

*Fex Summons Sal and Sally...*

“Hey, Sal! You and Sally get your butts down here ASAP! You won’t believe this place! We been here a month and we’ve already got the place buttoned up!” shouted Fex into his cell phone.

Sal took the call because he wasn’t at work, and he wasn’t at work because there wasn’t any work to be at. He was busy, though, having his second honeymoon with Sally, which was good. But honeymoons don’t last forever, so Sal was starting to get a little itchy. The problem was, he didn’t have any ideas that seemed to have any future attached to them, either for him or for Sally.

So Fex’s call, the gist of which was that he and Heather were “making it big in the Big H,” as Fex put it, didn’t exactly make Sal feel any better.

Nobody calls Hollywood “the Big H,” thought Sal, as he listened to Fex ramble and brag.

Besides, Sal continued thinking to himself, getting even more on edge as Fex held forth, eating up long-distance minutes, Foxy and Mr. Moto just up and moved to Vegas where she had some Tommy gun gig going. “Why don’t you come here too, Sal?” asked Foxy.

But Sal knew there were plenty more like him in Vegas, guys with a keen head for numbers, and the competition just seemed too stiff—not to mention that Sal’s first name was Salvatore, like about ten thousand other guys in Vegas. Nah, Vegas wasn’t gonna work. This was all going through Sal’s head while Fex kept blathering on the phone, burning up more of Sal’s long-distance minutes.

Then Fex said something that got Sal to thinking:

“... and then we got this agent. Guy’s a whiz, the best. Heather and me are already in the semi-quarter-finals of *So You Think You Can Dance*. This agent, Maury, actually thinks we got a shot at it. And then—get this, Sal—he turns around and asks me, ‘Hey Fex, you know anybody’s got a good voice? One of my people dropped out of the competition. Stage fright or somethin’. I don’t know what’s up but I don’t buy it.’ That’s exactly what he said.”

Fex paused to allow Sal to express his amazement, but Sal just waited for the next

bit. Unfazed, Fex continued.

“Oh yeah?” I says, “what competition is that, Maury? By the way, lemme freshen up that drink for ya.”

Sal, to himself again, telling Fex to hurry up, dammit!

“So Maury says—are you ready, Sal?—he says, ‘*The Voice!*’ Can you friggin’ believe that, Sal?”

At this point in the conversation Sal was starting to get over his mood, had stopped counting the long-distance minutes, and was actually getting a little excited, though he didn’t know what about.

“You mean, *The Voice?*”

“That’s the one, Sal. Now you’re catchin’ on. Get on down here and bring Sally. Heather’ll get her make-up fixed and figure out a look for her, get her some duds, you know, that dame stuff. We’ll get a singing coach for good ol’ Sals, one with connections, and get her an audition on *The Voice*. I tell ya, Sal, it’s a slam-dunk! But you both gotta be *here* instead of rottin’ away in that old swamp of Seattle.”

“Well, it sounds interesting, Fex ...”

“Interesting? What are you talkin’ about. It’s fantastic. Today’s what? Monday?”

“No, it’s Tuesday,” said Sal.

“No sweat. You two get here by Friday and I’ll start introducin’ you around on Saturday. ‘Course Maury’s gotta be her agent—Sally’s—and he takes a pretty hefty cut, but it’s worth it, ‘cause he brings in the dough and the big contracts. But *you’ve* gotta be Sally’s manager, Sal. You know how to, you know, *massage* her when she gets scared.”

The image of massaging Sally had a prompt and unexpected effect on Sal, but he managed to quell it soon enough to reply, “Uh, yeah, sure, Fex, I know how to, uh, take care of Sally when she needs a little reassurance.” Sal was getting more excited by the minute.

By the time the conversation was finished Fex had given Sal the number of a little motel in the Valley with a kitchenette that didn’t cost a bundle—“It ain’t seedy, like a lot of ‘em,” he said—and had set up a meeting with Maury, Fex, and Heather, plus Sal and Sally. They were going to meet for lunch on Saturday, noon-sharp, at the Bob’s Big Boy Hamburger joint in Burbank, “where all the stars hang out.”

“Don’t be late, ‘cause we gotta get a table. Place is like Mecca during the *hajj*. (Fex had been picking up some exotic terms since he’d been in Hollywood. He didn’t know what the *hajj* was, exactly, some kind of royal bash, he thought).

After the phone call, Sal was in an agitated state. When Sally finally came home, Sal couldn’t wait to tell her what Fex had said.

“He did *what?*” said Sally, getting nervous. When Sal got to the part about Maury the agent getting her an audition for *The Voice*, Sally screamed like an Amazon parrot or a peacock.

