head for the door.

They didn't make it far before the plant boss called them back. He admitted something Henry and Flip already knew, that he was getting complaints about incinerating the shells. He said that it was his duty to try and bring income to the operation and it was in keeping with that goal that he'd tried to charge them for the shells. Then he said that if the two men would be willing to take the shells he'd be glad to turn them over without charge. In fact, he was willing to load them onto whatever truck Henry and Flip might send.

He said he had 12 tons available and was producing more than a half ton of shells every day. Flip told the man that they'd be happy to take all the shells he had and that if things went as planned they would be willing to continue doing so on an ongoing basis. He said that they'd be picking up the first load within a day or so. The three men shook hands and Flip and Henry left. As soon as they were beyond earshot of the plant foreman Henry spoke.

"Paper for Indian kids on the reservation?" he said. "Where did that come from? I thought we were going to be making logs." Flip smiled.

"We are," he said. "But I didn't think it would be smart to tell that fellow that. There's definitely potential to make paper from shells. But there are bugs in the process that need to be worked out. We will eventually get to that. That guy knew paper isn't profitable. But if we'd mentioned logs he might have got to thinking and wanted to try it himself. You heard him. It's his duty to try and be profitable any way possible. We didn't lie though. The shells will eventually be turned into paper. But for that to happen we're going to need some capital. I figure we might be able to peddle cheap fire logs to people in Blythe and other places."

"I should have known you had something up your sleeve," Henry said. "There's just one problem."

"I know," Flip said. "How are we going to get the shells to Blythe? Where there's a will, there's a way. Let's go."

Before the day was through Flip and Henry bought a twelve-year old Ford truck with payload space capable of hauling two and a half tons of peanut shells. They also met with a

manufacturing representative and ordered two hand cranked peanut shellers. Flip wired his bank for \$375.00, \$250 of which was required to purchase the old truck with the balance going for the shellers. The following morning the two men picked up 4200 pounds of peanut shells and began their drive back to Blythe.

They gathered everything necessary to begin making peanut shell fire logs but ran into a slight problem in the beginning. They found that the logs were fine if they didn't have to be moved much. But when they were loaded for distribution to warehouses and to the end consumer they had a tendency to break apart. This problem actually turned out to be a blessing though. Flip and Henry were aware that producing peanut shell logs for the masses was certain to attract competition. And sure enough, several upstarts tried their hand at making them. But they all failed for a couple of reasons. First, none of them had a reliable source of shells. They also experienced problems with getting firm logs that wouldn't crumble in transit. None of them were able to solve this problem and simply quit trying soon after starting.

But Flip somehow intuitively knew what to do about the crumbling log problem. It was simple. He experimented by adding liquid soap to the wallpaper paste. Within a day they had shell logs nearly as stout as genuine firewood.

Their operation grew slowly and steadily. Within the first month they had local Indians as well as white men working at Henry's ranch. They'd made a deal with the general store in Blyth along with the dry goods distributor in town. Sales steadily picked up. By the fall of 1927 they employed 12 men and were selling more than 1000 shell logs a day.

Something Flip and Henry agreed upon in the early going was to always produce excellent products and sell them cheaper than anyone else in the marketplace. Their first venture helping Dave from Palm Springs fit that model perfectly. They made a pact that they'd continue offering the best stuff they could and selling it cheaper than anyone else. If they couldn't meet that standard they would look for an opportunity that did fit. They agreed that every party in any of their dealings must be happy or there was no transaction.

It wasn't long before the Phoenix shell supplier wasn't able to meet their needs so they called their friend Dave in Palm Springs and told them what they'd been doing. He wasn't surprised. His own operation was flourishing with his new line of roasted and shelled peanuts. He was able to connect Flip and Henry with several other peanut plants that were more than happy to turn over their shells to them. They also offered Dave an opportunity to become a distributor of shell logs in California. He jumped on it. By the fall of 1928 they were shipping 10,000 logs a week to California alone. Henry's family had become the largest employer in Blythe.

Flip and Henry had a thriving company on their hands. Dave recommended they talk to his attorney to form a corporation, which would reduce their tax liability and help protect them from lawsuits. Though his law office was located in California, the lawyer was also a registered

corporate agent in the state of Nevada. At his suggestion they set up a Nevada corporation and held the company anonymously through the use of bearer's stock. They called their enterprise Clearwater Corporation.

Their operation became too large to operate from Henry's family's ranch so they bought some land on the outskirts of town. Cash was flowing in steadily so they put up a 6000 square foot warehouse with four truck bays. Henry personally designed everything to accommodate their growing operation. Henry and Flip were the sole owners of Clearwater's stock and were drawing \$2500 per month, a lot of money in the late 1920s. Nearly 150 men worked at various jobs at Clearwater.

By this time many of their suppliers of shells had become reluctant to give the valuable commodity away. For a time they paid for shells while searching for a solution. As it had been with most of their challenges, the answer was simple. They decided to go into the peanut business. With no background or knowledge in operating a retail snack company they again called upon their friend Dave and made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

He would scout the country for a bargain factory for sale that could be easily converted to their needs. He'd also come up with a line of products and oversee the operation until it could be run by an experienced manager. In exchange for his efforts he'd own one third of the enterprise. And of course, all of the peanut shells the new firm produced would supply Clearwater's shell log business. This worked out well. They also invested in 10,000 acres of Georgia peanut ground and 6000 acres in South Carolina to ensure a steady supply of product. Each property was near full production of high grade peanuts at the time they bought. They could now rest easy knowing they were no longer dependent on others for their raw materials.

With business booming Clearwater began to diversify. Flip saw opportunity in marketing the liquid soap they'd been using to stabilize the logs. They experimented with the clear soap by adding color and fragrance and came up with a line of shampoo called simply, Rosewater. They contracted with a soap factory in Chicago to produce and distribute it. Women raved about Rosewater and it began to sell briskly. Each bottle sold meant a nickel net profit for Clearwater. The first year alone they sold 300,000 bottles. Louise Brooks, a silent screen beauty of the day commented in an interview with Variety that she loved Rosewater and used nothing else. In a short time they were producing pink, yellow and of course, the original red Rosewater Shampoo.

But they didn't stop there. They began producing and marketing peanut oil and peanut butter. The peanut oil business turned out to be a bonanza as the oil is the base ingredient of many over the counter medicines as well as more than two dozen cosmetics. Of course, Flip had been aware of this soon after his experience with Fletcher's compound. They had another hit with a popular line of hand cream and lotion products.

October of 1929 brought the stock market crash though there was no noticeable effect on Clearwater Corporation. In fact, because they sold the least expensive solid residential heating fuel on the market their business actually picked up. The following year many companies were closing as the great depression set in. Clearwater picked up two peanut plants for pennies on the dollar and had them profitable within months.

Flip contacted a business broker to have him look for a floundering paper mill in the southwestern part of the country. Early in 1931 he received a call. Flip and Henry paid a visit to the failing company in Los Angeles and made a cash offer on the spot. It was accepted. They renamed their new enterprise Platinum Page Paper. As he'd done with each new venture, their attorney incorporated the company and made it a subsidiary of Clearwater.

For the next seven months Flip and Henry worked on producing high grade paper from shells. It turned out to be more difficult than Flip had anticipated so he brought in industry experts to help. Essentially, he explained what he wanted and how he felt it could be accomplished. Flip immediately dismissed people expressing undue doubt in his idea and kept only those who were optimistic. The main problem was that it was difficult to get peanut pulp smooth and uniform enough to produce a high grade of paper. But Flip had an answer. One that worked.

He suggested that the shells be ground as fine as flour. The consultants said this would add an additional step to the production process that wasn't necessary when using wood pulp. Of course, they were forgetting the most important aspect of using peanut husks in the first place. Wood pulp was a relatively expensive commodity while peanut shells were little more than a discarded byproduct of what was an already profitable business. When all was said and done they were able to use finely ground shells as their base material and produce a high grade of paper for a third of what wood pulp paper mills were spending.

The process for getting finely ground shells required equipment very similar to what flour mills used to grind grain. They were able to install this equipment in their plant. And as a bonus Flip came up with a modified process that contributed greatly to the reduced cost of production. Virtually every paper mill would take wood pulp, flatten it with rollers and then run a contiguous sheet of new paper over many heated metal rollers. The heat removed the moisture from the new paper leaving it dry.

But Flip and Henry designed a different type of roller, one that was much larger and allowed for more of its surface coming in contact with the moist new paper, thus drying the fresh paper quicker. This proved to reduce production time by a third and reduce the cost of electricity by more than 30 percent. Once again, Flip's idea prevailed. Over the course of 20 years most new paper plants employed his innovations. Another benefit of using finely ground shells was that they were able to eliminate a costly paper purification procedure necessary with common wood pulp. Flip and Henry had set new standards in the paper industry and in doing so were ultimately able to produce high grade paper matching any on the market for one third what other mills were charging.

But it wasn't just peanut shells that went into their product. They'd also become buyers of scrap paper, rags and other fibrous materials such as flax and hemp. All of these commodities and others were added to the peanut pulp and provided yet another measure of quality to their paper not found anywhere else in the United States.

It wasn't long before they had a retooled paper plant ready for production. The only problem was that they had no customers. But that was remedied in a most peculiar way. Henry's

cousin Jeffrey had been with the Oklahoma City government printing office for four years. That office was no longer overseen by a government proctor. Jeffrey was now in charge of the entire operation. His duties as manager of the office involved frequent budget dealings with a powerful man from the US procurement office. This was a normal course of business as they would discuss costs of various printing projects. Jeffrey had established himself as a reliable manager of the Oklahoma office. Henry and Flip were also paying him a monthly consulting fee as his connections and knowledge of national business had come in very useful during Clearwater's startup days.

At Flip and Henry's request Jeffrey casually mentioned to the procurement officer that he'd heard about a new mill that was offering products similar to what they'd been using at a greatly reduced price. The government man was very interested in hearing more. Acting as an agent of sorts for both parties, Jeffrey stayed in touch with Henry and Flip telling them of the possibility of landing a contract to provide the government with paper. The procurement man said he needed wholesale prices for high grade white paper.

Henry and Flip were intentionally vague at first telling Jeffrey the price would depend upon the amount ordered. Platinum Page was able to produce a ream of high grade white paper for just over four cents. They were extremely profitable selling it for ten cents. The government was accustomed to paying just under 30 cents per ream. Flip and Henry suggested they tell the procurement man it might be had for 25 cents.

The procurement officer personally stepped into the negotiations and offered 23 cents per ream. Platinum Page countered at 24 cents and the offer was accepted. By now Flip and Henry had several business managers running day to day operations for their blossoming conglomerate. They sent one of them to meet the procurement man. He returned with the terms necessary to secure not just a portion of the government's business but nearly all of it.

The government would start buying only high grade white paper at 24 cents per ream. Platinum Page would bill the government each month and receive a check for paper sold. In their face-to-face proposal a procurement representative stated Platinum Page would actually keep 20 cents per ream and rebate four cents back to an attorney by the name of Harley Finnister in New York. The four cent rebate was to be considered an administrative service fee. None of this, of course, was presented in writing and if Platinum Page didn't agree to the terms there would be no deal.

Platinum Page's agent was fairly green but did recognize a kickback scheme when he saw one. When Flip and Henry reviewed the terms of the offer they laughed. They could only imagine the bureaucrat going back to his own superiors telling them how he'd secured a deal where he'd be paying six cents less than they'd paid other paper companies in the past. After discussing the matter briefly Flip reasoned they were reducing the cost to the taxpayers considerably and agreed to the deal with the administrative service fee attached.

Flip said that producing peanut shell paper had been his original idea and that it had come to him while under the influence of Leon Fletcher's white powder. Many wild and wonderful things had been born of that experience. Flip and Henry were now multi millionaires; yet thanks

to their anonymous ownership of Clearwater almost no one was aware of it. With Platinum Page Paper up and running the men thought it was time to take a rest and review what they'd accomplished.

They met only seven years before. A despondent Flip had been drifting aimlessly around the Southwest. Both were looking for something and neither knew exactly what that something was. Both would deny it was Fletcher's white powder that had made the difference though they would admit that it had been a powerful catalyst and had opened their eyes to new opportunities.

They agreed that through optimism and perseverance that together they'd accomplished more than an army of men might have. Each of them had more money than they could ever use and a constant stream of even more flowing in every month. They decided they'd set up several charitable foundations though Flip wouldn't reveal their names to me for inclusion in The Bellingus Family History. He did say that the beneficiaries of one are stray dogs, cats and other abused animals. Another foundation benefits American Indians of all tribes. He implied there were more.

There is one more significant piece to this account before I close it. Neither Flip nor Henry was comfortable behind the helm of a multimillion dollar company. They agreed they felt vulnerable in some unexplained way. It was clear that others were able to run the day to day operations without them. They'd grown particularly fond of the attorney Dave had introduced them to and left virtually all business matters in his hands with instructions for him to send them a quarterly progress report. By this time each man was taking \$10,000 per month salary, a very nice paycheck in 1932. Flip tells me he kept only \$1,000 of that money and banked the rest in a numbered Swiss account, a popular way to hide assets in days gone by.

With all their accomplishments the two friends were still restless. Henry had an idea that appealed to Flip. He wanted to change his name and become a professor of physics. He said he'd gotten the idea back at the time the two men met. He remembered Flip talking about how easy it was for Tigard Gomez, the fraudulent researcher, to convince people he was a legitimate physician using counterfeit diplomas. He said he wanted to get a new name with a college diploma to match and teach physics. Flip liked the idea. They both had several lifetimes of experience requiring ingenuity. Surely that would be valuable to students.

Over the course of several weeks they discussed the idea. Flip decided he'd like to be a professor of philosophy. He reasoned that he'd been a free spirit for more than 12 years. He recounted a time before he met Henry where he spent several months in the company of a traveling medicine show. He found the operator, a man calling himself Ricky Tombstone, to be an unusually intelligent and insightful man. He said he'd gained a great deal of knowledge and insight from Ricky, a man he felt to be a real life philosopher and had it not been for Ricky's words of encouragement and wisdom, he would have never made it to Blythe.

He also told Henry that he'd learned a lot from him as well. Henry had a dynamic and persuasive personality. There was his quiet, introspective side and there was also his playful and rebellious side. His proposal to fabricate new identities along with diplomas which would land them teaching jobs was an obvious product of his free spirited nature. But he was able to justify it with simple logic and reason.

