

1. *Mahayana*



I ought to have known it would come to this. The oracle warned me.

Crazy Bear said there'd be days like these. As usual, no one believed him. Now, all I want to know is: where *is* that lifeboat, and how *do* I ditch this ship of fools, without any of these bliss ninnies noticing that I'm already gone?

What I *really* need to do is quit counting cards with all these psycho psychics, and find my future freely, unfettered by someone else's idea of who I'm bound to be. Isn't that what I was fleeing in the first place? The strangling sense of wrongness that derives from the dictations of others?

And now, a huddled mass of probabilities, waiting to test me across the intersection. The novelty has definitely worn off, and converting castaways to stowaways has already put us behind the glut of traffic, as well as reducing the overall standard of life aboard our usually spacious cabin.

Rather than collecting more human souvenirs, I was considering making a few of them walk the plank, but that would hardly be kind, and kindness is written into my job description. Not that any of our itinerants are on a schedule, but if we don't claim our designated spot by noon, the info booth will be relocated to the nether areas.

Captain, my *ass*. We are equal in this sea of madness. No matter what some power-tripping hippie says.

Still, I feel like Peter caught with his pants down.

You will deny me three times before the cock grows.

That iceberg is looking awfully big.

Too true, too true. No one *really* follows *all* the rules, when no one's looking. Uncanny, these forecasts of failure. Everyone gets around to falling down, sooner or later.

How easy it would be, just to pretend...

Imagine there were no big Brother

No all-seeing Eye in the sky

So easy to forget the perils of an innocent lie.

The shadowy lump rises, banishing hope that I had spotted a bag of trash awaiting pickup, instead of a rolling stone looking to ride awhile. A mirage would have been welcome, but may as well face reality, here and now. Price we pay for every new day.

Not a trick of highway hypnosis. Action, then. Do I stop like a good soldier, or do I bypass the mandate, bearing the curses of the forsaken backpacker upon my eternal soul?

Hitchhiker off port bow, Captain. What are your orders, already?

Dilemma. How defiant do I feel? That ugly instant of limbo, where destiny debates while decision awaits. Disregard prophesy, and brace for whatever horrors result. Crap on the cross, just to prove that no thunderbolt strikes.

Or.

Pull over for the camel that broke the straw boss' back.

No. *Absolutely not.* No way can I stand *one more* damned rider today. And a dog to boot?

What I wouldn't *give* for a month off from helping these nitwits go nowhere faster.

This has gone too far. Choose it or lose it...

NEVER

PASS

A

HITCHHIKER

Every creed carries cumbersome, ritualized regulations. We labor under a minimum of absolutes, having found already the futility of following how-to manuals toward Heaven, or, in West Coast psychic space, "*awakening*," whatever *that* would mean. Awaken from *what*? Into another new dream?

Enlightenment. That sparkly shiny New Age Aquarian euphemism for "The Product."

If you knew what that word *really* meant, you wouldn't go there. Rotten bloody pit, it is, full of raving moonchildren baying their assorted animal imitations from a sewer tunnel of truth that washes away the waste of floods.

Other world-changers must wrestle with dogma. The nit-picky suggestions that are crafted to be forsaken. Those foolish consistencies which try the faith of the devotees and the patience of the priestly class.

In KALI, we follow *Magma*. We don't even pretend to piety. But bets are inviolate, and I wagered Crazy Bear the keys to this bus that I would never abandon a rider along my predetermined path, without dreaming how tempted I would be to get out and walk myself, just to be rid of the noise. *Privilege confers responsibility*.

Karma chameleons, we must nonetheless commit to our own kind.

The only constant is deviance. Profanity is sacred. And, never, ever, pass by a chance to give an angel in disguise a free lift.

You never know *Who* might be checking.

Well, sure, that's *Crazy Bear's* first commandment, the superstitious old yenta, but *I'm* in charge. First principles. When in *doubt*, figure it *out*.

Screw protocol. My Moses is off on the Mountain, talking to burnt-out bushes. He can *keep* his damned impossible pronouncements. Why should *I* be the only one bending over backward? That Golden Calf is looking better and brighter every day.

And *I* have possession of the pedal. *Nine-tenths rule*.

Power flows from the barrel of a carburetor. Ultimately, the power to dictate the course of our journey rests more with the helm than the admiralty. Besides, what does the Fool expect? The primary qualification for leadership is an intrinsic inability to obey.

Tripped-out Trustafarian left *me* to tend to his destiny while he's busy playing psychedelic playboy, paying us in profound promises to work out *his* karma for him here in crumbling Babylon, while he putters around Peru, experimenting with fancy entheogenic plants and consorting with shamans to penetrate the pyramid pattern.

He doesn't *have* to endure the dozen-and-a-half raggedy sign-slingers and threadbare thumbers *already* stinking up the schoolbus and giving my head a world-class ache, with their dumpsterdove wardrobes and noxious habits.

I've just about *had* it. For *real*. One more, and I'll *scream*. No shit.

Despite the official KALI poly-see of universal acceptance, I am starting to find myself intolerant of these freeloaders, with their overloud gutter-gravelly voices stuck on repeat, as our uncomplimentary complement rings with dissonance, good-natured and half-hearted attempts to scold puppies named after Grateful Dead songs, for public urination, or, in an ironic twist of comic hypocrisy, for "begging."

What to *do* when some pierced troglodyte knocks around an infant canine for yapping after snickers and ho-hos deemed too elite for the bellies of burdensome beasts, while the humans tactfully look the other way as a fellow hitchhiker, complaining loudly of the meatlessness onboard, has been unsubtly "reappropriating" my "secret" stash of homesmoked tofu jerky, before I've had even a *bite*?

Damn kids! *Unbelievable*. How *did* I get myself into this mess?

The child will embarrass his mother and kill his bother...

This is why Priestesses had to get stark raving stoned before dishing Delphi's pronouncements to the marks. Drive you mad with contradictions, otherwise. And *no* one wants to believe that Last Supper callout. Hurts not to be trusted. Even more to be entrusted with a left-handed proviso that I am not nearly worthy of it.

Which puts me in a no-win bind. Because if I lack faith in Crazy Bear's vision, what am I doing here at all? For that matter, why did he assign me to run things, if he was really convinced I would end up resigning?

Prove me wrong, witch. You always have that option. Sincerely hope that you do.

Even the primal Mugwai admits that his predictions taste better with a shot of salty soy sauce. No one's perfect, especially those who claim to be. And then he wanders off to consult his charts, mumbling something about glimpsing alternate quantum paradigms.

After all, his posted batting average on verified precognition lately dipped below .800, when the train went off the rail in Spain, earning our leader a lively roasting on Holy Fool's day. He'd called the attack for Italy. All of us lowly neophytes trotted out our patented Crazy Bear impressions *that* day. High comedy,

low humor. He had to sit there, grinning stupidly, but the wrinkles of worry beneath his eyes betrayed dismay.

The Lead Luna-tic himself, in a fit of pique, once claimed he would retire when his record dipped so low, which, predictably, put the estimating prophet in the terrible position of changing his flexible mind.

Crazy Bear persevered, ignoring the hecklers, and so will I. Can't give him the satisfaction. Knock that cocky bastard down to fifty-fifty, if I have to be an angel to do it.

Rules are rules, after all, and graceless leaders, who won't abide the regulations beneath which everyone else labors, *deserve* mutiny. *That's* Magma. Self-evident, but must be stated anyway, to remind the memory-impaired. Go ahead and lynch me already. Who *needs* this authority role play, anyway?