“Hey, hey, Salzie, calm down a bit, honey. This is our big chance. Here, let me rub your shoulders a bit, help you relax. There, is that feelin’ better now?” Sal continued rubbing in this manner, here and there, for more than a little while.

In fact, after about two-hours of shoulder-rubbing, and elsewhere, and a couple of martinis, Sally was ready to go, walking around the apartment practicing her “note,” looking at the clothes in her closet, checking out her make-up supplies, asking Sal which tint of red lipstick looked better, the *Baby’s Bottom #5* or the *Garter Glow #9?*”

When “Maury’s Day” came around, that Saturday, the results of the meeting at Bob’s Big Boy were better than any of them had expected, including Maury.

“Hey, ain’t these burgers great?” offered Maury, by way of approaching the topic, having already heard Sally’s *note*. Then he just dove right in. “I have to tell you, Sally—may I call you Sally?—I have not heard such a voice as yours, such a raw native talent, since, like, you know, Judy Garland, or, like, Joan Sutherland, you hear what I’m sayin’? In fact, I’m gonna call the booking agent at *The Voice*—Boone, he’s a personal friend of mine—and get you a booking on the show. ‘Course, ya gotta start at the bottom, like all the stars. But I really think you’re gonna be a big hit around this little Hollywood town of ours.”

Sal noticed that Maury did not say “the Big H.”

As they left Bob’s Big Boy, everybody had a glow on them—Fex was busting his buttons, Heather and Sally were giggling together, and Sal was pitching some ideas he’d been thinking about for some time now—“just wanted to get Maury’s take on them,” he said.

That night in the motel bed in the Valley, Sal and Sally were reviewing the day.

Sally cried, “What did he *say*, Sal? About your ideas?”

Sal hesitated, drawing out the big moment, then said, “Sals, he said that he thought they had ‘great potential.’ That’s what he said, ‘great potential,’ just like that.”

That night Sal and Sally didn’t get to sleep until the sun was coming up behind the mountains, flashes glinting off the tinted-glass windows of the Valley’s high-rise buildings in the distance.

*Tully Sells Out, Starts Over ...*

“Owl Man, hoot, hoot,” tooted Tully to his old friend, mimicking the owl, which, he knew, was Owl Man’s primary bird-totem. Why else would he take, or be given, the odd name of “Owl Man”?

“Tully? Is that you?” growled Owl Man on his cellular phone. “Where in the name of St. Andrew have you been? Grappling with Grendel in the briny deep? Tell me, old friend!”

“My good friend, all is well. Your old Tully has sold his miserable coffee shop to a cohort of tattooed young roustabouts who think they can make profits from selling coffee and pastries to the ‘Seattle grunge crowd.’ Well, I say, good luck to ‘em and don’t let ‘em darken my door again.”

“But what about you, Tulls, my old friend? What are you going to do?”

“Do?” exploded Tully. “I’m already doin’ it! I’ve got a new business goin’ and ya wouldna believe the profits, aye, the profits.”

“Now yer talkin’ nonsense, old fool. Ye canna be havin’ profits so soon,” said Owl Man, lapsing back into his Scottish brogue.

“Would ya like ta peruse my books, then, would ya?” said Tully.

“Aye, and I would at that,” said Owl Man.

So the two old Scots arranged a time for Owl Man to “peruse” Tully’s books—another excuse for them to crack open a fresh bottle of Macallan, of course—and when the day arrived Owl Man pulled up in front of Tully’s glistening new pub. Its name? *Tully’s Ceilidh Pub and Tap*.

“I’m still workin’ on the name, Owls, but I gotta hurry ‘cause they’re gonna start bendin’ the glass neon tubing soon. So if I’m gonna change it, it’s gotta be *soon!*”

“Well, the name sounds good enough for a start, Tully, and ye can always change it later if yer already makin’ profits that are scrapin’ ‘gainst the clouds of Scotland. But what about this *Ceilidh* part, Tulls? Are ya really gonna put on a *ceilidh* like ya say? A real Scottish-style party?”

“Aye, and ye can be sure I am, I am. Once a month, on Saturday night—gotta leave a day for the hungover crowd to get over it. Then it’s back to work for the poor

buggers.”

“So what is it yer callin’ a *ceilidh*, if ya don’t mind my askin’?”

“Oh, the usual, Owl, the usual. Lots of Lagavulin—and that ain’t cheap—and stand-up poetry and spontaneous singin’ and pipers and dancin’ and storytellin’ and all.”

“Yer not gonna have a *list*, I hope,” said Owl Man with a scowl.

“A list? Are ya tryin’ to fool me, ye old goat? ‘Course there ain’t gonna be no list. It’s all improv. Them ‘at feels like it comes to the mic, or gets up ta dance, or whatever it may come ta pass. I’m talkin’ about a real *ceilidh*, a real party.”