He pointed to many public figures that were obviously incompetent. Some of them actually held doctorate degrees. Without modesty he reasoned that he and Flip had accomplished more than a battalion of such men and had left the world far better off as a result of their endeavors. He went on to say that the educational establishment was nothing more than a snooty club and that diplomas were admission tickets to that club, tickets that could be obtained only from other club members. He felt their experiences qualified them as true teachers and that the world at large wouldn't agree unless they had credentials. So they'd do just that, offer credentials. Flip was in complete agreement.

With the tale of his early years as an American out in the open, Flip opened up and told me of a particular philosophy of his that shed light on something I wondered about since I was a young boy. It almost went without saying in my family that Flip was absent minded, an airhead. And as convincing as he'd been in that role it had apparently all been an act. He told me that Henry was a very aware and watchful individual who rarely missed anything going on around him. Watchful and silent, always alert and aware of his place among other people.

During their time together Henry schooled Flip in his ways explaining that it was often wise to observe and say nothing. Henry also said that he would usually play dumb with folks in an effort to have them think he was simple minded or at the very least, not fully aware of his surroundings. This served him well as an Indian because it allowed him to live his life without people being suspicious of what he might be up to. He even used the popular slang for the behavior, sandbagger.

During one of their discussions about the topic, Henry mentioned his and Flip's first meeting when they shook hands. Flip said he recalled Henry's handshake being feeble. Henry smiled and explained that in keeping with the illusion of frailty he always shook hands that way because most men felt superior to men with weak handshakes.

At first Flip was dubious as he'd always been taught to do his best and show others he was competent. But in time he grew to understand Henry had been right. One might say Flip took Henry's advice to extremes as he earned the undistinguished name, airhead, in more than one circle. I was almost as amazed to hear his entire demeanor was a complete charade as I was to learn that Flip had started a major conglomerate so many years ago. I realize it sounds typically cliché but the man never ceases to amaze me.

In reading Flip's account of his life the 1920s it's clear to me that both he and Henry gained far more wisdom with their life experiences than they would have gotten attending college for 20 or even 30 years. Perhaps it sounds like I'm trying to justify what they did in forging college credentials but I believe wisdom is where you find it. The majority of Flip's and Henry's students loved them. Flip has many framed letters in his home office from kids telling

him he made all the difference in their lives. And he, along with Henry did it without real diplomas.

Henry's cousin Jeffery was in Blythe visiting with family in the fall 1932. It was also among his duties to check in on the local print shop. Henry and Flip approached him one evening after a dinner. They explained that they wanted high school and college transcripts along with any other currently acceptable identification papers. They also wanted Diplomas from good, but not great colleges. They'd decided they would have master's degrees. They said that after spending the last seven years building their company that they wanted to drift way into obscurity as subdued college instructors.

Jeffery said he'd be glad to help but he'd first need an authentic diploma to emulate from the college in question. Henry was prepared. A recent shipment of books to the local Indian school included a large publication titled *Plaques of Distinction*. It was a collection of photos of various college diplomas around the country. It had been prepared for high school students as an incentive to get them interested in college, sort of a shiny object wish book. Henry brought the book out and showed it to Jeffery.

Flip had chosen the University of Virginia for his alma mater as it sounded distinctive and had an impressive looking diploma. Henry opted for a diploma from the University of Texas at Austin. Using the *Plaques of Distinction* book as a guide Jeffery had an authentic package of official looking documents for each man a few days later. He said even the current deans of the schools would be fooled. Neither man used his real name for the diplomas. Of course, Flip had suspected Henry's name wasn't Henry Smith right from the start. He'd been right. Flip never has learned his real name. The name he chose for his diploma was Choney Ballantine.

Henry's uncle, Ozzy Stillwater, the man experienced in Peyote rituals, actual Indian name was Cho-Nae, loosely translated as "Keeper of Wisdom." Henry chose the surname Ballantine because the last time he'd been drunk, 14 years before, was on Ballantine Ale. He ultimately decided drinking interfered with rational thinking and the ability to gain wisdom so he quit drinking alcohol completely. There was no particular reason for his choice in the name other than he'd always liked the sound of the word Ballantine.

Flip chose Livingston Ashcroft Bellingus as his new name. He said Livingston Ashcroft was the name of a plantation owner in the old South that one day decided to free his slaves and start a new life. He said he never much cared for the name Dudley and that since he himself was beginning anew the name seemed appropriate. He said the surname Bellingus might have been a Celtic mystic though he couldn't be sure. Like Henry, he said he liked the sound of it. Of course, it would be years until he'd be dubbed Flip by my grandmother.

With their new identities Flip and Henry boarded a train heading east. Their ultimate destination was Boston, where Flip had begun. He hadn't mentioned it to Henry but thought he'd get some sort of satisfaction returning to Northeastern University as an instructor. But that would have to wait. He'd first try and land a job in a lesser known college and get some experience. Ultimately he wanted to teach philosophy. He bought a college philosophy textbook and read some of it while traveling to New England with Henry. As things turned out he managed to land

a job at Salem State University a month later. They never asked him a single question about his educational background or about philosophy.

Henry was hired at Suffolk University in the science department. He was promised a position as a physics instructor when the present professor retired the following year. Unlike Flip, Henry was required to take a test first in the general sciences and then one specifically for physics. They made their decision to hire him based on the fact that he scored higher than anyone before him taking the general science test, and third overall in the physics exam. Henry told Flip the tests were laughably easy.

The two men remained close as they settled into their quiet new lives. They each admitted missing the excitement of running Clearwater but also welcomed the peace allowed them in their new positions. Flip taught philosophy at Salem State for four semesters before applying to Northeastern in the fall 1934. He developed an interest in a pretty woman by the name of Marguerite Bonnie Boyland working in the dean's office. She was 11 years younger than Flip. She was every bit as beautiful as Flip's first wife, Blanche Boyette. She actually has a vague resemblance to Blanche. Flip admitted to me he sometimes wondered if that was what attracted him to Marguerite. They courted for a year and married soon after the discovery that Marguerite was with child. That would be my father.

Henry followed a similar path though he married a graduate student in his first year at Suffolk. It wasn't meant to be though and they were divorced after six months. A year later he met his present wife, Ruth. She'd been a telephone operator for Bell Telephone in their Boston office. Henry left Suffolk and applied to Northeastern a year after Flip had been hired there. There was an opening for a physics instructor and Henry got the position. Over the years they each garnered reputations for their eccentricity while receiving the highest ratings from the students and faculty. They were natural teachers. They've remained friends and have stayed in contact since their first meeting in 1925.

That's Flip's account of his arrival to the United States and his first 14 years here. He also told me that in 1973 he and Henry received an offer through their attorney in the amount of \$900,000,000 for Clearwater. He said the company wanting to buy them out was one of the five richest corporations in America in 1973. He said their attorney suggested they accept nothing less than a billion dollars for the enterprise.

He laughed when he said that explaining that without Henry's and his own input the company had grown stagnant though still profitable. They'd invested in a large research and development department but, in his opinion, it did little more than waste good capital. By the time the offer came, the company was only worth a little more than half of the face value of the offer so they accepted it.

I asked him how he knew the actual value of Clearwater being out of touch for so long. His answer came as a surprise but at the same time it was logical. He said my aunt Delores had

been watching over things. He explained that his only daughter was a whiz at business and that he'd told her about Clearwater when she was only 12. That would have been in the mid 1940s. He also said that the company was all she knew about his past and that I should never mention Clearwater or Blanche to her.

Even with that disclosure I had a few questions for him as he knew I would. But before I could ask he answered them. He said it was logical to wonder why a multi millionaire would live in a middle class town like Everett. He simply said he liked it there. He also explained that he loved his home and the neighborhood and had no desire to be anywhere else because all my grandmother's relatives lived nearby. He explained that he also loved his job as a professor of philosophy at Northeastern. He told me that he and my grandmother were happy with things the way they were. He said he was certain that adding a lot of money to the mix would have made a mess of something that was already ideal.

I asked why he never set my father or uncle Alabaster up in a business or sent them to college. He explained that he would have been glad to had they just asked. He said the reason he told Delores about Clearwater was because she showed an interest in enterprise and finance. He said he'd lent her \$1000 dollars in 1949 and she used the money to buy a wholesale lot of auto parts, mainly car tires and wheels. She doubled her money inside of a month and never looked back.

I didn't have any more questions. In fact, I didn't have anything at all to say. I'd always thought Flip was retarded when it came to business. And then I remembered his old saying: *"Most things in this world and in others are rarely as they appear."* Man, did he ever prove that. The story of Flip's arrival to America and everything that followed was a humdinger for sure. We returned to Everett the evening after we'd left. On our return we said hello to my grandmother and went to the basement. Flip said he had something to show me. In the bottom drawer of his desk was a small metal locked box.

He took it out and opened it. There were a pile of papers inside. I noticed a small pink envelope in there with a heart drawn on it and asked about it. He took it out and handed it to me. Inside was a sheet of paper matching the envelope. It read:

Flip, Flip Flipiddy
Mr. Serendipity
Acts Sort Of Trippidy
Don't Give Him Any Lippidy
No Prof Is Quite So Hippidy

Cathy Charboneau Class Of '68 ♥♥♥

I wish everyone could grok your wisdom. I'll always love you, Mister Bellingus.

Flip said that Cathy had been in his 1967-68 philosophy class and had a big crush on him. He turned his attention back to the box and pulled out a check. Actually it was a copy of a check. It was on thermal paper, the type of paper first used for copy machines. It was issued by a California trust company. It was for cash. It was written in the amount of \$448,566, 981.23, his

share of the Clearwater proceeds after fees and expenses. He said he'd exchanged his barer stock in Clearwater for the check. It was that simple. Henry had done the same. He told me he immediately took that check and handed it over to the primary foundation handing his assets. Then he forgot about it and caught the bus to Northeastern to teach his afternoon philosophy class. Sounds about right.

The Antigravity Caper

It probably began in the mid 1950s. I've asked Flip exactly when he became obsessed with antigravity but he wasn't able to remember. He said it wasn't long after I was born. That was in the fall of 1954. I was probably 13 or 14 when he told me about it. At first it wasn't a full blown obsession but as I've noticed with so many of his stories his interest in the phenomenon increased until it was all he could do to fulfill his teaching obligations at Northeastern University.

Apparently there was a lot in the news in the mid 50s about UFOs and aliens. As a lover of unusual books myself, I've come across many interesting titles with these topics published in that decade. Some of them are quite valuable now. Flip has a ton of them. Some of my earliest memories of my grandfather had me sitting on the sofa beside his recliner listening to him talk about how unlikely it was that we humans were alone in the galaxy. He claims to have twice seen a cigar shaped object in the northwest sky over Everett, Massachusetts in 1965. He and I sat outside nearly every night for a month that summer hoping to see it again. It never showed.

Eventually Flip's interest went beyond flying saucers to contemplating the force that allowed them to hover in one spot. I realize the word hover might be inaccurate but it's the only word I have at present. Perhaps the word dwell would be more appropriate. According to Flip's research, flying saucers were able to sustain a presence in one spot indefinitely while also being able to zip out of sight at will. In a short time his focus went from flying saucers and aliens to levitation and antigravity.

I remember him talking about the Nazis having an antigravity aircraft of some type. He said that a working replica of it had been photographed somewhere in Maryland in 1949. I've checked on that but haven't found any conclusive evidence it was true. He also became a student of any and all levitation and antigravity devices in development in the 1950s and beyond. There certainly weren't many accommodating venues to disseminate such information back then. But he managed to put together a thick file on the topic just the same.

Of course, if the Germans were experimenting with the concept it was a sure bet the United States was as well. Flip showed me grainy photos of flying saucers that were reported to have been built by our government. Even with all his investigating he was no closer to understanding antigravity or the workings of the propulsion system utilized by a flying saucer. As a boy of 10 I recall offering the opinion that we really had no proof that any of it was real at all. He appeared to not hear the comment. That's how he is. He's worn a hearing aid for years but I've discovered it's not a hearing aid at all. It's a mini transistor radio.

Another of his qualities is an uncanny sense of intuition on what can be accomplished in business, science and industry. He seems to be able to latch on to just the right procedure, application or idea at just the right time. He doesn't employ a lot of analytical thinking to reach his conclusions. He says they just come to him. But he's also admitted that they only come after he's absorbed a massive amount of information on a topic. I didn't know it at the time but his study of flying saucers, antigravity and dynamic propulsion represented the information he assembled just before actually attempting to prove that the law of gravity could be repealed at will.

Flip has almost no background in science or mathematics leaving him at a disadvantage in technical endeavors. But such technicalities have never stopped him in the past. In fact, it would be safe to say that he never even thought about it. Perhaps that's because his close friend Choney Ballantine was a highly respected professor of physics at Northeastern. Flip and Choney go back many years. I've met Choney on several occasions and thoroughly enjoy his company.

I remember the conversation I had with my grandfather in 1966 or 67 about antigravity. He said he'd actually figured out how to achieve it. I sat with him one Saturday afternoon while he explained it. I've reconstructed the conversation and had him look over my rendition. He suggested a couple of minor changes and told me it was ready for prime time. The following is our discussion on the matter as approved by Flip.

"I think," said Flip, "that people often make things harder than they need to be. That's the case with antigravity. I've done a lot of studying and thinking about it, Chet, and it comes back to one thing. In fact, nearly everything comes back to this."

"What?" I said.

"Energy," he replied. "Take an airplane for example. It's not an antigravity machine in the technical sense but it still defies gravity in that it leaves the earth's surface through the use of some form of propulsion conforming to the laws of aerodynamics." He paused briefly. "In other words, energy."

I didn't know what to say so I just nodded. I remember thinking I was wasting one of the final days of summer and how I would have much preferred to be outside with my friends. But this seemed important to Flip and I realized he had no one else to use as a sounding board.

"And then there are rockets," he said. "More propulsion and more aerodynamics and more energy. And again, we have solid matter leaving the earth. I understand that just like airplanes, rockets don't meet the proper definition of antigravity either."

"What is the proper definition?" I asked.