Rather be the bad girl for the rest of the ride, but everyone grows up *someday*.

May as well be today. Here we go. Welcome to hotel hippie Hell.

On the roads of life, there are many pitfalls as well as potholes. Some are strewn along the concrete, others *inside* the bus. And the most dangerous lurk inside the *driver* herself.

This is what I get for taking the road more traveled. For all its faults, an idyllic ride along the rolling cliffs of Highway 1 would be less littered with vagabonds. When my precognition and driving get better, I'll foresee the dotted deadheads *before* we hit the highway, and ride the white-knuckle coastal gauntlet instead, like Neal Cassidy. No *shoulders* means no *thumbers*.

The brainless drainbow didn't *even* leave enough room for a VW *bug* to safely pull over, let *alone* our thirty-foot blue submarine. No jury in the land would convict me if I just...kept...rolling...sorry, kid, too much momentum...

"Althea! No groundscores! Go! Kick it down. Down!"

Still, *I* have come too far now to forget the energy boomerang such selfishness always ensures, and, besides...*I did* promise Crazy Bear.

The patron prophet of KALI would read about my flyby in his morning tea leaves, not to mention a whole pantheon of supersensitive Goddesses who would

recall the neglected stragglers, stranded by indifference and indulgent self-pity, the next time I called upon any of Her for aid.

What excuse *could* I offer for my conscious callousness, when I stand before the scales of Maat on Judgment Day?

Certainly don't need any krappy karma or a jumbo-sized order of guilt on the side, so I grind my teeth

...and the bus...

to a halt, honking and skidding into the diminishing shoulder of southbound Highway 101 at the last conceivable instant. Well, may as well. Can't really get any worse.

Breaking our stride *has* to be worth the heartwarming spectacle of the grateful boy with his miniature mastodon skipping up the gravel, kicking up a cloud of dust and pebbles in their haste to take their place on the train to Jordan.

Or was it the highway to Hel? I forget.

Otherwise, why were we thus cosmically paired? There *are* no accidents, and coincidence is *always* meaningful. How Magmatic!

Now comes the *hard* part. Where *will* we *put* this mystery?

Overbooked on this flight, the bus resembles a fire marshal's sweatdrenched nightmares, crammed to the rafters with ticketless deadheads. Maybe I'm doing penance for past-life slum-lording.

Fully half of our human passengers accompany their canine masters on this pilgrimage to the unholy Shitty, and blood has already been shed several times in squabbles over mutual edibility between much smaller specimens. The dogs are feisty, too.

Flipping open the door, I spin about in the captain's chair to shout warning at all the dogslaves loafing in the back. "Hey! Wake up back there and be on point! *Brontosaurus on board!* Keep hold of your leashes or collars or whatever," I yell over the chatter of heedless hitchhikers, "if you don't want your *pet* to become someone's *dogfood!* Everybody *take a step back...*and then *another* step back...and then *another.*"

These unheard, unprojected, and poorly scripted directions do nothing to make space onstage for these new extras to enter the scene, so I summon my

soulmate for backup. When all else fails, count on your bedtime buddy to lend a hand.

She *always* owes me one.

“Hey! *Cherie!* Help me *regulate* on this insanity already, will you? Can you get some more kids piled on the bed back there? We have to make room for Abu and his elephant here.”

Overcome with joy, the oversized dog tackles his laughing friend, pummeling him to the pebbles, while we choreograph a crowded clown act to accommodate them. Cute. This should be typical. Another endearing predictable fuck-up, plaguing my most definitely sub-saint patience.

Ms. Get’erdone always comes through for us, as a rule. *Seriously.* If she can’t direct internal traffic sufficiently slick to shoehorn another fleabitten pair onto the trip, she should resign her responsible post as recruitment coordinator for KALI. Talents are like assholes; they only function when flexible, flowing and loose.

Love that Magma. Don’t have to be a rabbi to understand straight shit like that.

“Move it, Momma! I’m getting mobbed up here.” How much harder to help than be helped!

Thin ice, girlfriend. Leaving me hanging in the *sack* is *one* thing. Shirking the Mission is quite literally another. That, I take *personal*. Wouldn’t be who I am, if I didn’t. *Get Her Done!*

Will Che appeal to their collective conscience, *guilting* the huddled masses into making way? Or will she whip out one of her patented pranks, to redistribute the mess of smelly humanity? Either way, the problem is in surer hands than mine. Cherie is a bona fide mistress at the art of bossiness.

“Well, part of the problem is this big, empty bed! Why hasn’t *anyone* started a massage chain yet back here? I wanna see a daytime cuddle puddle *right* now! What kind of hippies are you? Come on, now. Let’s go! *Everyone pile up in the back of the bus!*” she commands, to the extreme glee of some copiously unwashed folk I’d just as soon *not* have groping my girlfriend in our sleeping space.

No arguing with success, though, despite triumph's transient and illusory nature. The beleaguered pair loads up, before the swelling tide of humanity washes back to the cab and forces them to retreat.

Unable to advance after all, despite Cherie's heroic efforts, the two stake out the stairwell, blocking the exit for the time being. A clear violation of safety regulations, but such is life straddling the curve of the Sacred Chao. Situation Normal, All Fogged Up.

So much for the fire marshal. Good thing our *mechanical* speed limit keeps us well below the *legal* one. Hate to have to explain *this* surrealism to an officer of Babylon.

The protect/serve crowd might offer to help us thin out our bursting population. *Assholes*. They have guns and paddy wagons, but they won't get at *my* kids during my watch, no matter *how* bad they smell. Family is *Family*.

On the road again. Pleased to be departing, for the fifth time this morning, from Mendocino's middle realm, dubbed "SchWillits" for the shady and swilly who frequent the stopover, I engage the engine and return our rumbambulating expedition to the flow of traffic. The new rider, precariously perched, loses balance and falls more or less on top of me.

Far from the typical dazed drunk we've generally been hosting today, this one exudes an Asian gentility and a shockingly genial odor. Like the way *glass* might smell, if it did.

Definitely not bad, for a *boy* at least. His alert, smiling eyes set like dark garnets in his clear copper sculpture face, beguiling my femininity out of habit more than interest. Come-to-my-tent eyes.

The new debut bears a radiant, violet Kirilian haze, matching a mop of semidreaded black locks, peeking out from beneath his backward *Be Good Family* hat and tickling the thick hemp choker chafing his reddening neck.

Then, the funniest thing...

Though I should be at least *glancing* at the highway, our liquid lightsensors lock and I'm lost in his world. Let the small and weak make way for the mighty Mystery machine.

I've been here before. An eternity passes as the rider extracts himself from my lap, and the bus drives itself as we struggle to disengage. Mahayana moves unimpeded on pure faith, as I leisurely appraise the stranger with whom I am suddenly so familiar.

The backside of his baby blue cloth overcoat bears a Sri Yantra mandala and an eerie, extraterrestrial energy. As I gaze into the timeless sacred geometry, I feel drawn into its whirling mystery, overcome by the anonymous attraction between us.

Overall, he emanates an appealing androgyny and crafty confidence that strokes my cat, whether I find it in a physique equipped with an innie or an outtie. Belly buttons or genitalia, gender alone really *is* a trivial reason to exclude such a beautiful being from bed.

I could go there. In a different dimension. If I did not have a girlfriend...