On the appointed day Owl Man and Tully met again and Owl Man went over Tully’s books—aided, it must be said, by a shot or two of Macallan, and Owl Man found that the old fool wasn’t lying at all. The profits were sky-high!

“Well, ya coulda fooled me. I never woulda thought. At this rate, my friend Tully, you can buy out none other than Mr. William Gates and send him off to Borneo for all I care.”

“No doubt, no doubt,” said Tully. “But listen, Owl, let me express my condolences for the breakin’ up of your—what was it anyway?—your “heist” that you was writin’ up with Fex and all yer friends?”

“Oh, that! It was all a lark, Tully, ye knew that from the start, didna ya?”

“Aye, I did. But what about ... Miss Jasmine?” And old Tully leered just a bit.

“Let’s just say that Miss Jasmine and I have our plans. And they don’t include you, Mr. Tully.”

And on that teasing note the two old friends said good-bye, and did not see one another again, in the flesh, for many a day—though sometimes it seemed like a lifetime.

*Maury Predicts, Sally Sings ...*

Maury's predictions on the Saturday when he met at Bob's Big Boy with Fex, Heather, Sally and Sal, turned out to be NASA-accurate. Not only did Fex and Heather make it to the run-off finals in *So You Think You Can Dance* (their rendition of the "Mashed Potato" was a big hit with all the audiences), but Sally—and therefore Sal—also made it "big," just like Maury had predicted. Maury was practically drooling when Sally signed the "standard contract" that Sal had first gone over with a microscope.

And the first thing Maury did as her agent, after they all shook hands and he got into his Mercedes, was to call a famous voice coach and say excitedly, "Viola, it's Maury. How ya doin', babe? Hey, you're not gonna believe what I got for you. I tell you, I haven't heard a voice like this come along since Maria Callas. Thing is, she's totally untrained, but if anybody can bring out the talent this girl's got, Viola, it's you."

"Well, Maury, dear, you've never steered me wrong so far. Sounds interesting. What is her name?"

"Her name's Sally, Vi. Can I send her over to you?"

"Of course. But let me check my schedule first."

Viola put the phone down and Maury could hear the fluttering of appointment-book pages, then she came back on the line:

"Yes, here we are. I can take her next Tuesday at 2:00 PM *sharp*."

"Viola, baby, we'll be on time 'cause I'm gonna deliver her myself. I want to see the look on your face when you hear her voice!"

Such was the start of Sally's career, which took off like a rocket, thanks to Viola's careful voice-coaching, Sal's careful managing and massaging, Maury's expertise and his connections, and above all, Sally's crystal-bell of a voice. That's how Viola described it to all her friends—"It's like a crystal bell!"

And the fear that everyone was so apprehensive about at first—Sally's fear—just evaporated, partly due of course to Sal's massaging, but also because, with support and recognition Sally discovered a courage within herself that enabled her to let her voice go to places she had never thought possible—although she dreamed about it.

As Sally's manager, Sal showed an unexpected social smoothness—"workin' the

ropes,” he called it—that opened doors wherever they went. He made connections, was flawless in the mental agility required for negotiations, and worked tirelessly to increase his and Sally’s contacts within the cut-throat world of vocal professionals. Before long she was studying, along with her scales and exercises with Viola, classes in Italian, French and German as well. With a flawless natural *vibrato*, and a four-octave range, Sally was soon learning supporting roles for local operatic productions. Within six months of their arrival she had performed one of those supporting roles on stage. Within a year she had sung a lead role.

Together, Maury and Viola masterminded an audition for Sally with a famous maestro—Signore Giuseppe Tartini—who lived in an extravagant red-tile-roofed Mediterranean villa surrounded by palms and bougainvillea in Beverly Hills. The maestro spent most of his time traveling, but Maury and Viola caught him during a two-week break in his performing schedule, and brought Sally to his villa for the informal audition.

By the time she finished the short piece Viola had provided her to sing, the maestro was in tears.

“*Bella, bella, che bella!*” and he threw his arms around Sally, whom he called “mee-a new-a *prima donna!* Mmmm-ma! Mmmm-ma!” And he gave her a big kiss on each cheek.

Sally virtually became an overnight success—“*la fenomeno,*” she was called—overnight, because the opera world was notorious for the grueling years of labor and preparation it demanded of all who dared attempt it. Only a rare few enjoyed a rapid success like Sally’s. Over the years, in her frequent interviews, Sally never forgot to give credit, not only to Viola, but also to Miss Finley, her first voice teacher in Seattle.