"I don't know, my boy. I try not to let technical malarkey get in the way of progress though it has something to do with freeing an object from the force of gravity. You'll find scientists and other eggheads splitting hairs over things like this till doomsday. That's why progress is so slow if you ask me. Of course, there are some scientific principles that are important. One of them is Newton's law. I'm not able to offer specifics on this..." I interrupted him suggesting we look in the dictionary for the precise definition. He declined saying it wasn't that important. He continued on with Newton.

“The important thing about Newton’s law is this. The closer an object is to a large mass the more power that mass has to attract the object. In this case the large object that keeps us on this planet is the planet itself. And the object that keeps the earth revolving around the sun is the sun itself. The bigger and denser a celestial body is, the greater the force it exerts on things near it, which draw it down to the surface. For example, you’d weigh a lot more on Jupiter, the largest of the planets, than you would on, say, the moon, a relatively small body. Follow?”

I found the topic was becoming interesting as I’d heard some of it in science class at school and said I understood.

“Okay,” Flip said. “So what do you suppose you’d need to do to repeal this law, Chet?” I had no idea and told him so.

“That’s okay, my boy. I’ve been thinking about this for more than 10 years. And like most other folks, I’ve been assuming the answer was harder than it actually was.” Just then something Flip had said earlier occurred to me and I blurted it out.

“I’ll bet it has to do with energy,” I said. Flip looked at me as a smile came upon him.

“Good boy, Chet. Good boy. Care to expand on that?”

“Well, planes use propulsion and aerodynamics. Rockets use thrust. Seems to me thrust is pretty much a different version of propulsion. Both are energy,” I said, beginning to flounder.

“You’re so close, my boy. I’m proud of you.” I smiled not knowing why I felt so smart. Flip has always had a way to make me feel my contribution was valuable, no matter how small or even irrelevant.

“But the type of energy I’m talking about isn’t in line with thrust or propulsion. No. I’m talking about electromagnetic energy.”

“I’m not sure what that is,” I said.

“That’s okay, son. It sounds complicated but it’s not. In simple terms it’s a sort of repulsion. And under different conditions it can also be an atmosphere or field of attraction. One object moving away from another as a result of the invisible attraction or repulsion emitted by one or both of the objects. You could say it’s two or more energy sources in conflict. Here’s an example.” Flip took two fairly thin metal bars out of his pocket, each about four inches long. The ends of the bars were marked with an N and an S. He handed them to me. I reached over to his desk where there were a few paper clips sitting and touched one of the bars to them. They stuck.

“Magnets,” I said.

“Yes,” he said reaching for the magnets. I handed them to him. He took them and touched the north end of one to the south end of the other. They were attracted and stuck together. He handed me the magnets and told me to try it. I did exactly as he had done and got the same result. Then I tried putting two north ends together and they naturally repelled. I knew they would as most kids have learned this at some point in their childhood.

“The principle behind this is not nearly as important as what’s physically happening,” he said. “And that is the repelling force. Can you see how this situation might lend itself to an antigravity condition?” My face lit up.

“Good,” Flip said. “Hold your thought for a second. This isn’t anything new to scientists. I’ve done a lot of research and haven’t come across much in the way of electromagnetic antigravity studies. That doesn’t mean they’re not out there. You remember my buddy from the college, professor Ballantine? You might remember him as Choney.”

“I think so,” I said. “Is that the guy who has a feather in his hair?” Flip laughed.

“Yes. Sometimes he does. He hasn’t been around in a while,” Flip said. “I see him two or three times a week at the college, though. Since I’m not really much of a science guy I try to not bother him with my amateur research but last year I mentioned electromagnetic antigravity and it really got his attention.”

“You think you can make it happen?” I said.

“Maybe,” Flip said. “I asked Choney what he thought about it. He said he didn’t want to talk at the college. He invited me to his home in Cambridge on Friday and we discussed it. He told me that during the sabbatical he took back in 1937 he met a genius, a man at least as important to science as Edison. His name is Nikola Tesla. Have you heard of him?” I shook my head no.

“I’m not surprised. He went unnoticed much of his life. He should at least get a footnote in history, though. He’s the guy who straightened Edison out on alternating current. Edison was a brilliant man but stubborn and prideful. He was determined to keep direct current as the standard when all reasonable men of the day saw alternating current as the way to go. Tesla was also the man who invented radio. I know Marconi usually gets the credit but if you were to look at the patents filed you’d find out it was Tesla’s baby. It took a Supreme Court decision but Tesla finally got the recognition he long deserved.”

“So what does this guy have to do with antigravity?” I asked.

“Well,” Flip said. “I went to Choney’s place with a bunch of information about flying saucers and antigravity. I was sort of surprised he hadn’t done much in the way of research on the matter himself. He quickly looked through my research and politely dismissed it. But that didn’t mean he was dismissing the idea. Choney and me go way, way back. We worked a lot together in the 1920s. I feel he’s like a brother to me. I’ll tell you all about it one day. He said more than anything else he wanted to know how I felt about antigravity. He knows I’m not a science guy. But he also knows I had some pretty fair hunches that panned out years ago. That’s why he asked.

“So I told him straight out. I felt antigravity could be achieved with electromagnets. He asked if I’d had any visions or pictures of it in my mind. That sounds strange but it makes sense because in the old days that’s sort of how I got certain ideas. Choney knows me and stuck a piece of paper in front of me and told me to draw. So I did. I was amazed myself.”

“What did you draw?” I asked.

“A donut,” Flip said.

“Huh?” I said, showing my bewilderment.

“Not a real donut. It was actually like a group of donuts. A visual rendition of how electromagnetic radiation would have to flow to render something immune to gravity.”

“Isn’t radiation dangerous?” I said.

“Under certain circumstances,” Flip said. “and depending on how the radiation was generated. But not in this case. That’s where Tesla comes in. But first I’ve got to tell you what Choney said when I drew the diagram.” Flip really had my attention now.

“After I drew this donut shaped thing and explained how I thought it might work he said the utter simplicity of it was pure genius. You know what, Chet? I didn’t even know what he was talking about. And I sure didn’t know what I was talking about. And I really had no idea why I drew what I had just drawn. But Choney said I still had the touch.”

“What did he mean by that?”

“It’s a long story, my boy. Like I said, I’ll be telling you all about it one day when you’re older. Anyway, getting back to Tesla. You notice when you hold compatible ends of those magnets close you feel a slight attraction or pull? That’s a weak electromagnetic field of sorts. Same for when they repel. And if you energize the magnets with electric current you’ll get an even stronger field. Well, to produce an antigravitational effect that would actually be useful, one that might allow a body to float about, you’d need a strong electrical influence. That’s where Tesla comes in.

“See, Choney spent four months working on a top secret project with Tesla in 1937. He won’t even tell me what it was. Tesla’s known for some really profound scientific breakthroughs. One of them is the Tesla coil. Another is the ability to broadcast electrical current through the air.”

“Broadcast electric current?” I said.

“Yes. Many people believe that Tesla had developed the technology to generate power and then make it available by broadcasting it through the atmosphere, like a radio broadcasts music.”

“That would be neat,” I said. “I guess we could get rid of a lot of power poles.”

“Exactly,” Flip said. “And here’s the best part. Choney wouldn’t tell me what he’d been working on with Tesla but he did say he’d seen several demonstrations of broadcast electricity. He said that my donut drawing had given him an idea. Then he brought up something from a long time ago. I’d almost forgotten about it. It was in the spring of 1957 and I’d just gotten out of class. I took the subway to Cambridge to visit Choney. His wife told me he was out in the garage experimenting with one of his gadgets.

“I went around back to the garage. The big door was shut so I went inside through the side door. I really surprised Choney. He was standing there with a transistor radio. Back then they were about the size of a toaster. He had it wrapped up in a towel. He also had pillows secured to the ceiling of the garage. When I walked in Choney acted very peculiar. I could tell he was in the middle of something important. I sensed he didn’t want to talk about it so I didn’t say anything.

“Last week, when I went to visit him he admitted that he’d been working on an antigravity contraption back in 1957 when I walked in on him. Without a lot of details he told me it was related to the project he and Tesla had worked on in the ‘30s. He said he’d actually been

able to get a modified radio to be weightless. He used a radio because it was already partially wired the way it needed to be. Choney just made some changes.

“His mentioning it refreshed my memory. I recalled that day and asked what the pillows were doing strung up in the rafters. He told me that when he activated his contraption it immediately shot up in the air. Said he shattered two radios before padding everything. Then he said he became frustrated with it all and put it away. That is, until I showed up and drew the donut.”

“So what did you guys do?” I said.

“Mostly we talked about possibilities,” Flip said. “Choney asked me about my own research. I don’t have the background in science he does but I was able to explain my theory. Basically, I think it’s possible to generate an electromagnetic field around an object or even a human body. According to certain settings, that field will mimic a weightless atmosphere.”

“But there’s a problem with that,” I said. Flip seemed surprised.

“Indeed, there is, Chet. Do you know what that problem is?”

“I think so,” I said. “If you want to make a radio weightless there’s not really a problem. But if you want to make a human weightless there are two problems maybe.” Flip smiled.

“Please continue,” he said.

“If you created a weightless atmosphere there might not be any oxygen,” I said. “So it wouldn’t be something humans could use.” Flip mouthed the word ‘amazing’ without actually speaking. He nodded, encouraging me to go on.

“The other problem for humans might be the electromagnetic field. I don’t know much about that stuff but I’d guess it could be dangerous, maybe cause cancer. Everything else does.” Flip just stared at me for a moment.

“You’ve got the Bellingus touch kiddo,” he said. “You’ve hit upon both of the main issues with this whole thing.” My face lit up. I had all I could do to contain my pride.

“So did you guys figure it out?” I said, feeling like a contributor in an adult conversation.

“Not yet,” he said. “It won’t be us figuring it out. What I mean is, me and Choney. He’s a whiz at science and electronics so if anyone will figure it out, it’s him.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a little disappointed. Flip smiled again sensing my frustration.

“But Choney tells me my donut diagram is the answer. Of course, when he stuck a sheet of paper under my nose and told me to draw I had no idea what to do. But I picked up a pen and began anyway. Choney says it’s brilliant and thinks it will solve both of the problems you mentioned, my boy.” I smiled again.

“How?” I said.

“Well, first let me draw it for you and then I’ll try and explain.”

He picked up a sheet of paper, attached it to a clipboard and began to draw. Flip is a really good artist and had a diagram done in about two minutes though it looked more like several donuts stacked one top of the other. He explained that after Choney had seen it they discussed what would have to be done to make it functional.

He said that Choney came out and admitted that he'd contributed to Tesla's broadcast electricity project by modifying what's known as the Tesla coil. He was obviously struggling trying to explain it to a layman but I was able to grasp the concept.

"This is where I begin to get lost, my boy but I'll do my best. Choney tells me he's been able to take Tesla's original coil, a sort of transformer, and modify it to act as a capacitor. A capacitor is another electronic component that stores electricity and then releases it when there's a demand.

"This is what Choney was experimenting with back in 1957. But back then the distribution of current he was able to achieve was unpredictable. Since then he's managed to refine his own little broadcast electricity plant. Nothing like what Tesla had in the way of massive capability, mind you. But the compact coil is far more stable, and according to Choney, suitable for some new antigravity experiments. When he saw my donut drawing he said the last couple of pieces to the puzzle fell into place."

Right about then I decided I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere other than sitting right there with my grandfather.

"Really?" I said. "So why aren't you guys working on it?"

"We are," Flip said. "Choney says there's a lot of technical electronics work to take care of first. He says he needs to create electronic fields that will conform to the design of the donut." Flip pointed to the diagram and traced what looked like a tube extending through several normal looking donuts.

"I bet I know what that is," I said. Flip smiled indicating I should continue.

"I bet that's the space where a human can stand."

"That's right," Flip said. "That space will be devoted to our normal atmosphere."

"I have a question," I said.

"Shoot," Flip said.

"The space with our normal atmosphere, doesn't the air get stale? I mean, doesn't it get filled up with carbon dioxide?"

"Good question," Flip said. "The way I understand it is the field surrounding a passenger intermittently creates openings that allow for ventilation."

"Okay" I said. One other thing. What I don't get is if you're going to create electromagnetic fields that will lift things, don't those fields go beyond the boundaries of the donut outlines." I pointed to the drawing.

"You do understand," Flip said. "That's exactly what I was thinking but Choney said he had that part figured out a long time ago."

"So what's the answer?" I said.

"Interference patterns," Flip said. "Choney says he has a way to program the power broadcaster so the electromagnetic fields will exist all around a body as well as on the top of his head and under his feet. In other words, the entire electromagnetic field that will actually float stuff will surround the man and whatever it is he wants to carry. Choney says he can modify the device to make the normal atmospheric chamber as large or small as necessary. And there will be

no harmful radiation to the human or the cargo because it will all be deliberately channeled away. He thinks he could levitate a car when everything is ready. Can you imagine, Chet? Seeing someone sitting behind the wheel of his car only moving across the sky. That would be a kick.”

“People would think they’re going crazy,” I said.

“They would,” Flip said. “Choney says he’s got another month or so before he’s ready to test what he has. He’s told me he’s levitated small objects without the problems of the past. He says he needs to do some more work on the bird. That’s his name for a receiver. It’s what the magnetic fields are attracted to. If the payload is non human it can simply be placed somewhere in or on the cargo. If there’s a human being involved he simply holds the bird in his pocket. There’s no harmful radiation inside the human field. It’s all directed away as it forms perfect electromagnetic fields. It’s all very exciting.” I did think it was exciting but had a question.

“What about the problems of the past he mentioned?” I said.

“That had to do with them taking off super fast and crashing into the ceiling of his garage,” Flip said. “It’s the interference patterns that are the key to this. I understand it from a practical perspective but how he’s doing it is way beyond me.”

We chatted a bit more about the many wondrous uses of a true antigravity device and agreed it would be interesting to see what Choney would come up with. Over the next weeks and then months I’d visit Flip and ask how things were going with their project. At first he’d say it was moving right along and that he’d be witnessing a demonstration soon.

But it never materialized. As was the case with many of his projects this one didn’t pan out for one reason or another. I was never able to get a clear answer on what had gone wrong. But that was how things went with my grandfather. He soon took up an interest in other things. And of course, I was always glad when he’d take me into his confidence and share what he might be doing. Whether they were real or not, his projects were always interesting and entertaining.