Back to reality. What am I thinking? He's not even my type. Instead of shouldering his *own* backpack, his massive animal companion is loaded down, like a pack mule, with items meaningful only to humans. What *other* animal feels so helpless without a stash of collected objects? Humans are so *lame*. Next species, please.

None of *my* affair. The road beast seems free to leave if dissatisfied, bringing along his human's spare stuff wherever destiny leads, in a rather tragicomic flash of ironic justice. I'd absolutely *love* to see the look on his face when *that* development turns the tables.

Here we go again. I *hate* introductions, where strangers exchange the most superficial details of ego data while concealing our inner nature, but it comes with the territory I cover.

"My name is '*Amana*,'" I repeat obligatorily, for the fifteenth frustrating time today, as each of us regain our compromised composure, "and the bus is called, *Mahayana*. The 'Big Vehicle,' get it? We're on a peace mission. Hail and welcome. Please observe our preference that you not consume powder drugs or meat in our home, or leave any trash."

What else? “Oh, and do everyone a favor and feed your dog friend from the communal supply while on board, not canned scrap meat-or the other riders. There’s a throwdown stash behind my seat. Help yourself.”

“Thanks. I generally *do*. You can call me, ‘*Adam*,’” he flirts pleasantly over the din of the recently resuming bus and her occupants, pressing palms together before his sweatstreaked face like a psychedelic monk. “This big heartbreaker here goes by ‘*Doobie Scoo*.’ Don’t listen to him when he says *you’re* his one and only; he’s got one in *every* port.”

Charmed, I’m sure. Mirrors everywhere. Like married humans, road dogs always capture the essence of their companion’s foibles. Supersized egos adapt to each other out of necessity.

Domestication is egomania in action.

Continuing his rapid, manic rap, Adam traces a quick pentacle in the air using his index finger, a gesture which reminds me of the way devout Catholics carelessly cross themselves to commemorate occasions of personal sanctification and guard against evil.

“*Namaste! Many* blessings, for you and your crew. May the Holy Eye take note of your kindness, and reward you generously for giving sanctuary to a wanderer. *Om Shakti Ganesha Lakshmi Om*.” He smiles. “There. I ordered you good fortune.”

“So mote it be,” I quietly agree.

“I thought I’d have to grow *tits* to get a ride. This highway is absolutely *lousy* with kids headed to *Synergy!*” He domes his palms over his nascent nipples to dramatize the horrible fate I’d rescued him from. Cute. Great way to score points with me, kid.

Try it for ten *years* of monthly swelling, daily crass commentary, and unceasing harassment. Large breasts cause stupidity. In *other* people. Complimenting my mammoth mammaries is like insulting the *rest* of me.

Nevertheless, a shocking number of degenerates feel possessed to call my unwilling attention toward my chest, often merely to notify me of my mountains’ impressive size.

Oh my! They *are* big, *aren't* they? I *never* noticed. Must have happened only a minute ago. Thanks for getting me up to speed on that. I was simply *dreading* passing my whole life as a two-back. Guess I'd better go buy a *bra* now.

Lousy, indeed. "You're telling me! I was thinking of billing CalTrans for services rendered, the way we're cleaning up the one-oh-one. Call us the *Hobo Express*."

Adam takes stock of the technicolored clusterfuck behind me. "So all of you happy campers are headed to the festival in Golden Gate Park?" he probes presumptively. No point in denying it. I agree noncommittally, annoyed.

Kid could learn a thing or two about making friends on *this* bus. First, kick the sexism. Lesson two: do *not* refer to me as a "happy camper." Especially on *this* rotten bullshit lameass day.

"Any particular whatfor? Or is this just a party scene?" Strike three. Sorry kid, you're out. Already irritating, it's almost as if he's been speed-reading a textbook on my pet peeves. Even well-intentioned interrogation bothers me like no other common social vice.

Time to kill the chit-chat, before I get rude. Not *his* fault I'm in *such* a piss poor mood. Just having a hard time loving my species today.

Birthdays are like that for me.

"We're on a *mission*," I explain again tersely, staring ahead. "Promoting *peace*," I amend, more a message for myself than him. But I can't hang with him in this headspace.

I leave it at that, connection cut. My silence speaks for me, and he hastily gets the point, recovering a little lost ground with me. So few people can take a hint!

Sowing greener pastures, and spotting a free patch of bed, where the steamy cuddle puddle is proceeding with an abandon I cautiously ignore, Adam climbs eagerly over several heads to claim his human cushion, leaving me to my driving and thoughts.

Zen Master, how can I soar with the eagles when I have turkeys always begging a lift?

Dharma, pure and simple. May as well be a good sport about it; there is no escaping the duty of tending toddler spirits. Cosmic babysitting. The Bodhisattva

chauffeurs the Big Vehicle across the energetic ether, as all sort of childish souls cling to her, seeking enlightenment under Maya's million guises and yet never knowing that illumination is all we ever *truly* seek.

As Crazy Bear solemnly warned when handing over the keys and the immense responsibility of his vision for what we were to do with them, this mission is metaphor *and* memory for the accelerated hyperreality, predicted to follow this preparatory phase of flesh.

It's all part of the scribe's semisane scheme for evolution beyond the age of Reason, the plan that I serve in spite of my misgivings, because between his manic proclamations rings an undeniable truth.

The aging coffee shop Jewru's tongue vibrates with the conviction of inside information as he demystifies the mystical. Cunning linguist, that one. Or so I have been given to understand. Rainbow rumours are *so* unreliable. Never trust a Trustafarian.

All so very *obvious*, the estimated prophet likes to say.

The guiding theory is that our lessons and lives are constructing the recollections and temperament of the Star we are destined to collectively spark, when the skin addiction plays out, and the elements are aligned for ignition of the planetary parts.

Individual bioentities can be considered self-aware specialized neurons connecting the collective consciousness of an embryonic stellar soul.

We're manufacturing the memories of God. What we imagine to be our struggles for sustenance and success now are the stories which stream simultaneously before the Eye of Ain Soph, which in a different Now is being born, and in another Now recounting our adventures in the flash of reflection accompanying the death of the Star We Are.

Every choice represents a vote for a kinder or crueller Nirvana.

For the handpicked crew of ambassadors managing *Mahayana* and spreading her message, awareness amplifies the effect. Electing to stand for love and light carries the obligation to *live* it, or face the fate of the hypocrite.

Couriers of consciousness expansion, each of us becomes a focal point in the struggle between self and soul, as Ourstory winds down to its climactic commencement.

Even the most trivial errors can blow back on the awakening Buddha. The Bodhisattva trip is a trap. Enlightenment consists primarily of a shocking satori, exposing the stupidity of *every prior choice*.

Welcome to the Karma Cola world of rolling the immovable rock up the insurmountable mountain. Peak experience, indeed.

Privilege

Negotiating the ethical minefield of everyday elections constitutes training for the rapid-fire test we All will face when we confront each other, naked soul by soul, for Judgment Day celebrations. Hence the vital importance of our salvage efforts.

Better Brahma's million manifestations coiling about in the celestial Spiral Dance remember me kindly when we assess Ourselves; better still that these embryonic Enlightenments be nursed with exemplars who serve with a smile. If I don't Love this, why am I doing it?

confers

Driving. Thoughts. So intertwined, after six months meandering with *Mahayana* along her overworked itinerary of counterculture concerts, communes, and collective complaints against the war machine. As this experiment hurtles forward in space, I find myself moving more in terms of *mind*, zooming effortlessly into realms no earlier experiences led me to expect to exist.