By the end of her career, Sally had become a famous coloratura soprano, best known for her portrayal of the role of Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Especially popular was her *bel canto* rendition of the “mad scene,” also known by the opening lyrics, “*Il dolce suono ...*”

Sal finished out his years wearing burgundy velvet smoking jackets, smoking Cuban cigars and drinking expensive French brandies in cut-glass snifters, speaking a charming mixture of Italian, French and heavily-accented English. His favorite chair was a Louis XIV purchased at a Sotheby’s auction in Manhattan, although when sitting in the



chair his reading material was a throwback to his early years—the *racing sheets*. However, when interviewed by the occasional ambitious reporter, who would inevitably ask him about his early career, all he would say was that he had “a-started out in a-banking.”

*Helen and Heron Man Say Good-Bye ...*

The last time Heron Man saw or spoke to Helen—after the complicated *dénouement* surrounding the heist-plan, Fex, Ling Bank, and the rest of the gang—it was just like the first time Heron Man saw or spoke to Helen. In other words, it took place in a dream.

And she was just as impressive then as before, but the feeling of love between her and Heron Man seemed to have increased exponentially, probably as a result of their ... communion ... at conscious levels. This was the essential emotional content, the “feeling” of the dream—perhaps even the “message” of the dream—a deeply-connected love.

“You’re leaving,” said Heron Man.

“Yes, and no,” replied Helen. “You don’t really need me right now.”

“I don’t?”

“Not really. You’ve made the connection between us in such a way that ... it’s just there. It just *is*.”

“I’m—not—sure—I—understand—this,” said Heron Man slowly, feeling like he was trying to speak under water.

“Of course, you do. You just don’t always know that you do. But *sometimes* you *do* know—isn’t that correct?”

“Well, of course, *sometimes* it all becomes totally apparent, completely self-evident and clearly obvious.”

“Exactly. Those are what you call your ‘epiphanies,’ are they not?”

Helen was starting to sound like a teacher more than a lover, or perhaps a teacher-lover.

“Yes, yes, that’s what I call them. That’s what I think they are, in fact—epiphanies.”

“I think so too. So, why don’t you draw on your epiphanic knowing more often?”

“That’s a good question, Helen. Why not?”

“Are you asking me?”

“Well, yes, I’d like your opinion. Why don’t I draw on those epiphanies more often? Why don’t I *live* from that place more continuously?”

“Well, to put it in simplistic terms, it’s because you’re living in a deranged age when most of the world has gone mad, and you’re a good person who tries not to get too ‘far out,’ as people say, or ‘*non troppo loco*,’ as the Italians say—because you don’t want to scare people. And you *care* too much. The problem, of course, is that the more you try to stay in touch with society, and conform to its crazy “rules,” the more difficult it is to stay in touch with your epiphanies—the knowing that comes from me, from the angels, the *daimones*, and from all those other sources of intuitive and inherent knowing, all the embodied understandings and instinctual knowledge that society has rejected, thinking that it knows better. But it doesn’t know better, and *you*, of all people, Heron Man, must realize that.”

“Yes, you’re right again, Helen, I *do* know better. I suppose I get caught up in the daily necessities, distracted like everybody else, and I forget—temporarily, let’s hope—the most important things I know.”

“And they are?”

“You know very well what they are.”

“Of course, I do, I’m a muse. But I want to hear you say them.”

“OK. Well,” Heron Man paused as he tried to recall—and harder still, *to express* within the dream—what he knew. “First of all, *everything fits*. The whole universe is like a grand piece of orchestrated music in which everything, even the dissonance and destruction, belongs—the exploding super-novae, the atoms and molecules blasted far out into space, fused into higher valences or torn apart into lower valences, without which there would be no worlds. So, we’re all walking and talking and are alive here today, because, a long time ago, a lot of stars were destroyed and *died*. It takes many worlds to make a world, as it were; *many deaths to make one life*.”

“Very good. That’s a start,” said Helen. “What else?”

“Hmmm,” said Heron Man, waiting for the next insight to come to him. “OK. I know that I am part of all that destroying and creating, and that it doesn’t just occur a billion light-years away, out in space, it also occurs in me, under me, around me—and not just physically and mentally but emotionally and psychically as well. There’s no such thing as “removing” me from this cosmos. I’m connected to everything, even when I’m dead.”

“Excellent! I see now that you’re on-track indeed. In fact, you’ve just touched on something that applies to our relationship.”

“And that is?” asked Heron Man.

“You tell me.”

“Wow! Just like a game show!” said Heron Man, getting a little loose with his tongue.

“Yes. Just like a game show,” said Helen, calmly.

“Well, it’s perfectly clear that if I’m always connected to everything, then I’m always connected to you. Correct?”