I would have completely forgotten about our discussion on antigravity but in 1992 he brought it up again. I’ve never been able to determine whether Flip was an absolute genius or a complete lunatic. What represents the conclusion of the antigravity story sort of pushes me in the direction of thinking he’s nuts. But as is usually the case, there is an instance of what appears to be credible evidence that supports what Flip told me. Now I’ll pass that along and let you decide.

In 1992 Flip greatly reduced his workload at Northeastern. He was only teaching two classes a week as opposed to the five he’d managed throughout much of his career. His friend Choney had stopped teaching entirely but had remained on the faculty as an advisor. He confided in Flip that he’d agreed to the advisory position so he would still have access to the university’s science lab facilities.

Early in the year Choney told Flip he'd actually perfected the antigravity device he started working on in the '60s. Choney invited Flip to Cambridge for a demonstration. Remembering my interest in antigravity as a boy he contacted me and we got together for what he called a real life update.

When Flip arrived Choney was excited. He explained much of his recent work and all the wonderful stuff the new antigravity device could do. The way Flip told it, it almost seemed that Choney was deliberately trying to draw him, enticing him to ask for more and bigger proof. If that was his intention, then Flip took the bait. Choney suggested they get out of the city as a full blown antigravity demo in a populated area was sure to draw unwelcomed attention. So they packed the antigravity equipment into a small suitcase and drove to Bear Brook State Park in Allenstown, New Hampshire, about two hours from Cambridge. This was in May of 1992, the week before Memorial Day weekend.

They arrived at the park on a Wednesday in the early afternoon. There was a light hinged gate blocking the entrance with a one-man guard shack on the other side. It wasn't locked so Flip got out and opened it, letting Choney in. He closed the gate and returned to the Jeep. There was no ranger stationed at the guard shack. Flip said they'd only encountered a couple of other visitors to the park as they made their way. They decided the campground wasn't open yet so they drove along a trail that took them to the furthestmost campsite. I've reconstructed what took place during their session as best as I could.

Choney parked his Jeep and went around back to the cargo area where he removed the suitcase. Flip had taken a spot at a nearby picnic table. Choney put the suitcase on the table and opened it. Inside was a metal box that looked like a VCR.

"Looks like a VCR," Flip said.

"I used the cabinet of an old VCR for the working components," Choney said. Then he pulled out what appeared to be an overnight leather travel kit and unzipped in. He took out a video game joystick.

"Looks like a kid's game fun stick," Flip said.

"You mean joystick," Choney said. "It is. But I've made some modifications."

Also in the kit bag was a disc about the size of a silver dollar only considerably thicker. He handed it to Flip.

"This," he said, "is the receiver. It's what produces the interference patterns we talked about. It's what creates the invisible chambers that levitate. The joystick is what moves this little receiver about. Go ahead and put this thing in your pocket." Flip did as he was instructed.

"What about the broadcast electricity device?" Flip said. "I expected it would be pretty big."

"It was." Choney said. "Back in '67 it was half the size of a postal mail box and hummed like a power plant. The reason I held off on trying to perfect this thing back then is that although we had the concept and even the design worked out, electronic technology wasn't far enough along to make it practical. I had a working model but it was clunky. This," he pointed to the

VCR, “is pretty elegant, wouldn’t you say?” Flip didn’t find anything about the VCR case elegant but nodded just the same.

“Okay,” Flip said. “I know it all runs on broadcast electricity but where exactly does that come from? I mean, where does it originate? I’d guess something has to get this thing started.”

“A nine volt battery,” Choney said with a smile.

“No way,” Flip said. “I might not be a technical wiz but I know that if we’re going to fly around here this afternoon it’s going to take more current than a nine volt battery.”

“You’re right,” Choney said. “My version of the Tesla coil is inside. The nine volter kick starts a super capacitor and the thing is good to scoot.”

“So you’re saying you get more power out of something than you put in?” Flip said. “I must have read at least a hundred reports and studies that unequivocally claim impossible. What’s it called in science parlance? Over unity?” Choney winked.

“That’s right. Over unity. And it used to be impossible, my friend. Now it’s possible. It’s called progress. So do you want to see what we’ve got here or do you want to chat?” Flip smiled.

“Let’s give ‘er a go,” he said.

Choney picked up the joystick and held it out.

“Forward is up. Backward is down,” he said. “Left and right is self explanatory. Once you’re in the air you throw this switch,” he pointed to one of three switches on the device, “and it allows you to use the joystick to move around in a circular motion. Let’s do a little demonstration.” Flip nodded, taking the disc from his pocket. Choney took the VCR case and the disc and placed them into the suitcase leaving the joystick out.

“I thought we were going to do a demo,” Flip said. Choney smiled.

“Watch,” he said. He picked up the joystick and threw one of the switches. Flip noticed it had three positions. Then he handed the joystick to Flip.

“All yours,” he said.

“What am I supposed to do?” Flip said.

“Just throw this switch right here,” Choney put his finger on one of the switches. Flip put it into position.

“Nothing happened,” Flip said.

“Try the joystick,” Choney said. “Gently.” Gingerly, Flip moved the joystick forward. The suitcase rose from the table.

“Holy cow!” Flip said. “It works.”

“Sure does,” Choney said. “And it never would have happened without that donut configuration you drew way back when. Right now it’s not set for a human because the equipment doesn’t depend on oxygen to function. There’s an electromagnetic field around that suitcase that mimics the lack of atmosphere in outer space. That’s how this thing works. It produces an antigravity environment around an object, or a person. That’s what the other two functions of that switch are for, creating a livable environment for a human.”

“I’ll be.” Flip said.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Choney said.

“You bet,” Flip said. The suitcase was sitting perfectly still between them at a height of about six feet. Choney reached out for the joystick and Flip handed it to him.

“Watch,” he said. He took the joystick and jerked it forward quickly. The suitcase immediately soared up into the air about 60 feet. Then Choney threw one of the switches and began to slowly rotate the joystick. Flip stood there aghast as the suitcase flew in rapid circles above them. Choney then maneuvered the joystick so it stood straight up. The suitcase stopped dead still and stood above them at 60 feet.

“Just like the reports of flying saucers,” Flip said. “Is it possible our government has this technology?”

“It’s possible,” Choney said. “But without Tesla’s broadcast electricity along with later modifications it’s not likely. Still, it’s hard to tell what they have up their sleeves. I’d say if they had anything like this it would immediately be turned into weaponry and we’d be pounding our chests all over the world.”

“Star Wars,” Flip said.

“Yeah,” Choney said. “But that’s mostly theory. This is the real deal.”

“I can see,” Flip said.

“You wanna try?” Choney said as he offered the joystick to Flip. Flip smiled and took it. He sent the suitcase flying about as Choney had. While he had it Choney showed him how the three switches worked, which made piloting the suitcase even simpler once he had a bit of practice.

“What do you say, Liv? You want to switch places with the suitcase?” Choney refused to call my grandfather Flip and most often called him by his actual name, Livingston or Liv for short.

“You first,” Flip said. Choney brought the suitcase to a gentle landing onto the picnic table. He opened it, took out the receiver disc and placed it into Flip’s pocket. Then he switched positions of one of the switches on the base of the joystick.

“This will encapsulate you in our normal atmosphere,” he said. “It also creates an electromagnetic field around you powerful enough to lift you up. Here, try it.” Flip took the joystick and gently moved it forward. He rose off the ground.

“Unbelievable,” he said.

“Believe it, my friend.” Flip gently brought himself to about 20 feet and immediately took himself back down.

“Something wrong?” Choney said.

“There are two people coming down a trail over there. I hope they didn’t see me floating around.” Choney laughed.

“Doesn’t matter much if they did,” he said. “Who would believe them if they said they saw you floating around the campground?” Flip said nothing. The two hikers walked through the campground and waved as they passed. They continued, following a trail on the other side of clearing and made their way up a steep trail. Choney and Flip waved back as they passed through.

“Guess they didn’t see me,” Flip said when he was sure they were out of earshot.

“Guess not,” Choney said. “Give them a couple of minutes and then take yourself for a spin around. Beats any amusement park I’ve ever been to.”

Flip took his turn at soaring about the campground. He brought himself to a height of about 300 feet, which was on par with the highest point in the park. He saw the hikers walking away from him and this time didn’t react with fear. Choney was right. Even if he’d been spotted it would be hard for anyone to believe a man would be tooling about the inner atmosphere without a jetpak.

Flip brought himself down to the picnic table. He and Choney sat eating a snack they’d packed and discussed their lives along with some of the wonderful things they’d done together. They agreed that it would be foolish to openly admit that Choney had perfected antigravity. There was no doubt in either of them that the government would seize the invention and use it for dubious purposes. They talked about more noble applications for the technology.

The sun was dropping in the western sky. Choney said he wanted to try something while they were in seclusion. He wanted to see if his device was powerful enough to lift his Jeep. He said he’d had it off the ground in his driveway in Cambridge but there were obvious restrictions in going any higher. He felt the deserted campground was the perfect place to complete his testing. Flip was a little hesitant but ended up agreeing.

“It’s simple,” Choney said. “All we’ve got to do is just put the disc in the Jeep, adjust the setting on the joystick and we’re off. Should be fun.”

“What if someone comes along?” Flip said.

“Not likely,” Choney said. “We’ve been here for over four hours and have only seen those hikers. I don’t want to cover any serious ground. I just want to get it up to a hundred feet and see how it handles. It’ll be exhilarating.” Flip nodded. They took the suitcase to the jeep and got in. Choney placed the disc into a cup holder in the center console. Then he fiddled with the one of the switches on the base of the joystick. He moved the stick forward slightly and the jeep lifted up off the ground a couple of feet.

“Nice,” he said with a smile. “I’m going to goose ‘er a little.” Flip smiled sheepishly. Choney jerked the joystick forward about a half inch, which brought them to a height of about 50 feet inside of a second.

“Wow!” Flip said. “That sure is some kind of power.” Choney had a proud grin on his face.

“I guess,” he said. “Let’s see what she’ll do.” He began moving the joystick about slowly at first. The jeep began to dip and glide and soar. Both men found it invigorating. Choney swooped down toward the picnic table they’d occupied only minutes before and stopped on a dime, hovering six inches from the surface of the table. Then he suddenly pulled the Jeep back up into another climb heading for the 300 foot hill. But he didn’t stop at the hill. He continued over the hill and began to make his way down.

“Oh shit!” Flip said. On the other side of the hill was a clearing similar to the one they’d just left with one difference. There were about a dozen occupied campsites. People immediately

spotted the flying Jeep and began to point and shout and wave at Choney and Flip. Choney navigated the Jeep over and around the clearing and back over the hill. When he had the Jeep stabilized in midair he threw one of the switches and quickly lowered the Jeep. Like a masterful pilot, he eased back on the stick with the Jeep only a couple of feet off the ground and touched down like a feather.

He immediately started the vehicle and he and Flip made their way out of the park the way they'd come in.

"I hope we get out of here without having to explain that," Flip said. Choney laughed.

"That, my friend was a mass hallucination. There is no explanation for a mass hallucination." He laughed some more.

"I'm not so sure," Flip said. "Maybe the New Hampshire state police would pull us over and search the car. Maybe they'd want to know what this strange equipment is." Choney stopped laughing but not completely.

"It's a VCR and a video game joystick," he said. "There's no law against carrying such stuff around."

"Let's just get out of here," Flip said.

"Roger wilco," Choney said with a giggle.

At the end of the first part of this account I mentioned that I sometimes wonder if my grandfather and his friend are crazy. In person Flip comes across as a bit absent minded and maybe a little eccentric, even naïve at times, but not crazy. I also mentioned that there was credible evidence that perhaps supports this story. Here's the evidence.

Allenstown, New Hampshire, home to Bear Brook State Park, is only 15 miles from Manchester, New Hampshire to the south and roughly 10 miles from Concord to the north. This particular Wednesday, only two days before the park was to officially open for the Memorial Day holiday, a local news and talk show celebrity from Manchester by the name of Ziggy Kinsella was camping at Bear Brook State Park. With the sun still visible in the afternoon sky Ziggy, along with 19 other campers, clearly witnessed a 1991 forest green Jeep Cherokee zooming over their campsites, though not a single onlooker noticed any sound coming from the vehicle.

Kinsella, who had been incognito up until Flip and Choney buzzed the campground, gathered nine witnesses to the event and rode to WJKG News Radio in Manchester where he went live on the air with the story. It also got picked up in Concord. Several witnesses to the incident became local media personalities for a few days discussing the flying Jeep on various local radio shows.

There was a single paragraph in both the Manchester News and the Concord Tribune the following day stating that 19 people had all witnessed a green jeep flying over their campsite. But that wasn't all. Three days after the report aired two hikers came forward and told Kinsella

that they'd seen a man floating around a deserted campsite at Bear Brook. Flip has the newspaper accounts of both reports from Concord and Manchester. Apparently the story also got a mention on national news as well but no one took it seriously and it never got any traction.

So that's it, the antigravity caper. Has Choney Ballantine coaxed the laws of gravity into easing up? Did Flip actually produce a spontaneous and inspired drawing of stacked donuts that provided the missing piece to the antigravity puzzle? I'm sure I don't know. I've asked Flip for a demonstration of the technology. He says showing it to me could possibly put me in danger, especially if I slipped up and mentioned what I'd seen to someone. He says he would be very sad to have been the one to provide the fodder that could get me locked up in a lunatic asylum. Gotta love the guy, always looking out for his grandson.

Choney & Flip Visit Parallel Universes

As you may have gathered by now, my grandfather, Flip Bellingus, doesn't see the world as most people do. In private conversations with my grandmother, she told me she had always considered Flip to be on the eccentric side and as time passed he only became more so. She would sometimes laugh uneasily and say she loved him for what he was and would stay with him for better or worse regardless of what the future brought.

Flip himself always appeared to be totally and completely unaware that he was different than anyone else. In part, it was this lack of awareness that earned him the name airhead. Though he never once in my presence acknowledged the name or showed the slightest indication that he was aware people were talking about him when using the word. Over the years he seemed to have built an immunity to the outright indignation and odd glances his behavior prompted in all types of social settings.