The *map*, to me, no longer depicts physical *locales*, so much as vibratory states of existential *awareness*, a schematic of Her Spirit, rather than an arrangement of legal labels, assigned to every part of the Mother by those who seek to control Her.

responsibility

Kalifornia, certainly, is a state of *mind*. The end of the road, as it were, brimming with those who came up against the Void and found they could run no further from their problems. Stolen land, heisted and shysted over and again. Greedy for gold, every exploiter trod upon this ground and claimed it with names, first in Spanish, then with Oklahoma quaintness.

Welcome to *Hopland*.

Nowadays the fortune-hunters come seeking nuggets of shimmering cannabis-renewable, sustainable *green* gold, clutching their trim scissors instead of dipping pan, but even still, only one in ten will come up as they dreamed. The balance will barge manically about the largely redneck and outsider-sensitive rural widespots in a vain quest for *work*, which as far as these shiftless streetkids can tell is nothing more than a local codeword for garden duty.

For a growing small-minded segment of the counterculture, clipping buds for twenty tax-free dollars an hour is just the Manna from hippie Heaven they've been holding out for, in order to finance that hegira to Holland or hedonistic heyday in Hawaii.

As in all things, the Wheel of Karma spins for some, and rolls over others.

Some will be successful in landing the coveted contract, and happily trim marijuana for a month, before being run off by an armed grower who decided not to pay the inflated scale after all.

And some will wind up in the river for having unauthorized access to the bounty of the Harvest.

By and large, these are the kids burdening us today, the waste product of the work migration that infects the counterculture each autumn, as the bliss ninnies and water-treading grasshoppers realize that with winter looming, they'd best come up and with a quickness.

Chronically unemployable, even within the underground economy, because of how alienated they are from what work is *for*, they solicit each *other* for help in everything, even failure.

Drainbows. Free lunch as lifestyle option. The blind begging the stupid. I want to shake these kids, wake them from their dependent stupor. Somehow these "hippies" never grasp why they are *repeatedly* passed over for the abundant trim work, even after laying around for weeks in front of the small growingtown grocery grouped in large, dirty bands.

So there they sit, season after season, flashing annoyingly alliterative, unsubtle "WILL WORK FOR WEED" signs, scribbled on cardboard boxes with

crudely drawn scissors and unconvincing marijuana leaves, while unwittingly harassing for spare change and pot the very growers they seek to impress with their work ethic and reliability.

Everyone just wishes they'd go *away*; they'd want it *themselves*, if they'd snap out of their lazy daze long enough to want better than bumming. Sooner or later, they do what birds do, where the climate suits the clothes.

No point in being bitter about it. Scruffy streetkids are Family, like it or not. It's a phase. Psychedelic infancy. Dropped out but not tuned in. And every once in a while, one of these kids will show you his pure crystal light through the layers of dumpster grime and proudly recycled rags, and you know that tomorrow, *that* one will be *driving* the bus.

In the strangest of places, if you *look* at it right.

Another backpacked form shadows the shoulder, this time in front of the erstwhile Solar Living Institute, a progressive enclave which sticks out like a hitchhiking thumb on the south end of this dull agrarian community. Stopping here, probably to pick up one of their permaculture interns, warms my heart. *Mahayana* is running today on vegetable oil, partly with the help of these folks. We owe them many blessings for converting the big vehicle to operate outside the petrochemical box. I eagerly open the door for her.

She brings sunshine to my dreary day, waking me with her wide jade eyes. Orbs linked, we linger a moment in the other's openings, her unavertable lids parting like lips in amazement, exposing a bright, conscious soul adorned in a full, fine body wrapped in functional khaki cargos, white wifebeater tanktop, and windblown bandana.

Shimmering golden crown chakra burning brightly above bunned blonding dreads, she simultaneously shows the protean energy Being she ultimately Is, as well as the flawless form the atman animates, gripping a climber's walking staff in her right hand to balance her bulky backpack.

Without wearing a *dab* of makeup, she *easily* outfoxes nine of ten magazine models. The faint rich dampness of her armpit hair reaches my naughty nostrils and

sets my snatch squirming with a musky moistness of its own. This rider, too, is quite emphatically my *type*.

Whoa, momma.

“*Linda*,” she exults perkily. “Linda Hand.”

“*Amana*,” I return, tickled. “Amana Mission.”

Gracing me with a golden grin, she fires back, “We’re a natural team, then. Need a hand with anything?” *I’ll say*, I think, imagining the elegant erotica we’d make together.

“Let me *ponder* on that for a minute or two,” I purr suggestively. “I’ll get back to you.” Where *is* Cherie? Can she *hear* this?

Linda flashes her pearlies. “Can’t wait. Thanks for the ride! I’m supposed to set up the Sustainable Living booth by noon. Otherwise they’re giving our spot to the tree-sitters and *we* get stuck next to the beer garden again.”

I abandon any attempt to contain my excitement. “We’re neighbors! We’re running the *Synchronized Survival* info stand, for the *Karma Alliance Light Institute*.”

Naturally she’s familiar with our work. We’re in the same racket: sustainable energy.

Complements on many levels, we agree to collaborate on more mutual projects. Linda and I flirt for an all-too-brief moment, comparing notes and spiraling souls, before she is absorbed in the swirling mass of non-driving humanity to the rear, and I am rebound by the road.

Fantasies. They come unbidden in the most inconvenient of moments. A test of my newly sworn monogamy, or some cryptic cosmic signal of *that* played-out path’s hopelessness?

Of course, if my *girlfriend* likes her, too, we can make a triad without compromising our commitment. Sharing with Cherie! Could we give polyamory another go?

The idea fills me with a giddy evil electric anticipation. Eat my pie, as it were, and have it, too. Three hot, hairy young dykes on the prowl all over the festive circuit...we could be downright *dangerous*.

Until I wind up tending the bus, alone, again, wondering *where has that girl gotten off to all night?* Opening that Pandora's Box will only free the demons that feed from the energetic exchanges of the orgy, who gleefully shatter the stodgy bonds of soulmates striving to greedily reserve their love for each other.

One's eager sexual frenzy is the other's neglected needs, and *our* relationship, at my *own* insistence, can't sustain such frivolity any longer. There is always *somebody* on the sidelines; far too often, that somebody is a stupidly surprised self.

Hot breath caresses my cheek, and I realize with a start that the breeze is temporal, not astral. *Cherie!* I'd know that spicy scent in a fragrance factory. Think of the devil...

"Pull over, it's time for a brake. Go ahead, I'll take over the wheel. This wing nut that you just picked up has some pretty extreme *weirdness* going on, that you ought to see for yourself. I can't explain it, but something told me you should get hip...switch with me, so he can turn you on to his trip." She tries to undo my safety belt, but I bat her hand away.

What an annoying pushy *bitch*. Don't try to pull me out of my groove just to look at some goofball's mandalas or mobile museum! "Send him up *here* to sit on the stairs with his dog, and I'll talk to him while *I* drive." *Nobody* gets me to relinquish my throne for trivia. The only reward this driving duty offers is the satisfaction of sliding into the parking spot at the end, and I'll not be cheated of it so close to the Shitty.

Slut.

Forgiveness is coming slowly.

Festival season's been rough on our relationship. Each of us have vowed to forever forsake the other, multiple times over the course of the summer.