“Bingo!” shouted Helen. “That’s the answer. The truth is, my dear Heron, you can’t get *away* from me because I’m never *gone*. I don’t *go*, I just *am*. Think of me as a talking-facet of this multi-faceted universe. Or, you could call me a constellated *phase* of the universe that talks, just like you are, a talking-phase of the universe, constellating itself as it goes. That’s what we both are. And ... you must know how inadequate all these *words* are.”

“Oh, yes, I know only too well the near-impossibility of making these translations between phenomena and the words we try to give to them.”

“Like trying to communicate in two different languages derived from different planets.”

“Exactly! But, Helen, do I understand correctly that the gist of this dream is that you’re *going*, in the sense that I won’t be seeing you or dreaming of you for a while?”

“Maybe. It’s hard to say. We can’t really pin these things down. I might *show up* when you least expect it. As for what you’re calling the ‘gist’ of the dream, my dear Heron, the gist of it is love.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” said Heron Man, with grateful sincerity.

“Actually, everything that *you* have been telling *me* is reassuring.”

“HMMMMM,” hummed Heron Man.

“Yes. HMMMMM,” responded Helen.

“So then, I don’t need to carry that lover’s lament, worrying about whether you *love* me or not.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, no!” Then she added, “No worries, mate,” miming the Aussies with a touch of humor.

*Heron Man's Last Sonumai Dream ...*

Heron Man's dream conversation with Helen seemed like it took about twenty minutes, but measured by the clock it probably took closer to twenty seconds—"time" being so elastic in dreams.

But he found the conversation with her—if that's what it was—to be deeply satisfying. He awoke with tears in his eyes and gladness in his heart, for he knew that the words she spoke were true.

During the next several days, in fact, her words and presence constantly reverberated in his mind—on the mental level, to be sure, but also physically, emotionally and psychically. He reviewed the dream over and over, dwelling on its implications, re-experiencing it. It's as if the dream never really faded, but had the effect of enlivening his imagination in a rare way. It almost seemed as though that brief exchange had provided him with a "soul-map" for the remainder of his life.

Perhaps we can imagine his shock, then, as he fell asleep one night not long after dreaming of Helen, when *Sonumai* appeared to him—not Helen!

We must remember that it was Sonumai's instructions he had recently carried out so precisely—printing out foggy "dream-photographs" of her and showing them to Shaman Song, along with the provocative phrase, "most desirable Sonumai." For Heron Man to follow Sonumai's bizarre instructions in this curious way, brought about Shaman Song's downfall, in a way that the athletic, martial arts antics of a Jackie Chan or a Bruce Lee never could.

The combination of the blurred photos, her name itself (not to mention the memory of her image), and the designation "most desirable," would, she knew, bring about Song's downfall. Heron Man recalled Owl Man's observation that "a woman" would be the cause of Song's ruination. Apparently Owl Man was correct.

For some reason, Sonumai had decided—assuming a dream-figure can "decide" things—to help Heron Man and Owl Man in their *mano-a-mano* struggle with Shaman Song, who always seemed to be maliciously bent on their sheer destruction—often, it seemed, simply for the pleasure of it, just to show that he could.

As Heron Man focused on Sonumai's image and began to recognize her, he was

stunned for a moment.

“What’s the matter,” said Sonumai, “were you expecting Helen, or one of your blonde bombshells?”

“Can we just drop the blonde bombshells for now? You know I don’t have any. Besides, you must know that Helen is the woman of my dreams.”

“I’m just kidding with you, Heron Man. It’s play. Don’t take it seriously. You did a beautiful job, by the way, with your last assignment.”

“Assignment?”

“Of course,” said Sonumai. “What did you think you were doing, giving a piano recital?” And Sonumai grinned. She enjoyed toying with Heron Man, it seemed. “You’re always so ... serious,” she said.

“Yes, I know. I’m a Capricorn. It’s an occupational hazard.”

“And is that your occupation? To be a Capricorn?”

“Well, I suppose I’d have to say I’m a writer, because it’s mostly what I do. Not that I make much money at it, though.” Heron Man knew she was playing with him, but he didn’t know what to do about it except stay engaged with the conversation.

“Sonumai,” he said.

“Yes, dear?”

“Why are you in my dream?”

“Oh, that,” said Sonumai. “Well, I should tell you the truth. I came to thank you for helping me with Shaman Song.”

“Helping you? I thought you were helping me!”

“Yes, that too. It goes both ways.”

Sonumai started to fade but Heron Man spoke strongly to keep her engaged.

“Sonumai! What do you mean, ‘both ways’? Did he harm you in some way?”

“Harm me?” she scoffed. “My dear Heron Man, he *killed me!*”

“He what?”