As I've mentioned in other accounts, during the course of his life Flip would often become obsessively interested in any number of unassociated things. Family members tolerated these oft inconvenient pastimes as we'd grown accustomed to associate many of them with Flip's professional connection to philosophy. I think it was the philosophy connection that served as sort of a defense for various unusual behaviors and kept my grandmother from having him committed on several occasions. My uncle Alabaster was more direct in his assessment of his father. He would often say that Flip would one day be famous as the founder of a new genre of advanced thinking that would come to be known as Gonzo Philosophy. Flip said he liked the idea and that he was working on putting out a book on it.

Since I was one of the few family members taking an interest in what my grandfather was up to, we'd formed an unspoken alliance where he'd confide in me and explain what he was doing from time to time. I remember one such occasion back in the late 1960s. He was still teaching full time at Northeastern and often in the company of his old friend and Northeastern Physics Professor Choney Ballantine. Years later I learned that Flip and Choney had been friends for more than four decades. Choney was a Native American of Cherokee descent and would occasionally wear colorful tribal outfits, the perfect companion for Flip.

As a young teen I remember meeting Choney on several occasions. He was an affable and engaging man who first appeared at the Bellingus household as Flip's unannounced dinner guest. During this time Flip was often absent from the family scene; explaining that he was helping Professor Ballantine with scientific experiments that had the potential to change the world. Flip had been known to utter such stuff from time to time so no one took this particularly to heart. Grandpa always seemed to be involved with life-changing projects surrounded by intrigue and secrecy.

But that secrecy was broken early in 1969 when I received a phone call one afternoon in late spring. I was surprised as I wasn't able to recall ever talking to Flip on the phone or even seeing him use the telephone for that matter. He asked that I come over immediately as he had something very important to tell me. I was busy but his urgency was almost unprecedented so I walked the short distance from my parent's house to his. Flip was sitting on the front porch in an antique wooden lawn chair he'd built in the 1930s. He was nervously smoking an awful-looking dried, black Italian cigar. I seemed to be the only family member that was tolerant of the smoke. I actually liked the aroma.

I approached and he motioned for me to sit across from him.

"Chet," he said with apprehension. "I'm glad you could come. Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure, Flip." I returned. "You seem nervous. What's up?"

"Big things are up, my boy. Really big things." It was quite unusual to see Flip this edgy about anything.

"I'm all ears," I said.

"Okay," he said as he placed his stogie into an ashtray on the table before us. "Maybe you remember Choney Ballantine, the physics professor from the college." He always referred to the University as the college.

I nodded.

He looked around as though he were checking for spies.

"Well, Chet. We've been working on something quite important. It has to do with physics. Actually, I think we might have proven a major theory." He looked over his shoulder and then lowered his voice to a near whisper.

"In fact, we have proven a major theory." I was lost on the subject of physics and told him as much. He nodded.

"I'm not much on the sciences either," he said. "But I've learned there's a very fine line between philosophy, art, science and other matters. It's amazing how everything is so closely related, how it's interwoven and overlapping." I had to be careful not to allow him to go off on a philosophical tangent and gently steered him back to the matter at hand.

"So what's this theory about?" I said. "Sounds interesting."

"Oh, yes. The theory," he said. He gathered his thoughts for a moment and continued.

"Choney and I have discovered a parallel universe. Three actually, but I wasn't present for the second or third discoveries, just the first. And with the discovery we have come to believe and nearly prove that there are an infinite number of parallel universes."

He looked around again to be sure no one had heard and then flashed a grin of self satisfaction. I didn't know what a parallel universe was and didn't know how to respond. I had heard the term on an old Star Trek episode and decided to try and play along.

"Sounds like science fiction comes to life, huh Flip?"

"Exactly," he said. "I knew you'd understand, Chet."

"Well, I don't really understand but I have a vague idea of the concept from watching television."

"I'll explain it to you," he said. "But first, what do you know about Frank Sinatra?"

"Ah... He's a really famous singer and actor with connections to..."

"Actor?" Flip said, interrupting me. "Are you sure? I know he's a famous singer."

I wasn't at all surprised that Flip didn't know Sinatra had a movie career along with his fame and fortune as a singer. Grandpa had sort of a reputation for never watching television.

"Yeah, I said. "Sinatra has been in 30 or 40 movies, I'd guess. But what about him?" Flip sat still for a moment, perhaps contemplating Sinatra on the silver screen. He finally spoke.

"Sinatra did a concert in Hoboken, New Jersey two weeks ago."

"His home town," I said with a smile.

"Smart lad," Flip said, returning the smile. "Yes, his home town. Choney and I were there." That didn't surprise me either as Grandpa might have been anyplace at anytime without the family being aware.

"Okay," Flip said. "Before I get into that, let me explain how we crossed into one of many, many parallel universes." I just nodded not knowing what to expect.

"First, I want to say that my explanation will be full of holes because I have only a basic understanding of how this works. As you know Chet, quantum physics is the study of electromagnetic waves or frequencies made up of atoms and the subatomic particles surrounding them. Those particles are protons, electrons, neutrons and others. It's hard to remember it all. There's something very peculiar I never knew about all of this. Choney tells me, and reading up on this has confirmed it. It seems that when attention, human attention and other experimental activity, is placed upon an atom, only then do particles such as electrons for example, allow themselves to be seen."

"Whoa, Flip." I said. "What does that mean? Allow themselves to be seen?"

"Well," Flip returned. "I'm speaking figuratively. Please, let me finish and then you can ask questions." I nodded.

"When attention is placed on an atom the subatomic particles orbiting that atom become visible. Our scientists have known this for quite some time but haven't been able to figure it all out. The obvious question is..." I opened my mouth and Flip motioned for me to speak.

"The obvious question for me is, if protons and electrons are visible only when people are looking at them, where are they before people are looking at them?"

"Exactly." Flip said. "Where, indeed? And that brings me to what we believe we've discovered. Back in the late 1950s a Princeton man by the name of Hugh Everett postulated that unobserved subatomic particles are waves of pure energy. It's only when attention or

consciousness is placed upon them that they become solid or observable. Everett believed that those waves or the 'non-state' of matter represented by the waves exists in a parallel universe, one that is present extremely close to our own. I know I'm not doing the explanation justice, Chet, but it's the best I can do. Are you following?"

"I think so. My question is, how have you guys proved this?"

"Right," Flip said. "The proof. I've sort of been tagging along with Choney listening to his theories and helping out with experiments. We had to stop experimenting about a month ago because we blew out all the electricity on his block. There's a transformer up on the top of a power pole a few doors down from his house. He's got an airtight shed in his back yard. We were inside the shed bombarding the atmosphere with a custom blend of ions using some bare high voltage wires. A large length of thick, bare cable somehow got loose from the harness we made and hit the ground.

"Lucky for us we were wearing sneakers or we might not be having this conversation." Flip chuckled affably, something I'd rarely seen him do since I was a young boy. "That shorted out our experiment and knocked out the electricity on his block. When the power company came out to fix it, one of the neighbors told them that we'd been experimenting with high voltage. Of course, there was no proof by then because we'd dismantled the whole setup. But we still got a visit from the power boss and a polite warning that there would be an investigation and serious consequences if something like this happened again. He seemed to already know that Choney's electricity use over the last few months was more than five times normal."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" That just slipped out as I've been witness to many of Flip's dubious stories over the years. He didn't take offense and simply nodded and continued.

"Choney has a summer place down in New Jersey. Keyport. A quiet place just a half mile from the water. It's secluded. No one around at all. We packed up our stuff and rode down there a couple weeks ago."

"So that's where you were," I said. He stopped and looked at me innocently.

"Did you need me for something, Chet? Gram knew how to get in touch." I felt silly questioning him yet found it interesting to discover where he'd actually been in one of his many unexplained absences.

"No, Flip. Please. Continue with your story."

"Right," he said. "Where was I... Oh yes. So we drive down to Keyport and set up a new shed. We got everything like we had it here and turned the power on."

"Can I ask what this high voltage setup has to do with parallel universes?" I said. Flip paused.

"Oh. Of course. Theoretically, and now not so theoretically..." He chuckled again. "There is a great deal of electron activity switching from the wave state to the particle state within an ion chamber. That's what we'd fabricated, an ion chamber. So we ran a number of tests and then called it a day. Choney told me Sinatra was playing in Hoboken and said he knew a guy

who could get us in to see him. I haven't been out for entertainment for years so I agree to go along." I smiled.

"So we put everything away and Choney calls home to Cambridge. And here's where it gets weird, Chet. The phone rings a couple of times and then a guy picks up."

"Lemme guess," I said, joking. "Choney answers."

"Exactly," Flip says, missing my attempt at humor. "So he hangs up the phone looking really spooked and tells me there's a strange guy at his house in Massachusetts. Then he asks me to call and ask for Choney. I begin to protest but he waves me off and hands me the phone. Then he dials the number and it rings a couple of times. His wife picks up and I ask for Choney. And he comes on the line. Choney is standing there alongside me and scratches out a little note on a pad by the phone that says, 'fake it.' So I'm on the line and I ask how his day is going and he asks me if I've been drinking and says I just left his place three minutes before. I put the phone in the cradle and tell Choney what he said."

"Holy shit," I said. "You guys crossed into a parallel universe! Is that what happened?"

"Yep," Flip said, as he appeared to be searching for a word. I interrupted him.

"How could this be? How could there be two of the same guy in the same place?"

"We were puzzled about that too," Flip said. "But that was before we realized what had actually happened. I've read some science fiction on the topic since we did this and the consensus is that there is no way two of the same guy show up in the same universe. According to almost all the popular authors, if that were to happen it could trigger cataclysmic events. But since we really did this I guess that trumps science fiction." I nodded with no clue as to what he just explained.

"Anyway," he continued. "We didn't have much time to think about it because we had to get going to the Sinatra show. We wanted to run some more experiments but Choney's friend had left tickets at the door of the nightclub. So we cleaned up and drove about 40 miles to this club in Hoboken. As we drove we were chattering away about how we were just imagining the phone conversations with the Massachusetts Choney and that we'd been working too hard and that maybe the high voltage was having an effect on our brains. And then we get to the club. And the marquee reads: ONE NIGHT ONLY: SQUIRE ROBINSON RETURNS HOME."

"Who the hell is Squire Robinson?" I say.

"That's what we wanted to know," Flip says.

"I figured we were at the wrong place but Choney confirmed this was the club. Then we thought about our experiment and just looked at each other. We were both thinking the same thing." I couldn't believe I was having this conversation as it was way over the line even for Flip.

"What was that?" I said with obvious impatience.

"That we had actually accomplished what we had set out to do, making our way into a parallel universe. And then it was confirmed. We had just parked behind the place and walked to the front when a big white Cadillac limousine pulls up. And out steps Frank Sinatra with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. He's all smiles as he makes his way into the

nightclub. Very chic. He arrived early to avoid the crowd but there were still a bunch of fans everywhere. And they were all shouting, ‘Squire, Squire... We love you.’”

“Amazing,” I said.

“Yeah,” Flip said. “Amazing. By now we were thinking we were in big trouble. But we went into the nightclub and took a seat in the back. You know me, Chet. I never drink strong drinks but I had a glass of wine that night. I was wondering what might happen if I called home. I never pick up the phone but what if someone answered and I asked for Livingston or Flip? Would I have come on the line? Would I have been able to talk to myself? I already know the answer. The wine helped calm my nerves and we enjoyed listening to Sinatra.

“I know in that world his name’s Squire Robinson but it was Sinatra. He sang all of Sinatra’s songs. He looked just like Frank Sinatra. He talked about all the fun he had playing Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas last winter. It was him all right. Only difference, his name was Squire Robinson. I asked a couple of people at the club if they’d ever heard of Frank Sinatra and they just rolled their eyes like I was dopey and shook their heads.”

“Okay,” I said. “So the big question is how’d you get back?”

“That was the big question all right,” Flip said. “All the way back to Keyport we talked about getting back to our original world.”

“Did you notice anything else different about where you were?” I said.

“No. We had the radio on and there was nothing. Once we heard a short report about Squire Robinson singing in Hoboken but that was it. The following day we were up at sunrise experimenting again. We ran all the same tests over and over. Since we didn’t know what we’d done to jump worlds, we had no idea what to do to get back.”

“So how’d you check?” I said.

“At first we thought to run a test and then we’d take turns calling home but Choney said that would raise too many questions. So he came up with a better idea. We turned the radio on in the house to the popular morning drive shows. They were all talking about Squire Robinson’s show in Hoboken. We knew as long as we were hearing that we were somewhere other than where we belonged. We kept testing up until noon. By then the radio reports about Robinson died off so we were left to figure out another way. But we got lucky. The phone rang around noon and it was Ruth, Choney’s wife. She knew there was a chance we were going to get to see Frank Sinatra and asked about it. She used Sinatra’s name. What a relief.”

“I’ll bet,” I said.

“After that we packed everything up and drove home. Choney is continuing his research. But I think I’m going to back away for awhile.” Flip said.

“Smart move,” I said.

“Yes,” Flip said with obvious relief in his eyes. “I got a call from Choney today. He’s back in New Jersey. Says he was able to bounce back to the Squire Robinson world again and return. He says he’s figured out a way to make it all more predictable. Asked if I wanted to come along.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said I’d have to think about it. Choney says he’s also visited two other worlds. He’s found minor differences there too. And you know what’s strange, Chet?”

“The whole thing is strange,” I said. “It’s almost unbelievable. But what were you going to say?” Flip appeared to be somewhere else but popped back when I asked the question.

“The strange thing is the difference between worlds, at least the worlds Choney has visited... The difference is celebrity names. Everything else is exactly the same except one celebrity has a different name. Same background. Same history. Same looks. Wives, husbands, kids... The only difference is these stars have a different name than the one they have in this world.

“And here’s something else that’s interesting. Choney did some checking while visiting that world and found that Squire Robinson’s real name was actually Frank Sinatra. But when he was starting out his agent suggested he might have a better chance at making it big with a more American-sounding name. So they came up with Squire Robinson. Choney seems to think that at that moment, when Sinatra changed his name, a new universe was somehow created. Very weird indeed.”

That ended our discussion on parallel universes. Two or three times over the following years I brought it up and Flip told me he was still interested and was staying in touch with Choney. I asked why Choney didn’t go public with the information. Flip responded that he eventually planned to do just that.