Interlopers, drama royalty of various gender persuasions, the pathologically horny, and just plain pathological, have all taken a crack at splitting us apart. Great fun.

It's *not* the *sex*, per se. I mean, we both played with plenty of people *before* we met, as well as the *since* which bothers me, and reasonably assume that the future

beyond each other will contain many adventures with various crevices and protrusions. Transcending relationship staleness is our primary premise.

The *problem* is the way Cherie treats *me*, when she's busy weighing my virtues against someone unfairly new, exciting and flawless, free of bitterness and expectations. The way these others treat *me*, as an obstacle to their lust for my lover.

Machiavellian shifting of loyalties in the pillow room have far outweighed whatever transient thrills I found there. Our late-night ventures to the labyrinthine world of polyamory has brought us to the brink, and now we're both sworn to faithfulness, just like a picket-fence straight couple.

Now, apparently, it's *my* turn to regret that demand. The Wheel of Karma is often cruel.

Healing lies before us.

Adam's trip turns out to be interdimensional. "As I was explaining to your girlfriend, this *Ephemeris*, here, indicates the temporary presence of a *Portal Potty*, in Speedway Meadows, on this date," he solemnly intones, as if everyone bases his life around accessible squatting space.

Crackpots and chamber pots. The zen of crapping without the benefit of internal plumbing.

I snort. "You don't need a chart to tell you *that!* There'll be several *dozen*. The promoter rents them, so we don't shit under the bushes."

He laughs. "Not a Port-a-Pottie; a *Portal Potty*. A transient effect of mass gathering, which enables quantum travel by opening a wormhole, poking through a temporary rending of the fabric of the space-time continuum. Get enough imagination in one place, and the boundary between dimensions becomes very malleable." Out of my eye's corner, I spy a green graphic matrix against the otherwise black LED screen of a Palm Pilot. Wing nut, *indeed*.

"I think I saw that episode of *Star Trek*. Or was it the *Twilight Zone?*" Usually I conceal my incredulity at the delusional nonsense that comes my way-glass houses and all-but there's no point in encouraging him. Is this rubber-room case for real?

How come California doesn't fall into the Ocean? Cause there's a wingnut holding down every corner.

“Have you looked at your girlfriend’s digital flip-phone lately? Those things make Captain Kirk’s communicator look downright *primitive*. We happen to be traveling, after all, in the twenty-*first* century, a region with maximum mind manifestation. Minor miracles all over the place. But the programs I’m running, here, will blow your *mind*.”

Consider it *blown*, brother.

“You won’t see the *Existential Ephemeris* reviewed in local tech magazines. The download time was unreal, but worth every year. I had to design my own server to access *that* Web, and piggyback the signal from Sirius B’s surveillance net; no commercial provider connects to it this far in the boonies.”

“You’d be surprised. This *is* California, after all. Every other head designs web pages or builds systems or UFOs in their back yard.” Or has been recently liberated from psychiatric incarceration, thanks to Republican cutbacks.

He frowns. “I meant *chronometrically* local, as in ‘Gregorian time coordinates: the early second millennium A.D. Pre-Purge. Dawning of the Age of Aquarius. You know, *this* end of the *Kaliyuga*.” He scans for comprehension. “You’re hip to this trip. I can *feel* it on people.”

Well, this, at least, makes sense. We seem to be on the same page here. “You’re talking about the final phase preceding the transformations of 2012,” I probe ominously.

He nods. “I think of it as the *South Side of Time*.”

This happens to be a pet subject, but I’m in no mood to harbour or humour lunacy. “You mean to *tell* me, with that innocent poker face, that you are taking up all this room on my bus, hitching a hundred-fifty miles to this festival, *not* so you can enjoy the big-name bands or speakers, *not* to vend goods legal or illicit, *not* to network with the many heady minds in attendance-but...because you *think* a particular *shitter* will be there, *let me get this straight*, that *enables* you to *teleport* through space and time? What are you *on*, and where can I *get* some?”

My jibe fails to take its intended derisive effect. Instead, suddenly pensive and secretive, he draws closer and lowers his tone to a barely audible, confidential whisper.

“Okay, that’s the secret password.” Oh, goody, I’m in the club!

“What I have is so strong it breaks the laws of physics. So I can’t offer it to people; I have to wait to be asked. Some sort of filter to keep the unready away. This is *not* for the mass market, and lives are on the line to keep it that way, for safety’s sake. This is about Deep Magic.”

I’m all ears. His face is so serious, I have to bite my lip to restrain a skeptical snicker. Humor the madman and he’ll go away.

“They call it *R-E-P*, Reality Exchange Potion, and you have qualified for a guided trip to the other side of the story. But I’m warning you! One hit will *completely* transform the way you *conceive* of existence, no matter *what* you think about it right now. That’s part of the magic. *Astral jetskiing*, nothing like it. Definitely does *not* mix with narrow minds. You’ll see what I mean.”

He’s thoughtful. “Keep it on the downlow, though, it’s *very* powerful stuff. Not for the kiddies. Strongest letters in the alphabet soup. So let *me* decide who’s ready to hear about it. Rather, I’m only supposed to tell those who have already figured it out. *This* shit makes DMT seem like a *whip-it*. REP is the secret ingredient in transdimensional metempsychosis, which is what floats *my* personal boat.”

I refrain from informing him that I had figured out *nothing*. The expression I employed is merely a venerated Hippiespeak way of implying *insanity*. Let him imagine what he wants. “And what does this have to do with why *you* are *here, now?*”

“There’s a *very* narrow window for these things, and it looks as if *Synergy* taps into a main vein from which one can virtually travel virtually *anywhere*. These mass gatherings have a distorting effect that represents a key opportunity for spacetime surfers in the region. High tide, as it were. The *metaphysical* event generated by the *physical* event contains all the intensity and intention that the promoter’s thoughtform generates, interacting with the energetic enthusiasm and expectations of everyone who eventually makes the scene, with and without bodies...and of course all the *psychedelics...*”

I have now officially heard it *all*. Enough. Too freakin’ much...

Someone more interested in this drivel than I am grabs his unwanted attention, and I am free to be One with the landscape *Mahayana* smoothly conveys

me across, the material Mother, with Her contours and ridges that mirror the metauniverse completely in every manifestation. All the mystery I crave at the moment is the koan of the road.

Why, Zen Master, are human beings such hopeless irredeemable fuck-ups?

The coast is high-rolling, with Porsche and Mercedes in every lane, but the real wealth comes from Gaia's flesh, this rich fertile place near the sea, full of fruits and forests.

Behind every million-dollar mansion is a devastated woodland habitat invisible from the top-dollar view on the redwood patio deck. Enlightenment will come when we realize how much more *valuable* trees are while they *stand*.

I can never resist a stiff middle finger whenever we emerge from the final refuge of redwoods remaining on the soiled planet, to greet the grisly spectacle of a lumber mill, billowing toxic fumes as loggers reduce the lungs of our Mother to toilet tissue and junk mail.

Synchronous enough, *Mahayana* is once again stuck behind a caravan of flatbeds, each loaded down with thirty or forty centenarian lumber lifetimes. Not really a *cosmic* coincidence; the 101 is a prime conduit from forest to sawmill. I feel like scripting a MasterCard ad of my own:

Logging rights on public "protected" lands: \$80 a truckload.

High-quality polished redwood table top: \$5000.