“You heard me. He killed me. I’m dead. Dreams are the only place where I have any life.”

“How did this happen? This, this ... killing.”

“Really, you don’t want to know. You’ve got your Helen, and she’s quite alive.

Why would you want to know about a dead Sonumai?”

Now Heron Man heard a note of self-pity in her voice that didn't resonate with Sonumai as he'd come to know her.

“But I *do* want to know. Who cares about the reason? By the way, I have to ask: Are you feeling sorry for yourself?”

“Oh, I suppose I was, just a little. I was really pissed at Song for quite a while, but one gets used to being dead. It's not so bad. Especially when there are nice people like you whose dreams I can enter. Look at the interesting conversation we're having. And don't forget that you did me a favor by taking those photos of me and showing them to that pig, the so-called Shaman Song!”

Heron Man was not quite sure how to respond to this, and a moment passed.

“Well?” said Sonumai. “Are you going to answer or not?”

“Sure, of course. I'm just not sure what to say, because I don't know the story about ... *how* ... he 'killed' you.”

“Well, you don't have to put it in quotation marks. He *killed me*, period! I'm dead. That's all there is to it. He's a pig. And until you and Owl Man came along, I had no way to 'balance the scales of justice,' as the living put it so prosaically—and a bit *righteously*, if I may say so.”

“Yes, that's a pretty mechanical metaphor for *the fate of the soul*. I guess scales were a big deal during the time of the Egyptians. But tell me what he did to you. I don't now how long I can stay here.”

“That's right, I forgot. You're alive, and dreaming.”

“I hope so.”

“OK, I'll tell you the story, brief version:

“I was a highly sophisticated *geisha* in Japan during the 1980s, when Japan was booming. Sonumai—people loved my name—and I was very much sought after. Only the richest men could afford my companionship. At the time, Shaman Song was in mainland China, trying to make a name for himself, working for the Chinese *mafia* as an assassin. He also took great pride in his studies as an apprentice shaman, performing psychic tricks that made him feel powerful but the real Chinese shamans recognized him as *fèi wù* (廢物)—or 'good for nothing.'

“‘OK, big shot,’ said his Master one evening. ‘You go Japan. Find Sonumai. Kill her.’”

“Jesus!” exclaimed Heron Man, in a Christian expletive not especially appropriate for a Japanese *geisha*. Sonumai was unperturbed, and the story continued:

“That was it. It was not an assignment for money, it was simply a test to see (1) if he could follow orders, and (2) if he could penetrate my circle of protectors. So one night when it was raining heavily, Song managed to slip past my guard and stabbed him from behind. He found his way into my quarters, killing more guards on the way, and when he finally found me, he treated me in the ugliest, cruelest, most debasing way. That’s when I realized he was an absolute pig, when he was using me so badly. I knew I would not survive the night. And that’s when I decided I would get my revenge upon Mr. Song, no matter how long it took—dead or alive.”

Heron Man was stricken, but managed to say, “Oh, Sonumai, please go on. Tell me the rest of the story.”

“He cut my throat, and that was it. I died. But I did not forget. Many years must have passed, it’s hard to tell time when you’re dead.”

“But what about the ‘most desirable Sonumai’ part?”

“Oh, that. While he was mistreating me so, he also thought he was falling in love with me. In his demented mind, he thought if he killed me, then I would be ‘his’ forever—his ‘most desirable Sonumai.’ That’s where that came from. But if you showed him the photos, and told him that saying, I knew he would go crazy, because he would know I was alive, but dead. He would realize I was getting revenge on him from beyond the grave, and he could *never* have me.”

“But the photos were just a blurry mess.”

“Yes, but don’t forget that you took them in a dream. It’s different here. And even though Song is a fool and a pig, he can *see* into dreams. I knew he would recognize my image. So I asked you to ‘take’ my photo, dear Heron Man, and you did. And now Shaman Song kisses snakes all day. He deserves it.”

“How did you know that I—or Owl Man and I—could help?”

“It wasn’t until you and Owl Man came along with your silly novel plot about the heist at Ling Bank. I had heard about Song’s defeat in a clash with Owl Man in China—



what he charmingly called the “little dust-up”—and I knew that humiliation from Owl Man would always rankle, and therefore attract, Song. I knew he would show up.”

“You knew about the heist?”

“Oh, yes, I knew all along. I’ve been following all of you. Watching. Waiting. Waiting is the easy part. Doing things is the hard part. For that, you need a dream companion. That’s what you’re doing for me, my love.”

“Your love? But,” hesitated Heron Man, “you know about Helen.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, of course I know about Helen. She’s very good for you by the way. But that doesn’t mean I can’t love you too, my dear Mr. Heron. After all, look at what you did for me.”