Now, for those of you reading this that come from relatively normal families this account is sure to be bizarre. But that’s what life around my grandfather has been. Bizarre. As far as celebrity parallel universes go, I have no idea whether it was real or a dual hallucination by two mad professors from Northeastern University. I would have added the incident to the confidential Flip files had it not been for a letter I received from him in 2004. In that letter is a personal account of a very strange experience. But what else is new, right? Grandpa has obviously maintained contact with Professor Ballantine over the years.

Apparently Flip had a hankering to get personally updated on world jumping. I think that’s what Choney calls it. What follows is the letter he sent me. I’ll let you decide if he’s crazy or not.

March 16, 2004

Dear Chet,

Since you are the only person other than my parallel universe travel partner of 1969 aware of what happened back then, I thought you might be interested in an update on world jumping as Choney calls it. You’ll have to forgive the informal tone of this letter as I’ve just returned from

an exhilarating and inhibition-shattering experience that almost denies explanation though I will do my best.

After not hearing from Choney since his retirement a couple of years ago I received a phone call from him last month. He wanted to know how I'd been doing but there was something else on his mind. I've known Choney a very long time and I just sensed there was something out of the ordinary afoot. With the expected small talk of two old friends reunited out of the way, he got to the real point of his call.

First he recounted our experience of 35 years earlier when we managed to visit a parallel universe in Hoboken. As you may remember, I didn't much care for the idea of getting stuck in a world where I already existed, so I simply backed away from further parallel universe experimentation. During our recent conversation he has given me a brief overview of everything he's learned over the last 35 years and I must admit, I find it quite fascinating. Then he makes me a tempting offer. He invites me to an experience where I will be made aware of all he has discovered about parallel universe traveling with the guarantee that I'll be able to return without the slightest difficulty.

I must admit, the adventurous side of me took over as I found myself agreeing. Then he tells me to free up at least 48 hours and describes a remote place in the country where I'll be contacted the next day. The following morning I drove to a secluded clearing in the woods not far from our summer home in New Hampshire. Waiting for me there was a very large helicopter.

Okay, I say to myself as I approach the copter with caution, this is very peculiar. Then the belly of this thing opens up and standing there before me is a very pretty woman, a blonde. She calls me forward. I move a little quicker now. As I get close to her I notice she looks like a woman from the movies, Annette Bening. I open my mouth to ask who she is and before I could get the words out she confirms what I'm thinking. It is Annette Bening. Then she says that the "others" are waiting and we need to get going.

We board the helicopter and fly for nearly 12 hours. You may remember I'm not much of a movie fan but for nearly two years I had become almost obsessed with supermarket tabloids and movie magazines. For a while there, I couldn't get enough of them. I have to admit that Annette is every bit as beautiful in person as she is onscreen and since your dear grandmother has passed, I sometimes find my mind wandering and wondering, if you get my meaning.

We talked and laughed and joked around while we traveled. She's really good at Scrabble and she totally beat the snot out of me (a colorful expression she actually used) at Rummy too. I asked her about universe jumping but she just said there'd be plenty of time for that later. I noticed that my inhibitions were drifting away as we flew. I felt like a completely different person and I liked it.

Finally, just around nightfall we land in some tropical place. I have no idea where and didn't care. We step into the steamy night and I get into a golf cart with Annette taking the wheel. It's pretty dark now and hard to see anything clearly. After riding for about 10 minutes we come to what looks like a castle. Suddenly I hear a lot of thundering, gut-wrenching noise and realize it's coming from the massive motor and gears grinding somewhere inside that are

actually lowering a monstrous medieval drawbridge. By this time almost nothing seems unusual and I decide to just go along with it.

I walk with Annette over the drawbridge and into the castle. Then we walk for about 5 minutes through some dimly lit halls. Our feet hitting the floor made an echo much like the empty hallways at the college. The temperature is much cooler inside, a pleasant contrast to the steamy setting outside. We finally get to a big room, sort of like a banquet hall. There are huge torches fixed to the walls with a big fan at the top of a domed ceiling drawing out the stale air. The room has a buffet table loaded with gourmet food and there's lots of comfortable furniture everywhere. Despite the torches, which are placed pretty high on the walls, the lighting here is dim too. I look around and as my eyes adjust to the light I can hardly believe what I'm seeing.

In almost every chair I'm recognizing celebrities. Angelina Jolie is sitting quietly in one corner filing her nails as though she's bored out of her mind. Danny Glover is playing cribbage with Patrick Swayze. Paul Newman is playing ping-pong with Rudy Giuliani, of all people.

I'm standing there in complete and utter disbelief. Annette escorts me to the table with the food and says with gentle authority, "Everyone, this is..." Before she can finish, a crusty old guy says in a gravelly voice reminiscent of a 70s gangster movie. "Bellingus. This is Flip Bellingus. He was in on the very first recorded jump back in '69."

The guy is big, I mean really big and is sitting in a luxurious chair in a shadowy corner and it's pretty hard to make out who it might be, but I have my suspicions. Sitting by his side is Martha Stewart and she's holding his hand as though she's telling his fortune or maybe giving him a manicure. It seems he's in charge and finally he makes an announcement that we're only waiting for one more then we can get started.

A man who had been stooped forward in a chair suddenly perks up and repeats my name in a dreamy cockney accent. "Bellingus," he says. "Flip Bellingus. I thought you'd be a much older bloke. Welcome, mate." He extends his hand and I automatically shake it. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was Mick Jagger. Right about now I'm having trouble with my reality settings, Chet but I wasn't allowed to dwell on it for long.

Out of nowhere Cher approaches in one of her classic revealing piecemeal outfits with a bowl of steaming deep fried Twinkies and offers me one explaining sweetly that she loves them and they're her only vice in life. What the hey, I think, this is sort of like a vacation so I take one. She hands me a napkin, gives me a peck on the cheek and continues to float about the room offering everyone fried Twinkies. I'm really not feeling at all like a retired university professor anymore.

Annette explains she needs to hurry off and tells me to make myself comfortable and relax. I take a plush seat near the food table and begin to nibble on the Twinkie. Paul Newman finishes his ping-pong game and walks over. I stand and extend my hand to the man mumbling something about how much I love his movies, especially *The Sting*, the only movie of his I've actually seen. He thanks me politely and says that we're already friends of sorts in spirit. "How's that?" I say.

He explains that he's visited many parallel worlds and has actually met several of his own alternate-universe doubles. My mouth fell open as I just about dropped my Twinkie. I somehow got the idea that seeing your parallel universe double could trigger Armageddon or something. Newman says he couldn't have done it without my and Choney's groundbreaking research so long ago. I remember many discussions with Choney where we concluded it would be impossible to actually meet yourself in a parallel world. Of course, we proved that false with the first jump. I swear Paul knew what I was thinking because just then he smiles warmly and says,

"It's true. Choney has it all figured out and the gang here, well, we just love bopping from one world to the next. We like to meet here though. We have sort of a code word for this place."

"You do?" I say. "A real code word?"

Paul smiles. "No big deal, really. It's Fiesta."

Then he explains that in the world he comes from his name isn't Paul Newman, it's Jack O'Toole. He tells me that none of the guests present are known by the names familiar to me. He says that years before, by chance, Choney was introduced to Alphonse Bruno and offered him a peek at another world. That opened the door to more and more parallel world celebs visiting the castle. Bruno was the man sitting with Martha Stewart when I came in. In our world he's known as Marlon Brando. The woman doing his nails, Martha Stewart is known as Gigi Simpson in her own world.

But here's the thing that's really strange, Chet. Each and every world is real unto itself. Not a single celebrity feels out of place in his or her world of origin. Knowing Marlon Brando as Alphonse Bruno seems strange to you and me, but where he comes from, anyone hearing the name Marlon Brando would think it just as out of place.

Everyone is sort of has their eyes on us as Paul is explaining all of this to me. The reason I'm here at all is because long ago Choney mentioned to some of the celebrities he had a partner who was important to the first parallel universe jump. He sort of built me up to be some sort of comical character, I guess. Paul told me that for years everyone had been bugging Choney to introduce us to his world jumping partner, Flip. That's why I was invited to Fiesta. Then Paul looks around the room and tells me everyone would like to introduce themselves.

Danny Glover looks over, raises a hand shyly and says "Benny Henshaw here." PeeWee Herman stands up with that goofy voice of his and says "Lenny Morgan, hehe." Many of the others introduce themselves using their alternate universe names. Everyone insisted I call them by the name I was familiar with. I was sure glad for that because by now I've decided that the whole thing is way too weird, while at the same time feeling it was all quite natural.

I remember wondering if the whole experience wasn't a dream or the result of someone giving me a hallucinogenic drug. But that feeling soon passed and I just sat back in a stuffed chair and nibbled on my Twinkie.

That's when I heard a quick clapping of hands followed by a group of beautiful young girls scurrying out to a small stage. They were wearing bikinis and sheer veils as they

immediately took to vigorous dancing to a beat provided by a few small drums and finger symbols. It sort of reminded me of what it might be like in a Harem during entertainment hour. Then I saw someone going around and lighting delightfully fragrant incense at little stations scattered about the room.

Soon after that I began to feel woozy as the lights got dimmer. I thought I recognized Paris Hilton walking in. Keanu Reeves was right behind her. He looked over at me and winked. Then he pointed to Paris and let out his signature “Whoa.” After that he went to the food table and loaded up a big plate. I was trying to remember if I’d ever read anything about those two going around together but it was hard to think because by then I was really light headed.

Anyway, the next day I wake up in a beautiful bed. There’s a small table in the room loaded with breakfast food and I help myself to coffee and a sweet roll. While I’m sitting there I hear a gentle knock on the door. It’s Annette again and she’s looking great. She walks up, gives me a Hollywood peck on the forehead and opens the drapes letting bright sunlight in.

She starts making small talk calling me sleepy head and treetop bandito. I had no idea what she was talking about. I asked about parallel universes again. She says that me and everyone else from the night before had a wonderful discussion about all of it. I told her I wished I could remember. She said something like I would remember as the need arose. I didn’t quite get it and began to enquire further. Right then she became a little abrupt and said there was no more time for talk and that I needed to get ready to return home, which is exactly what I did.

She also said that I shouldn’t mention any of what I’d seen or heard. I thought, no problem there, honey. She walked me to the helo pad and said I’d be riding back alone. Then she mumbled something about me not being such a stranger, kissed me on the cheek and ran back to the golf cart. By now the pilot had started the motor. As the massive blade slowly picked up speed, Annette’s hair began blowing back as did her dress. I got teary seeing her gently waving. Then she blew me a kiss, turned and walked back to the castle. It was like a scene from a romantic movie. I’ll always remember that moment. On the chopper ride home I had a lot to think about and decided I’d ask Choney about what happened when I got there.

I called him on returning and we actually met at Boston Common. We spent a sunny afternoon there feeding pigeons, drinking lemonade and discussing physics. He explained everything but it’s almost too much to believe. It seems he’s developed a collapsible doorway he calls the Ion Arch. It’s a lightweight entry into virtually any parallel universe. He showed me a picture of it. It’s got a dial where you can choose the world you want to visit. I can’t imagine how Choney created that. It’s powered by six D-Cell batteries. I’d love to tell you more but I’ve gone long on this letter. I’ll save the rest and tell you all about it when we next meet face to face. Until then.

Sincerely,

Flip Bellingus

Flip Meets Superfly

It would be safe to say that Flip has gone through many phases in his life. Some of them have gone virtually unnoticed as they resembled mildly obsessive hobbies where he more or less maintained privacy around the interest. For example, it wasn't until I began to work on the family history project that I learned he spent more than two years completely consumed with ancient civilizations and secret societies. But that didn't come as much of a surprise. Stuff like that is right up his alley.

And then there was the thing with the movie *Barfly*. Apparently that movie had a profound impression on him because of its intrinsic honesty contrasted against a backdrop of misery and squalor. My grandmother wasn't fond of this period as it had Flip frequenting questionable drinking establishments with their often seedy patrons. And for a while it appeared that she'd been right. Flip ended up with a traumatic brain injury as a result of his obsession with the squalid side of life. It's too bad she didn't live long enough to find out the whole experience had been manufactured to gain sympathy from a jury deciding a patent infringement case. But that's how it goes with Flip. One can never be sure of anything.

In 1972 Flip began to display unusual behavior but for him, not all that unusual. It was just that this particular obsession came with a soundtrack. A funk soundtrack. I wasn't aware of this until it had passed though learning of it brought some things into clearer focus, mainly some of my grandmother's offhand comments during the time. I heard the story from Flip a couple of years after agreeing to record the family history. Our conversation on the funk soundtrack days follows.

"The first record I brought home," Flip said, "was *Maggot Brain* by Funkadelic. It took a little while for me to get into the groove of the music but the lyrics, well, let's just say they don't write 'em like that anymore."

I was familiar with Funkadelic and owned several of their records in the '70s. After our discussion I got hold of the sheet music for several cuts on the album as I'd never paid very close attention to the words when listening. It turns out Flip had a point. He continued.

"The title track sort of sets the tone for the rest of the record. I think the tune that really got me hooked was *Can You Get To That*. When I first heard that song I got teary. It brought me back to Scotland and reminded me of the yearning I had to be an American."

Interesting. Funkadelic conjuring images of old Scotland. Why not? I've included the first verse of the song here for illustrative purposes. After hearing Flip's story of his early years as a new American I can see how this might have affected him.

*I once had a life, or rather
Life had me
I was one among many
Or at least I seemed to be
Well, I read an old quotation in a book just yesterday*

*Said "Gonna reap just what you sow,
The debts you make you have to pay."
Can you get to that?*

I once again found myself sitting with my grandfather wondering what motivated him and drove him to certain endeavors.

"Was there anything in particular that brought on your interest in Funk?" I asked.

"Oh yes," Chet." He said. "One of my students."

"Ah," I said. "A girl?"

"No, a middle aged man. His name was Darnell Troxler. His first day in class he was dressed like Superfly. Ostentatious jewelry. Knee high patent leather boots. Stylish chapeau with a raven feather. Big sunglasses with big rhinestones in the frames. He was a real head turner. I was hesitant to admit it but I wished I could have gotten away with dressing like that. After a while I did get some similar threads... er, clothes, though a bit more subdued. Troxler said he wanted to study the white man's philosophy. I think he was disappointed with my class though, at least at first."