Our irreplaceable ancient ecosystem: PRICELESS.

Not that the TV generation will be alert enough to sense the contradiction. *Plenty* of trees in the dogwalking park. If they want nature, they'll buy a granola bar at the corner gas station.

A final rider, just outside San Rafael, not interested in exchanging pleasantries or even being pleasant. Beyond this point, or, really, from Santa Rosa on South, hitchhikers tend to be lazy or stupid or both, since we are in range of the city transit system. The vibe on this one is dark and shady, and I immediately regret stopping for him, despite my pledge to Crazy Bear in the name of those without wheels.

We barrel into a wall of fog obscuring the exit to Stinson Beach and the underground surfer haven of Bolinas, as I catch the unmistakable whiff of something unspeakably foul, which I deliberately mistake anyway for some sort of smoldering mechanical disaster, before spotting the source of the awful stench: our latest addition smoking *speed* from a folded foil, only a couple feet away from my delicate nostrils. Without even asking!

The thing is, I'm hypersensitive to stimulants and also prone to them, and even the fumes from meth get me lit. Tongues start to move faster than minds, and an argument always breaks out when we practice chemical tolerance for street powders.

For this and other reasons, their absence and our abstinence relates to the subject of Crazy Bear's *second* rule. Only psychedelics are exempted from this ban, along with untreated herbal products.

"Hey, kid," I stammer. Will it ever end? Who the Hel did I piss off to *deserve* this? "You can't smoke that *shit* in here. Save it for behind a dumpster."

He affects shock and indignation. "They're *all* smoking back *there*," he protests.

"Sure. *Buds* and *hash*, not crack or tweak. We don't need *that* poison in our lungs. If you *must* waste your energy that way, could you stick to a discreet bump, and not foul up the air for the rest of us? Thanks *so* much. And stay out of sight of the windshield, okay? Were you born in a crackhouse or something?" I realize with regret as I say it, that, perhaps, he *was*, and, if so, I may have rather cruelly touched a sensitive nerve.

Oh, well. He needs to know that he comes off that way, if he's even *capable* of caring.

The Bridge is upon us before I even have a chance to consider the five-dollar toll. San FranPsycho, the city with a cover charge. Like everything else about the Shitty, the toll plaza generates calculated cash, on absolute *lockdown*. The only way to avoid paying is to loop around to the south, a detour which expends more fuel and time than the five dollars represents. Smart. Evil, but *brilliantly* so.

“Hey, anybody got five bucks for the Man?” I, naturally, have no cash. Most of the time, I don’t really need it. We carry six fifty-gallon tanks of pure refined hemp oil up top, and can refill anytime at the KALI communitarian farm outside of Bend, Oregon, or the new one in Southern Arizona.

We run a barter and begging economy: tit for tat, if not this for that. Donations come easily on the road; there are many friends for our ideas in the natural food business. Since we represent a non-profit educational charter, carefully crafted to avoid both excise levies and excessive harassment, the regular crew of six gets into concerts and festivals with a wave of our laminates.

Everybody loves missionaries, even the cannibals. We just disappear when they break out the ketchup.

The Institute’s break-even premise also, theoretically, takes care of Caesar and his extorted cut at *this* inconvenient juncture, if I actually *knew* where that paperwork is buried beneath the gear of six residents and nearly twenty transients.

Par for the course; none of my guests admit to holding even *five* units of Empire scrip, to get us past the trolls. Instead of a contribution, I am assaulted by a barrage of obnoxious excuses: “I had to buy burritos for my dog,” “will they take Canadian cash?” “don’t pay their fascist imperialist tax, the money feeds the war beast in the Middle East!” “Ask them if they’ll trade for a nice rock” and so on so I am

Forced to Jedi my way through the tollbooth. “Do you even *know* what 501c3 *means?*” I lecture the agent. Little old matron, with thick glasses, curly short grey hair and a pompous disposition. Bet she goes to church a lot. “It means *tax exempt.*” I jiggle my imaginary Minster’s credentials in her face.

She shakes her head, smiling in that annoying way inflexible librarians tell you they are closed for the day, despite five minutes grace on the clock behind the desk. I smell bitter bitch in full-on resentment mode.

“You have to apply for a sticker, if you’re part of a church fleet or something like that. Look, take this, and I’ll snap a photograph of your license plate. The bill will go to the address on the registration. Go ahead, we can’t hold up the line, now.”

She hands me a blue flyer describing the billing procedures and penalties for ignoring them.

Crazy Bear's *accountants* can worry about it, then. If they can follow the tortuous trail of front companies and semi-serious spiritual organizations, they'll wind up sending the trivial bill to Les Williams and his team of paper mages, who will probably find some way to get the Institute a tax *credit* in the bargain.

Sometimes the obvious answer is to be direct.

Crossing the Gate gives me occasion to glance at the digital clock we keep mounted on *Mahayana's* dash, in order to overcome the watchlessness of our crowd.

No way. This is not *happening*. We did *not* just strand my *best friend* while picking up all these losers.

"Ah, *shit!*" A forgotten promise stands neglected. I *knew* I should have risen with the sun, instead of greedily grabbing another cuddle-hour with my snoozing sleepmate!

Sure enough, Cherie's phone can be heard twinging over the din in the back. *Deva's* special ring. *Incoming text message.* Damn! One momma I definitely did *not* want to leave hanging. Too late now.

"What's up?" Adam, again, tending to Doobie Scoo's frequent, ferocious appetite. We maintain a bag of soy-based, vegetarian animal food for general use near the front of the bus, in order to avoid the spectacle of low-quality pet grade meat being consumed in our strictly vegan presence.

Far from being an ethical issue, since we believe predators are predators and should ideally kill their *own* food, preferably elsewhere, the ban is part of the health code. Most of us-especially me-simply cannot handle the *smell*.

More than one gruesome vomiting episode convinced us that for everyone's sake, even the most reluctant carnivores need to give vegetarianism at least a trial run while riding *Mahayana*.

"Oh, nothing. Just that I *promised* Deva we'd stop by her place in the *Mission* to pick her up, and bring her with us to *Synergy*. We're behind schedule. No way to do that *and* set up the booth on time."

"Is it incredibly important? Can't she take a cab, or city bus?"

“Yes, except she’s in a wheelchair, and won’t spend a *penny* on herself because she’s on a fixed income, and terrified Bush is going to cut off her SSI. No *way* she’ll leave the house unless *we* go get her.” Nothing to do about it except doubletime to the site and dispatch a driver to the Mission, once the booth is erected.

The foggy clogged streets of slanted San Francisco always bring me down, with their duplicate duplexes and irrational traffic insider-only instructions. Every trip I swear never to return, only to be foiled by the stark reality, that all counterculture roads lead, eventually, here, to this incongruously dark slum city, with its overpriced hovels in the wall and sketchy vibe.

Masonic

The plain fact is, despite the huge head population clinging to the site of the Summer of Love, San Francisco is *not* a “hippie city,” whatever *that* would mean. *Hippies* don’t *build* cities. *Masons* do. Hippies build *communities*.

Reinforcing this impression is the creepy coincidence implied by the bizarrely named *street triangle* of *Bush*, *Presidio*, and *Masonic*, which I pass suspiciously synchronously to these thoughts.