“What I did?”

“Yes, of course. Look what happened to Shaman Song?”

“Oh yes, the ‘rattlesnake farm’ in Eastern Washington.”

“Yes, and it suits him perfectly, don’t you agree?”

“Well, I have to say I do agree. It does fit him perfectly. A perfect form for his madness.”

“Yes. He’s crazy, you know. And the snakes will keep him occupied until, one day, he will slip up and they will all strike and fill him with their venom. And that will be the end of Shaman Song.”

“But if he’s dead, like you are, can’t he hurt you again?”

“Oh no. He can’t hurt me any more. That’s only for you living ones, my dear.”

Heron Man felt the love that Sonumai felt for him, and he had to admit that he was feeling the same for her.

“Will I see you again, Sonumai?”

“I doubt it. I’ve waited so long for this. But there are other places I want to be, other ‘states’ I want to inhabit, as the saying goes. But I do want to thank you, my dear Heron Man. In a strange way, you have saved my life, even though it is in death that you did it.”

And she gave him a gentle kiss on the lips and began to fade. Before she disappeared entirely, though, she turned back and said softly, “Please give my love to your dear Owl Man and his lovely Jasmine.”

“I will,” said Heron Man, reaching after the disappearing figure. “I will.”

“One last thing,” said the dwindling figure of Sonumai, “I don’t know if you realize this, Heron Man, but *you* are the man of *my* dreams.”

*Owl Man and Jasmine take stock ...*

Late one night, Owl Man was busy transferring the morning's dream-notes from his bedside notebook into his computer—so busy, in fact, that he didn't hear Jasmine entering the apartment after her "Hour of Joy" shift at Tully's new digs.

Usually Owl Man tried to transfer the notes as soon as possible in the morning, so as not to lose any more dream details than necessary. Today, however, he had an early appointment and had to rush out with little more than a sip of espresso to get him going. Jasmine was still asleep when he left—her distilled-spirits schedule being different from her previous brewed-caffeine schedule.

Most days, however, there was enough relaxed overlap in their schedules to allow for ample conversation and other forms of ... communion. Although tonight Jasmine was understandably tired from work, the huge tips she was raking in at Tully's did provide her with a boost. She was glad that Owlie was still up, though she could see that he didn't realize she'd come home.

Availing herself of this opportunity, she tiptoed up behind the rapt owl and kissed him lightly on the back of the neck.

Owl Man jumped and murmured at the same time, difficult though that would seem. The time-lapse between his surprise at the unexpected touch and his recognition of who it was and what she was doing, could have been measured in nano-seconds.

"I'm so glad you're home, Jaz. I've been recording an unusual series of dreams, and it feels like they are leading me to something portentous. How was your shift at Tully's?"

"In truth, very lucrative, Owlie. Even though the Scots themselves are a frugal lot, the generosity that their distilled spirits unlock is rapidly filling my strongbox with gold! As you know, expensive scotch beats coffee any day—though we don't want to do without our morning boost!"

"Certainly not."

"But tell me about this dream series. What's going on?"

"Well, it's nothing I can really put into words yet, but I have a feeling that the dreams are carrying me through a portal that's leading to new adventures."

Jasmine pondered this for a few moments, as the very vagueness of Owlie's description sparked her imagination.

"Hmmm. Imminent developments—a welcome change. It's almost dull around here, in comparison to how crazy everything had gotten for a while. Just think: Fex, Heather, Sal and Sally have all moved to 'the Big H'; Foxy and Mr. Moto have de-camped to run a Tommy-gun shooting range in Vegas; Coo is parading around Disneyland dressed up as Mickey Mouse; Old Man Ling has landed behind bars; Shaman Song spends his days kissing rattlesnakes for a living; and Joe and Jolene got married and are running a bowling alley."

"Are you telling me that Tully and his new business are not keeping you sufficiently entertained, my dear?"

"Oh, far from it. As you well know, with Tully there's never a dull moment—all the castles and maids, the pipes and the swords, the non-stop blustering stories and the solemn oaths!"

"Yes, I do know," said Owl Man, pulling Jasmine a wee bit closer. "I also remember the day when Tully, my old dog of a friend, turned my life upside down by bringing you to the *Come Ye Heather*. Donuts and coffee, I believe it was."

"I remember. *Macchiato*. And hadn't Fex just fainted or something, or Foxy had danced a jig?"

"Yes, something like that. But all I remember is you, my love, and how when I saw you my heart leaped like a wild stag o'er a hedgerow, and wouldn't stop bounding until you'd chained me to the ground with a date in my calendar—a Saturday night, I believe it was."

"I beg your pardon, dear Owl. Just who, do you think, was chaining whom?"