"Why's that?" I said.

"I wasn't much for following the curriculum. But as it turned out he wasn't interested at all in traditional college philosophy," Flip said. "Most often I just gave a brief history of the hotshot philosophers and then held lectures on common sense philosophy. My own philosophy, in fact. I've sort of been keeping track of it. Even gave it a name."

"Really?" I said. My uncle Alabaster always said Flip would come up with a new strain of philosophy. "Not Gonzo philosophy?"

"No," he said missing the attempt at humor. "Hunter Thompson already has that covered." I was a fan of Hunter Thompson and again, was interested in what Flip might know about him.

"Don't you mean Gonzo journalism?" I said.

"Well," Flip said. "It seems that once people move in a particular direction that everything they do tends to be reflected in the overall trend. Thompson's writing was extraordinarily unique as was his entire life." I don't know why but I found it amazing that Flip was aware of what Hunter Thompson was all about. I was curious about his own philosophy and didn't want to drift off topic.

"So what name have you given your own ideas?" I said.

"That's not ready for prime time," he said. "But I expect it might be helpful for those who are struggling trying to figure things out."

"Wow. That sounds interesting. Can you explain it?"

"Not today, my boy. Though it is a topic for another time. Today I want to talk about how much I learned about myself and our country along with African American culture through the eyes of Darnell Troxler and some of his associates."

“I had no idea...” Flip stopped me in mid sentence sensing where I was going with my comment.

“Wisdom is where you find it, Chet. I learned more about real life philosophy in the company of a mule than I did in any college textbook. Darnell showed up in my class one day. After the first lecture he asked if he could monitor the class. Of course I said he could. He asked how important having a textbook would be. I said not important at all. He seemed to like that answer.

“It was my extracurricular material he liked. It was what all the students enjoyed. He was often the first to show up and the last to leave. I grew fond of the man. After a week or so he began to dress down some. I think he somehow felt he was causing me problems with administration. But that wasn’t the case at all. I admired him for his unique ability to express himself in dress.

“Anyway, one time after class he asked if I wanted to go for a drink. I told him I wasn’t much on drinking. He said he wasn’t either. Then he asked if I’d ever eaten soul food. I’d never even heard the expression. He smiled as he took me by the hand and led me out of the class to the parking lot to his car. It was a 1971 Eldorado. Metal flake copper with a padded landau roof.

“But it wasn’t a vinyl roof. It was custom made from pigskin. Sleek, smart looking car. Big whitewall tires. He called it his ride. I’ll never forget how fitting that term seemed, his ride. Many of our African American friends have a way of putting things so plainly. I think that’s what I find appealing about much of their music. There’s no need to sit and ponder. Most of it is clear as the sunrise.” I just nodded and found myself in complete agreement.

“We went for a ride around town and eventually ended up at a restaurant in Roxbury.”

“Ugh,” I said. “Dangerous territory.”

“That’s the rumor,” Flip said. “But I found the place delightful, a community and marketplace. We went into a place by the name of Willy Mack’s and took a booth. There were about a dozen people eating. I was the only white person there but no one seemed to notice. I let Darnell order for me. And what excellent food, Chet. The sweet corn bread was exquisite. We also had some melt-in-your-mouth ribs, black eyed peas, collard greens with pumpkin cobbler for dessert. One of the finest meals I’ve ever had.

“Once Darnell ordered he got up and put a few coins into the juke box. What a cornucopia of sound. I don’t think I’d ever heard real jazz before that day. There was Al Green and Bobby Blue Bland, *Drifting From Town To Town* with Matt ‘Guitar’ Murphy on guitar, what a tune. Then there was Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson and Ray Charles. A whole new world opened up for me that day. And while we were waiting for our food a man sitting alone across from our booth was trying to get our attention. ‘Pssst, psst...’ He was whispering our way and calling to us.

“Darnell chuckled and said the guy’s name was Lonny and that he was crazy and wanted to prove it. Then he smiled and urged me to go and sit with him for a bit, said he was crazy but not dangerous. So I went over and stood at his booth waiting for him to say something.

“In front of him was a large rectangular Pyrex brownie pan. It had an inch or so of butterscotch pudding in it. He was holding a mixing spoon. The man mumbled something and motioned for me to sit across from him so I did. Then he asked if I knew anything about ancient history. I told him I knew a bit. He said he’d just returned from England where he’d visited a famous relic. I looked over to Darnell who was sitting with a big smile. Then the man produced a package of Twinkies from somewhere, opened them and began placing them just so in the pudding, mumbling as he went. He did this with several packages. When that was finished he took out some rectangular wafer cookies and placed them on top of a few of the Twinkies sort of bridging them. Before I knew it, I was looking at a near perfect replica of Stonehenge.

“By then our food had arrived so I pointed to our table and told the man my dinner was waiting. Darnell laughed and called over to the table inviting Lonny to join us. While we ate Lonny told us about his being a spy and a space traveler and a government man. He repeated that several times. Said he’d been dropped off here on earth to see if he could get some sort of rational explanation for why people act so mean and cruel toward each other. He looked to me and asked if I could add some insight to the issue.

“I told him I’d noticed that there wasn’t enough love being shared in families or in schools or even in church. He nodded and quoted the Golden Rule and said that if everyone followed it there would be no need for armies or courts or police or any kind of fussing at all about anything. You know something Chet?”

“What?” I said, not knowing what to expect.

“That man wasn’t crazy at all. He was one of the sanest people I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But he goes around claiming to be a spy and being sent here by aliens and all the rest. That’s not a sign of sanity.”

“One would think,” Flip said. “But I’d say all that is just some sort of defense mechanism his mind has manufactured in the face of so much bad treatment. At the time I thought that man was really tired, Chet. I think he made up those wild stories so people would let him alone. But just under the surface was a truly wise person.”

“Yeah,” I said. “A wise government agent from another planet constructing a miniature Stonehenge out of Twinkies in a soul food restaurant in Roxbury, Massachusetts.”

“Well, you know what I always say, Chet.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“Most things in this world and in others are rarely as they appear.”

“Ah, yes. So you think the guy was actually sane?” I said.

“I think he was as sane as he wanted to be,” Flip said. “Listening to him that day told me he was a true philosopher.”

“So what happened after you had dinner?”

“Not much,” Flip said. “Darnell drove me home to Everett. Said he wanted to see where I lived, my crib, he said. After that day he and I got together often. I went to his place from time to time and listened to music. I ended up buying all of Al Green’s records. There were others too.

There was one guy I liked a lot. He was a poet and musician. Kind of on the radical side. His name was..." I interrupted.

"Lemme guess who you're talking about," I said.

"Are you familiar with any of the contemporary Black poets, Chet?"

"I think I know who you were about to mention," I said. "Gil Scott Heron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. Great stuff. His message is cutting and clean and accurate. Believe it or not, I actually introduced him to some of my black Navy friends. Is that who you were going to name?"

"Sure is," Flip said. "I had no idea you were a fan of black culture, Chet."

"I'm not so sure it's black culture," I said, "and not just simple human nature. Like you said earlier, wisdom is where you find it. So did you ever meet up with Lonny again after the first time?"

"I did," Flip said. "Gram had been asking a lot about my sudden interest in soul music and jazz and black people. I told her I'd sort of accidentally opened a new window to humanity in meeting up with Darnell Troxler. Said I'd been spending some time in the neighborhood, or as the denizens say, 'da hood.'" Flip smiled. "Of course, like you, she warned me to be careful. But I never gave it a second thought. I'd sometimes ride the T into Roxbury and visit Darnell and Lonny and some other nice people I'd met. I found out that Darnell didn't actually live in Roxbury. He lived on Beacon Hill." Beacon Hill is a trendy and exclusive part of old Boston.

"They told me I was one of the few white people who actually understood them. I didn't really know what they were talking about but Darnell and Lonny set me straight one day. And there wasn't a trace of crazy showing in Lonny. As it turned out Lonny was Darnell's cousin. After I'd known them for a few months I sat with them one afternoon and we talked and talked and talked. I guess by then they trusted me. Darnell told me some very interesting things." Now Flip had my attention.

"Like what?" I said.

"Well, he told me that he'd joined the Army in 1966. As you know Chet, joining the Army back then got you a direct ticket to Viet Nam and that's where Darnell ended up. He became a member of a recon helicopter crew. Saw a lot of action. Said he enjoyed it. Said it helped clean up his heart and soul."

"What exactly does that mean?" I said.

"I guess it's something most of us go through sooner or later. He told me he'd had a lot of anger and hate over the way things were in the country, especially against people of color. Then he found himself in the middle of a war. Men on the chopper crew were black, white, Asian and Hispanic. And all of a sudden skin color didn't matter so much. What mattered was staying alive. Darnell told me he made his peace with God and with his own life."

"I have a close friend who went to Viet Nam," I said. "He's told me the bonds he made with his buddies were sacred."

"I think Darnell would agree," Flip said. "One of his duties back then was as a mechanic for the chopper. That was his training. He said the chopper had these bay doors in its belly that

could open and shut manually or hydraulically. There was this hinge thing he talked about that would always get snagged when opening the doors manually. Said a couple of people actually died because it malfunctioned at just the wrong time. So when he got out in '70 he came back to Roxbury and visited a friend that ran a little machine shop. He had one of the faulty hinges with him. He knew exactly what to do to modify it to make it work perfectly. Spent his own money to pay for three prototypes before he got it right.

“After getting out of the Army he served another 18 months in the Air National Guard. He was able to test the new hinge during that time. He showed the improved hinge to his commanding officer, another chopper vet familiar with the hinge problem. The guy pushed it through to whoever the decision maker was and Darnell ended up with a contract for a half million dollars. Used his GI Bill benefits to get a small business loan and went into partnership with his machine shop friend. They manufactured a few thousand of these things and Darnell traveled around to various Army, Navy and Air Force installations overseeing the retrofitting of the part.”

“Cool,” I said. “I love a success story.”

“It doesn't stop there,” Flip said. “There was something else in Viet Nam Darnell noticed needed improving. He told me there were times men would stay out on patrol for weeks at a time. Most often all they had to eat was canned and packaged rations. Darnell came up with a portable mini camp stove. About 10 inches by 8 inches. One burner. Little metal flaps that kept the flame concentrated, shielded from the wind. The Army already had something similar. But what made Darnell's stove different is that it used almost any kind of fuel. Lighter fluid, rubbing alcohol, gin, even gasoline.”

“I was in the Navy with a guy whose dad owned a company that manufactured field cookers for the military,” I said.

“Interesting,” Flip said. “After having success with the chopper hinge Darnell brought his little portable stove to the same Coronel and again the guy put it in front of a decision maker. Darnell's first order was for 10,000 units. But he didn't try to manufacture these himself. He contracted the work out to a company in Minnesota. Maybe it was your friend's dad.”

“Could be,” I said.

“Anyway,” Flip continued. “He charged the government \$22 per unit and had them manufactured for about \$5. Nice little profit. He threw his commanding officer a \$10,000 finder fee.”

“The guy leaned on him for some cash, huh?” I said.

“That's what I thought too,” Flip said. “But that's not how it went. Darnell said he kept expecting his CO to want a cut. But he never did. He said that was another thing that helped restore his faith in people, a guy in a position to take advantage who didn't use the position to take advantage. So without any pressure at all he just gave the guy ten grand. Said it was one of the most liberating things he'd ever done.”

“So this guy must be pretty well off,” I said.

“Yes,” Flip said. “During this visit Lonny had a few things to say as well. He told me he’d been cooking delicious soul food his whole life. It turned out the restaurant we visited that first time was his place. But that’s just a hobby really. He makes a fortune selling soul food cookbooks. Maybe you’ve heard of them. Lonny Granger’s Soul Food Mastery. It’s a series of books. Best sellers.”

“Can’t say I have,” I said.

“Gram has the one for desserts. Had it long before I met these guys. Sweet potato pie, cobbler, lots of great peanut recipes, pecan pie. Some amazing stuff.”

“I think I’ve had the peach cobbler one time,” I said.

“Probably,” Flip said. “Anyway, Lonny had this little soul food shack in Roxbury back in the ‘60s. When Darnell started to pull in some serious money he just gave his cousin the money for a restaurant in a better location. It was successful right away. With that behind them Lonny asked if Darnell would finance a small press run of cookbooks. They printed up 300 at a local shop and sold them in the restaurant. They were sold out within a month. They printed up a couple more batches and sold them locally. Before long bookstores around Boston were carrying them. Then they went national. Lonny’s soul food books are the number one bestselling books on the topic.”

“Something seems weird about all of this,” I said.

“Weird?” Flip said. “How?”

“Well you described Darnell as sort of coming across as a... Well, I don’t want to be disrespectful. But you know, dressed like Superfly, I guess that doesn’t fit the image of a successful entrepreneur, unless he’s selling...” Flip broke in.

“I’m glad you brought that up, Chet. With everything those two guys told me that day I felt compelled to share a little about myself.”

“You didn’t,” I said.

“Didn’t what?” Flip said.

“You didn’t tell them about Clearwater, did you?”

“Not exactly,” Flip said. “I told them that when I was younger I’d had some success with recycling peanut shells. I told them how Choney and me came up with peanut shell logs and other spinoff products. I said we sold nearly everything to a conglomerate. It’s interesting too...” Flip stared off into space.

“What’s interesting?” I said.

“Oh. I guess they had some preconceived notions about me. Sort of the way you just did because of the way Darnell dresses and the way Lonny pretends to be crazy. I guess they didn’t see me as the kind of guy who would have invented anything. But as I’ve told you before, I’ve deliberately created a certain persona designed to steer people away from getting too close to me. Turned out Darnell and Lonny did the same thing. That’s one reason Darnell dresses like a pimp. That’s what you were thinking before, isn’t it Chet? It’s okay. That’s what he wants people to think. It’s easy to stay under the radar if you come across as a pompous fashion whore driving a pimp mobile. Those were Darnell’s exact words.”

“Wow,” I said. “Is anyone what they appear to be?”

“Sadly, Chet, many folks are.” Flip said.

“So what did these guys think of your peanut recycling tales?” I said.