Presidio

What prescient Inner Order Stonecutter ordered that triangle carved into the map, nearly a century before the code could be cracked by events? To what diabolical end did the shepherds of civilization place this obvious sign of their tyranny, which unmistakably suggests, without explicitly exposing, the dark occult conspiracy behind the current reign of calculated madness, to the point of *naming the family* figureheading the plot to impose a New World Order from the Pentagon? My, what *have we gotten ourselves into?*

Bush

“Hey, *tune in*, ’Mana! *Heads up*, girlfriend! That was *Deva-*”

I curtly cut her off. “*I know! Shit!* I know. We’re late. Tell her we’ll have somebody go for her, in about an hour.” Preoccupied, I pass my turn on to Fulton. “*Shit!*” I repeat.

Adam is talking to me. All things considered, I wish he'd shut up for a minute and let me regain my bearings in this mazelike metropolis, but I can't spare the energy to silence with kindness.

"I can get you an extra *day*, but *smaller* slips are trickier; it might just make us be *later*. Turn....Here! *Now! You won't get another chance!*" He's frantically punching keys on his doo-hicky.

He's insane, but something deep within screams *run with it*, and I dutifully execute the prescribed turn, without any reality-based evidence that I ought to do so. You've got to be like that in the Shitty; the misaligned streets abound with penalty-bearing proscriptions against changing course midstream, that appear to be little more than a brazen intention to waste fuel on a massive scale.

Market Street is a nightmare that way; using *that* thoroughfare is a subtle but necessary art. The key is conviction, knowing the map in your mind will lead you to a place where the compass can once again help.

"Left. Okay, through that tunnel...trust me. You'll thank me yesterday. Turn right, and...*there*. Go to your friend's house. She'll be pleasantly surprised."

"No, you dimwit, she's *expecting* us. I'll just have to send somebody down for her later. If we don't set up before the first band plays, it'll be madness."

He smiles. "Have it *your* way, then."

Cherie arrives, acrobatically vaulting over the teeming masses. "*Listen*, 'Mana." She inclines toward Adam. "Sorry to interrupt, kid. High drama in the hole." Preoccupied, she returns frantically to me.

"Deva said *not* to go to the dispensary. The Feds showed up with a warrant this morning. All the plants have been seized, and she said stormtroopers are just sitting quietly inside, waiting for patients to come and fill prescriptions. Everyone who goes in there could get hit with *Federal* drug conspiracy charges. We're supposed to warn everyone we can get ahold of."

Too much to absorb. Engage autopilot. "*Where is she now?*"

She wrinkles her nose. "That's the funniest thing. She said she had Luna and Dylan help her across the street to wait for us on the corner, about an hour before the

raid...because of *your* message. The girls are pooling cell phones and contacts to clue everyone in as fast as they can.”

Confusion. “*What* message? I sent her a text memo, yesterday morning, to remind her to be ready by eleven, and haven’t *touched* your phone since. What time was this raid?”

“She says hell broke loose about fifteen minutes ago. She had front-row seats and they didn’t even glance at her. The first thing she did was send a quick summary to her list of text contacts, once she calmed down enough to think.” The clock reads 12:20.

“That’s impossible. I woke up in the Patrick’s Point rest area at eight, realized we were running behind schedule, and have been driving nonstop ever since. Did someone else send her a memo, and she just thought it was me? Check with the Family.”

“No, she *specifically* said it was *you*. Thanks for the warning and steer clear.”

Adam’s grinning like he’s got the Cheshire Cat in his bag. “What *is* the matter with you?” I snap. “Our friend’s in deep *trouble*. And so is a whole *network* of medical marijuana patients.”

“She’ll be *fine*,” he assures me softly, as if he’s channeling Nostradamus. “They’ll *all* be fine.”

Exasperated, I fall back on default mode, and reset course for the north side of Golden Gate Park. The only thing to do about the mess in the Mission is to stay the hell away from it. All we can add at this point is arrest reports.

The north side of Fulton is strangely deserted, considering the crushing crowd anticipated, and I readily slide *Mahayana* in to the first gap which calls to me. No longer in the mood for the festival, I am nevertheless relieved that the journey is over and our throng of riders can finally debark.

“Um, there is one thing...” Adam stammers, as if realizing the enormity of something. “This could get a little *tricky*.” He stands up abruptly and authoritatively addresses the multitude.

“*Listen*, we did a little...um, *dayslipping* on this trip, and you *all* owe yourselves twenty-four hours. No need to worry about it, the Universe will collect, the next time you sleep.”

The cabin bristles with befuddled agreement. A great time is most certainly our due. We should treat ourselves to a frenetic festie, after this uninspiring journey, not that we need this presumptuous nitwit to tell us so. Yes, we owe ourselves a wonderful day.

“But...wait. There is a downside. You’ll *lose* the day when you finally pass out. The Law of Conservation of Mass, Energy and Time. I just realized, if any of you fall prey to the Sandman before *Synergy*, you’ll miss the party altogether. So all of you *must* stay awake until the festival is *over*. Sleep when you’re dead.”

Not that anyone has any *idea* what he’s talking about or why he’s choosing this moment to seize the soapbox, least of all me, but his last comment is received as a pep talk to party hardy, and therefore greeted with an appropriate riot of enthusiasm.

Feeling more like I’m delivering a prepubescent classroom to the Zoo than hippies to a peace festival, I gratefully and triumphantly jerk open the doors to *Mahayana*, and let the flood flow out onto the sidewalk.

I rise to follow them, but Adam interferes. “Let them go. There’s nothing in there yet. The Portal Potty hasn’t even been *delivered*, and that spot won’t be activated for...twenty-eight hours. Let’s go paint this square town red.”

Cherie appraises him quizzically. “Hey, Mr. Interdimensional Traveler, we’re *here*. Load *down*. If you want to join our group, you need to submit an application to the Board of Directors and work a probationary internship on the farm, like everybody else. You’re welcome for the ride, and you don’t *have* to go to the Festival, but you and your dog *do* have to clear out of this bus. Now.”

He stares at her blankly, openly stunned. You can see the thought run across his face-*Bitch!*-and I have to admire his restraint in refraining from voicing it. She comes off that way, some times. I myself have often failed to keep that bitter word to myself, when my lover so frequently evokes it. It’s part of Cherie’s charm.

I find myself answering for this stranger, before I realize it myself. “He’s cool, Cherie. He’s *my* guest, for now.”

She shrugs. “Have it your way. You always *do*.”

Not now, I beg her in my mind. A fine time for *her* to display some extremely petty, not to mention inappropriate, jealousy.

“Let’s *all* get some *air*, anyhow,” I suggest. “I *have* been driving for four straight hours, as if anyone cares.” Consensus is found on fresh air, and we put *Mahayana* on lockdown, urban protocol, which consists of a large chain latched from the steering wheel to the accelerator, and held in place by a large Master lock.

This is for show; the bus is equipped with a secret cutoff switch, Lojack style. Only a driver who knows precisely where we put that switch has a prayer of turning over the cranky old biodiesel-swilling beast, who frequently challenges even *my* authority to start her. But an ounce of deterrence is probably worth a few pounds of shattered windowpane.

The ease of parking speaks profoundly; it is quite obvious that something is amiss. This side of Fulton should be jam-packed with RV’s and buses by now. Our riders have disappeared into the woods, probably expecting *Synergy* to come together for them, but I realize with a creeping sensation that they will find *nothing* in Speedway Meadow.

“Was it cancelled?” Cherie wonders aloud. “The permit yanked at the last moment? I thought the Mayor of this dump was on *our* side.”