"Oh, there's no doubt, love. You chained me."

"I beg to differ, Owl Man. 'Twas you, the big *bwana*, who clapped the irons on poor little helpless Jasmine."

"Yes, poor helpless Jasmine with the Black Belt in *karate*, who just happened to break Tully's nose."

"He deserved it, Owlie, and he admitted it!"

And their banter went on until the two lovers were at once aroused and ready for

slumber. It did not take long before they were both sated and braided, drifting like flotsam into sleep, and tossed like jetsam onto the distant beaches of their dreams.

*Heron Man and Owl Man at Irma's ...*

After the Hasty Heisters had disbanded, after Tully had sold his coffee shop to the Seattle grunge crowd and, not least, after Jasmine had left the coffee shop and followed Tully for the far superior tips she garnered at his new place, downtown Seattle just wasn't the same for Owl Man and Heron Man. No Tully's.

So for a while, they tried to carry on with their morning coffee meetings at a nearby Starbuck's, which after all *originated* in Seattle. But the corporate atmosphere so came to dominate the explosively successful chain, with an outlet on practically every corner, that the two curmudgeonly writers couldn't shake the feeling that they were being somehow *bribed and suborned*—like jurors in a mafia crime-boss trial. So, little by little, they ended up holding their frequent meetings at Irma's Diner, where Heron Man had first seen the terror stippled across Mr. Moto's face after Shaman Song had entered Moto's dream.

Irma was no Jasmine, but, still, she was just as outrageous as she was on the night that Heron Man met her, and she did have a kind of whacked-out charm of her own. She took an immediate liking to the two writers, and was always telling them about past lives they reminded her of. And besides, who were they to deny her fantasies? She was convinced, for example, that she and Owl Man had been lovers in a past life, but that, because the local King was jealous, he'd had them both beheaded on a sweltering day in June, which is why Owl Man hated hot summer weather so much, and why Irma didn't like to sweat.

Like most "rational" people, the two intellectuals indulgently tolerated Irma's exuberant and credulous fantasy life. At the same time, neither of them could explain how Irma knew about a prominent scar Owl Man bore on his neck, well below the collar-line.

"It's about three inches long, on the left-hand side, near the clavicle. Am I right?" she said confidently.

This sent a shiver up Owl Man's neck. There was indeed such a scar, the result of a near-fatal childhood spill down a mountainside. To Owl Man's knowledge, the only person in the world who knew about it, besides himself and Jasmine—was his mother.

"Irma, how did—?" Owl Man couldn't finish.

“Don’t worry, honey. I know you don’t believe me. But you should try takin’ someone else’s word for a change. There’s more goin’ on in the world than even you and Mr. Skinny Bird here know.”

On that point, at least, the three friends were in complete agreement.

*Owl Man Discloses His DCL Dream ...*

For some time, both Jasmine and Heron Man had been hearing bits and pieces of the dream series Owl Man had been tracking, but about which he was unable, or unwilling, to say very much. But he left no doubt that he felt something “portentous” building up and taking shape in a very unusual dream series—not that any dreams were ever very “usual.”

Finally, things came to a head, and Owl Man called a meeting of the three of them, on one of Jasmine’s precious days off.

After some initial, spirited banter, and a couple of rounds of Italian roast *espresso*, the tone shifted dramatically as Owl Man cleared his throat by way of calling the meeting to order.

“Ahem. My dearest friends, I feel a bit like Ishmael, about to set sail on a modern *Pequod*—although I don’t expect any shipwreck to befall us. It’s rather a sense of the Great Unknown that lies ahead of us, an adventure into the future that has been presaged by my recent dreams. I can’t say at this point what roles we will individually play, if any, but I have no doubt that our lives will be profoundly affected.”

Owl Man paused and looked at his friends—Jasmine and Heron Man, both of them real and imaginal in the best senses of those words. A solemnity had settled over the three of them, since it was obvious that whatever Owl Man was about to say next would be portentous in the extreme, as he had been hinting for some time. There was no anxious rush. Heron Man and Jasmine sat calmly and awaited the Owl’s next words.

They were not long in coming.

“I don’t mean to be coy in the least. But I think it’s best that I not divulge too much about this next dream task, except to say, perhaps, that it will probably unfold in England—mostly London, I suppose—and that it will take the narrative impulse to what I expect will be a higher creative pitch than ever. By that, I mean that my dream is based on what I call the *fictive purpose of dreams*, which just happens to include, among many other things, the interplay between life and death.

“I see this dream as the keystone of an arch, so to speak, the central element in a structure yet to be built. I feel I have no choice but to call it by the name it gave itself as I



slept. According to my dreams, this new 'structure' will be called ... *The Deathling Crown Lottery.*"