“They thought it was pretty smart to take something people were paying to get rid of and turn a profit with it. They were curious about how Choney and I developed so many products starting with the peanut shell businesses. I kept steering them to the California lawyer who’s running things. Darnell told me he felt his field cookers, chopper hinges and other business investments he made were worth between five and ten million depending on the method of inventory and accounting used to tally it all up. He said the accounting end of business was confusing to him. I laughed and agreed. Lonny said math came easy to him and with a wink offered to count my beans any ‘ol time for free. We all laughed at that.”

“So what happened?” I said.

“It seemed like Darnell was interested in selling his holdings and retiring to an island somewhere. Lonny sort of let that slip a couple of times during the course of the conversation. Though thinking back, I doubt any of it just slipped out. I told Darnell I could maybe get him an audience with the lawyer and if he felt there was any value in Darnell’s holdings he might want to make a buyout offer.

“But by now I was getting the feeling Lonny and Darnell knew I had the power of decision. I don’t know exactly why but I felt sure they’d seen through everything and that my being a professor of philosophy was nothing more than a pleasant pastime. I’d put almost everything in my personal life on hold and thrown myself into studying black culture and music. I had been truly fascinated with a dynamic race of people that had always been right there beside me.

“They never said a word about it but I could feel they knew there weren’t many people who had the liberties I just take for granted. These two guys were beyond intuitive. It was like they were looking right through me.” Flip described what many family members had witnessed numerous times over the years; his sudden obsession with the most unlikely of things and his all consuming passion for investigating them.

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Well, I never admitted to having any control or influence with Clearwater. But I spoke to the lawyer and told him if Darnell’s interests were sound and a deal was feasible he should make him an offer.”

“And...” I didn’t know why but I found this discussion especially exciting.

“Clearwater offered Darnell \$6.5 million for the field cookers, the patent on the chopper hinge and a couple of other inventions. He countered with eight million and we ended up buying him out for seven point four. The managers tweaked his enterprises and improved the bottom line by more than 25 percent in two years.”

“Wow,” I said. “And Darnell never mentioned any of it to you?”

“Nope. Not a word. It was about six months later that Choney and me decided to sell our interests in Clearwater.”

This little story might not be as exciting or unusual as some of Flip's tales but it's one of my hands down favorites. I think the reason for that is because it shows how innocent and downright disarming my grandfather can be. It also shows me that there are others out there who easily recognize folks for what they actually are. But there's much more to the message here.

Flip openly admitted he pretends to be something he's not, which for lack of a better term would be an airhead. Even so, I'm sometimes forced to wonder how it is that a man living in the United States could be so unaware of an entire race of people living right alongside him? Has that been an act too? Listening to him and watching the childlike expressions on his face as he described his initiation into jazz, and funk and the blues tells me none of it was staged. It's all real. I believe it is, anyway.

Unlike many of Flip's tales where he's asked me to keep everything hush hush, he never mentioned secrecy with this one. I felt I could get a bit more perspective by asking my grandmother about it as she would certainly have noticed certain changes in his behavior along with a new fondness for funk, blues and jazz.

She actually had quite a lot to say about this period. As he often did with people he liked, Flip brought Darnell and Lonny home unannounced for dinner soon after they'd first met. This was right after Thanksgiving where Gram always outdid herself with a massive amount of superb food. According to Gram, Darnell was wearing what she referred to as a "wild costume with a cape like Batman." I seem to recall certain disco outfits back in the '70 that came with capes. She said she was quite surprised at first with the two characters Flip had brought home. I must admit that neither of my grandparents had had much contact with people of color. And it wasn't out of prejudice. My grandmother was a first generation Scott and mainly associated with other Scotts socially.

I asked her how the dinner went that evening. She said that Flip's guests were regular gentlemen and great conversationalists. Right away Lonny noticed his soul food desert cookbook in the kitchen. It was one of just a few cookbooks my grandmother kept on a shelf. Lonny picked it up and asked if she'd like to have it autographed. She wasn't sure what to make of that and just looked to Flip. He explained that Lonny was the Lonny of Lonny Granger's Soul Food Mastery. He took the book and turned to the back page. There, big as life, was a picture of him sitting at a table in Willy Mack's holding a copy of one of his books with a big smile on his face. Gram looked at the picture and then to Lonny and smiled. They got along famously after that.

She said both Lonny and Darnell were impressed with the Thanksgiving leftovers and that she actually wrote out several recipes for her famous sausage stuffing, chunked rutabaga, and pumpkin pie. But food was just one of several things they had in common. Darnell admired my grandmother's tablecloth. It was a huge elaborate crochet design she'd made herself. As it turned out, Darnell loved to crochet. After dinner Flip and Lonny were all alone because Gram and Darnell were busy examining her crochet work. She gave Darnell some tips, showed him some intricate patterns and promised to keep in touch. But it didn't end there.

Somehow the topic of singing came up. Not soul or jazz or funk but church choir singing. Gram was a long standing member of the Methodist Church choir and almost never missed a Sunday. Flip tagged along when it was convenient. I remember visiting my grandparents as a boy. They had an old upright Steinway piano that had once belonged to Perry Como. Flip would play and play and play while my grandmother, uncle Alabaster and Auntie Delores would sing all kinds of songs. I remember my sisters and me and my grandparents trying to teach us the three parts to Row Your Boat. We never did get the hang of it.

Darnell, his wife, along with Lonny and his wife were all in a choir in a Roxbury Presbyterian church. They said they loved singing the gospel. Gram told me that before the night was through she had Flip sitting at the piano playing one spirited tune after another as Gram, Lonny and Darnell sang the words. My grandmother said it had been years since she enjoyed a visit by anyone as much as she enjoyed having Darnell and Lonny over. She said that she ended up singing as a guest at their church in Roxbury and that Darnell and his wife came to sing short solos at the Methodist church in Everett.

I guess it isn't all that unusual that my grandparents found friends outside of their race. I know that Flip is a very engaging fellow and can only imagine that things like skin color and cultural difference often go unnoticed in his world. He told me that after Darnell sold out to Clearwater he and his wife began to travel, apparently in an effort to find a subdued island where they could retire. And that's eventually what they did. Lonny followed several years later, though without the sizable nest egg his cousin had accumulated. The poor guy was forced to knock out two new soul food cookbooks every year to maintain his waterfront manor.

House Of Cards

“When building a house of cards it is important not to let your own fart-storm topple it.”
Livingston Ashcroft Bellingus

When I was a boy of about 10 I did something that was not very cool. I did it with malice of forethought and with the intention to deceive, although I believed that a legal technicality would protect me from any consequences.

I've always been of the entrepreneurial spirit. And as a lad I was a reader. I liked mystery books and DC comics. Superman was my favorite. One day I noticed an ad in the back of a comic book offering any enterprising individual the opportunity to earn money selling greeting cards. The deal was simple. Send them \$2 and they'd send you two boxes of all-occasion greeting cards retailing for \$2 a box, which spelled one hundred percent profit for the retail seller. I asked my dad if I could do it and he said no. I don't remember the reason now but I'm sure it had something to do with a past lack of personal responsibility on my part.

Not easily discouraged, I visited my Grandpa and pitched him on the idea telling him that his son, my father, wouldn't allow it. He reluctantly agreed to let me have the cards mailed to his address, only a couple of blocks from my own. The cards came in a few weeks and I sold them

easily. With the cards came an offer that was too good to refuse. Because I was now an established customer they were willing to send me a case of 48 boxes of cards on credit. I would gross \$96 dollars and send them \$48. Such a deal.

This time I didn't ask for permission, I simply filled out the form and sent it along. And a few weeks later the cards arrived. Flip was curious. I told him what I was doing and he offered some cautious encouragement with words about responsibility and not giving my father any reason to get upset. My original intention was to sell the cards and send a money order to the company for their share. But I'd recently learned a little something that helped to change my mind about that.

Six months prior to the greeting card deal I had sent away for a stamp collector's offer from a match book cover. It contained a wide selection of international stamps for free with only a small fee for postage. The only hitch was that the buyer had to purchase some stamps from the company every month for a year. I didn't quite understand that part but I sent in the offer anyway and got some colorful stamps from Italy, Brazil, Turkey, Hungary and other faraway places.

Everything was fine until the following month when I got the stamps I was supposed to pay for. I tucked them away thinking they'd stop coming. Well, they didn't. After two or three months I went to Flip and explained the situation, knowing my dad would not be nearly as understanding.

Flip and I had the obligatory discussion about responsibility and one on "fine print" as well. He then penned a letter to the company stating that I was a minor and not responsible for my actions and he'd appreciate it if the company would let me out of the deal. We gathered all the stamps together, including the free ones and sent them back to the company. Flip saw the relief in me and asked if I'd learned anything. I said that I had. And that was the end of that.

Six months later I'm in the greeting card business with 48 boxes of cards in Flip's garage, humming right along making sales to my friends' parents, going door to door, kicking butt, raking in the bucks. The cards were actually pretty nice so it wasn't hard moving them. I don't remember when it occurred to me that I wasn't going to send the company their money, but it did at some point. It wasn't long after getting them before I'd sold almost all of the greeting cards without my parents even knowing.

This was all happening in the middle of the summer while the city's recreation department was sponsoring the annual fun-filled day trip to Canobie Lake Amusement Park in Salem, New Hampshire. Kids, with or without their parents, could take the trip starting in the early morning and be home at around six in the evening. The outing included a bus ride and a day filled with amusements, a roller coaster, swimming, hot dogs, candy, soft drinks, the works. I even got to see my first rock band play live, The Beau Brummels. Me, my mom and sisters were signed up to go. And what a time it was, especially for a 10 year old boy in 1965 with \$85 in his pocket.

I treated my family and friends to just about everything the park had to offer. We rode all the rides a dozen times and ate enough junk food to puke. In fact, my youngest sister did puke, twice. My mother was a little suspicious asking a couple of times where the money came from

but I told her I'd been saving it for months. She never actually saw me with more than a few bucks at one time so I guess she just decided to go with the flow. She was pretty good at that. After the outing I enjoyed hero status in the Bellingus family for several weeks.

By September I'd received my first letter from the card company asking for their money. And I distinctly remember not being afraid in the least. I waited until they sent a second, more aggressive letter mentioning possible legal action before responding. I don't recall the exact wording but my letter was designed to be a "pity us" message along with the mention of the "dealing with a minor" technicality I'd been depending on.

I'd pretty much mastered my mother's handwriting by this time. I wrote the letter from her perspective telling the company stuff about scolding her son for ordering the cards without permission and how the cards got damaged by rain because I'd left them in the garage with a leaky roof, which caused the damage.

I closed by saying we didn't have the money to pay for the cards because she was a single mom trying to raise five kids (not true) and that there should be something in the order form for a parent's approval and that they perhaps shouldn't send orders to ten year-old kids. I actually feel a twinge of shame as I write this even today. I never heard from them again. The perfect crime.

After I was certain there wouldn't be any bad consequences I showed Flip a carbon copy of my letter to the company thinking he'd be proud that I'd managed to exploit a technicality in ripping them off. He appeared to already know what I'd done. He seemed disappointed but not angry. He did tell me that I'd stolen the money. I argued that the company should be more careful in dealing with kids. We debated the technicalities of the situation and I stood firm that what I'd done was okay, especially since I'd gotten away with it. I remember him laughing at that and saying, "We'll see."

A while later I had occasion to visit with Flip for a few hours. He asked me how things had been. I told him not so good and explained that my rat fink uncle, Alabaster Bellingus, his other son, had promised to enroll me in a karate class and after saving up and spending my own money on the white uniform, was informed by dirty, rotten uncle Al that he couldn't afford the class and that maybe he'd send me the following year.

Then, after years of bugging my own dad for a dog, he finally relented but changed his mind at the last minute. This was a problem because I'd actually taken a beautiful black Lab puppy home only to have my father tell me that I'd have to find another family to take him. And if that wasn't enough, I explained to my grandfather, I had also failed math a couple of times coming into the spring quarter after the teacher told me I'd be okay for the year, when I actually wasn't okay at all. This resulted in my having to make up most of the year's lessons in summer school. I told Flip that lately things had sucked.

Of course, he gently used my problems for the obvious teaching opportunity. He pointed out that each of my problems revolved around people not keeping their word. I emphatically agreed saying something like, yeah, what's wrong with some people? Then he asked if I had any of the greeting card money left. I rolled my eyes not wanting to go there and I said I didn't.

He started to explain cause and effect relationships in the physical and non-physical world and a bit about the workings of Karma, though he never used the word. He reminded me how puffed up I'd acted thinking I'd gotten away with something when I failed to send the card company their dough. He also said that I may have technically been okay in keeping the money, but that some things are wrong and are always wrong, even if sanctioned by the law.

He again pointed out that each of my problems related to people not keeping promises; the same kind of thing I'd done with the greeting card company. I tried again to justify my actions by saying I'd spent most of the money treating my mom and sisters to a good time. Then he said it, "When building a house of cards it is important not to let your own fart-storm topple it."

I laughed a weak laugh. He asked if I knew what the quote meant. I said I wasn't sure. Then he asked if I would have been so generous had I actually sent the company their money and was using my own earnings for the outing. I thought about it and admitted that I probably wouldn't have. He said it was often easy to be a big shot with stolen money.

He reminded me of how cocky I'd been at the time and that trying to explain certain things to me then would have been futile. He told me that I'd been full of myself and gloating about it and that was the fart-storm, acting like a big shot full of phony pride and vanity. The house of cards was thinking that I was actually entitled to keep money that wasn't mine. He also said that no one ever gets away with anything, ever. There are always consequences, good consequences for good deeds and not so good consequences for not so good deeds. He asked if I understood. By now I was crying but I nodded that I did. I sure do love the man.

Throughout much of his life Flip was known as an airhead but I disagree. Look at how he treated this situation. Rather than deliver an authoritative, finger-pointing lecture at the scene of the crime he let the natural laws of cause and effect take over, knowing that what goes around comes back full circle.

Only then, with the sting of the apparent consequences of my actions fresh in my memory did he address the issue with me, explaining how things work. And it made a much greater impression than a chewing out ever could have. To this day when I'm tempted to take a gray-area shortcut I sometimes think of the greeting card caper along with Flip's wisdom and back away. That sure is a lesson that has stood the test of time.

Flip is one of the wisest men living in this world and I'm glad he's had an influence in my life. I sure wish everyone could spend some time with him. Peace

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