She’s on the wrong track. Paying close *attention*, all right, but not to the *right* things. I know *what’s* happened, I just don’t know *how*.

We’re a day early.

Even though we left the *same day* as the festival and picked up a dozen-and-half hitchhikers, all entertaining the *same mad delusion*.

Hard to escape the conclusion that this is all part of *something* this weird *kid* did with his pocket computer. Boy, will Cherie be *pissed off* when she gets ahold of *that* concept!

Nevertheless, we all stride silently to the site, as if to see with our own eyes evidence that the unimaginable has not only been imagined, but actually come to pass. Again.

There is *jack shit* in Speedway Meadows.

No stage, no speakers, no vending tents, no twenty-five thousand projected peace enthusiasts. The extra event Honey Buckets have yet to be delivered, as Mr. Portal Potty prophesied. Score one for the looney prick.

Sure enough, we have managed to arrive *before* we left.

The physicists will line up around the block to argue with this. I leave them the unenviable job of offering an alternative explanation.

We, the jaded crew of *Mahayana*, seek *our* explanations, all six of us, from a suddenly nervous Adam.

We're *listening*.

"Well...I guess it's a *little* strange, the first time you do it. I don't know, I never brought anyone *with* me before. I dayslip all the time, as it were.

"Adam," I say slowly, "what the hell are you talking about?"

"It's cheating. Living on borrowed time. You go back a day, then forward an extra day when you next sleep." Groping to explain the everyday phenomenon of altering time seems to stump the glib Mac-daddy. Good to know, for future reference.

We're all staring at him, trying to decide if it is he or we that are mad. An impromptu visual straw poll suggests the vote is evenly split.

"Look, I *told* you the reason I was journeying to *Synergy* was to take advantage of a quantum abnormality associated with the event. This whole *area* of space-time is bristling *alive* with little trap doors and other wild energy."

Blaming him for our dilemma is tantamount to conceding the power of his Palm Pilot, but guilty, or merely insane, we are content to place the culpability on the one claiming it.

"All I *did* was use this handy-dandy pocket program to locate the nearest dayloop, and tell Amana how to get there. I heard about your poor friend, and I guess I acted a little brashly."

He brightens. “Of course, *this* means you can be her *salvation*. We might even be able to avoid the electric fence of paradox, if we’re *slick* about it. *Some* errors, I will eternally maintain, are *inspired*.”

There’s only one way to settle it. To hell with taking the bull by the horns; the way to deal with *those* fuckers is to grab and control their *nuts*.

I collar an innocent bystander, a local yuppie aerobics class refugee in tacky pink tights, frilly socks, and designer sneakers, powerwalking her poodle through the park.

She tries to ignore me, but I block her way and rather forcefully demand the time of day from her. Befuddled, she consults her flip phone and brightly provides it after a moment of awkward fumbling. “Twelve forty-five,” she announces.

“I see,” I say carefully. “And excuse me, the *date*?”

She doesn’t look at the cell phone for this one. “Why, it’s *Friday*, the twenty-fourth.”

“Of *September*,” I offer speculatively. She nods, plainly confused at this interrogation. “Just for *fun*...it’s two thousand...four...*right*?” She agrees, deeply disturbed on many levels.

Cherie, eternally being *Cherie*, gets in the poor woman’s face. “Are you *sure*?” she demands.

“Leave her *alone*, momma. Let’s just go look at a newspaper or something.” The grateful but frightened civilian seizes the opportunity to dance away with her tiny dog, fleeing from the lunatic band of drug-crazed ruffians we had taken every pain to appear to be in her eyes.

The love of my life is madly waving *her* own cell phone about, which claims, in accordance with each of our memories, that the date is actually, as we had hoped, *Saturday*, the twenty-*fifth*.

My *birthday*, for all that’s gotten me so far. Hell of a surprise party.

An unlikely suspicion grows suddenly plausible. I ride, after all, with latter-day *Pranksters*. Could this all be *rigged*? A warped *mindfuck*, as a *birthday* roast?

If I am the *sole* butt of this put-on, one simple explanation occurs to me: the crew has been feeding me the *wrong* day *all week*.

“Hey *Amana*, you put the *wrong date* on this recruitment report. The *twenty-second* was *yesterday*.”

And I checked my mental calendar, deciding I was right. “*Veinteidos, cariña*. Twenty-second is *miercoles*. *Hoy, chica*.”

“Today’s not *Wednesday*, it’s *Thursday*. *Veinteitres, pinche pendeja* .”

“No, it’s *not*.”

“Yes, it *is*.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“Of *course* I am. I *know* what day of the *week* it is, *bliss ninny!*“

“Okay, *Thursday* it is. Let’s get on with it.”

And I *fell for it*.

Now I get it. Must have gotten mixed-up during one of the innumerable date disagreements that so frequently arise among the calendar challenged, and innocently let them falsely *correct me out of a day of my own life*.

Cherie, of course, would be the mastermind; manipulating the date on her phone would be simple. *Deva* would have to be in on it. That would make *Adam* a plant in the gag...

...and *Linda*, too, for that matter, and *all* the hitchhikers we’ve picked up, pretending to be desperately rushed, to arrive at a festival that wouldn’t be happening until tomorrow. That *has* to be for realism.

No reason for all these kids to be loading down the shoulders of the highway, without anything in it for *them*. Usually we only get three or four kids hitching on this frequently run route.

Most of them *seemed* authentically pathetic, but my sneaky soulmate could have recruited the actors from the treesitting community in Southern Oregon, where she deliberately maintains contacts I am not privy to. *Those* kids just have *humility*.

Another bus *could* have ridden just ahead of us, dropping off riders as fast as we picked them up.

It was *Cherie*, after all, *wasn’t it*, who *asked* me to pay special attention to *Adam* and his *too-convenient* time-travel trip. Was *that* the set-up? If so, I done been *suckered*. Hats off. They had me, for a *second*. But *now* I’m hip to their jive.

Call it out? Why not let them *have* their fun? I must admit to being impressed at the grand scale and sophistication of the prank, and curious about what else it might be a setup *for*.

All in good fun, I'm sure. Some of our friends will practically turn themselves inside out, just to make a memorable party more so. Great lengths have obviously been gone to, and I surely wasn't hustled down here a day early for *nothing*.

There's no way on Goddess' green Earth I'd have *chosen* to spend *one more day* in the Bay than absolutely necessary; but I may as well make the best of it. Play dumb until they deliver me to whatever midnight climax Cherie has in mind, and love her for dedicating her sneaky self to serve our mutual Mistress.

Hail Eris!

Linda-who suddenly strikes me as a *consummate* actress-appears genuinely perplexed as she approaches our rapidly retreating core.

All of us-for *various* reasons, I'm sure-are eager to avoid the inevitable reality-confirmation demands of the disoriented, debarked riders, who now outnumber the routine local park patrons by two-to-one.

"Do *any* of you have any *idea* what the *malfunction* here is all about?" she solicits anxiously, with a perfect imitation of worry. *Award winning!* Cherie knows lots of theater types, too.

Seems sometimes like my girlfriend *knows* the whole *world*. Walking double entendre that she enjoys being, part of her *mystery*-and my misery-is never being sure just *how* Biblical that knowledge *really* is.

With a consciously hypocritical stab of jealousy piercing my own tender heart, I contemplate anew what *their* connection might *really* be, after all.

A general chorus of denial and mutual cluelessness.

I wonder what scriptwriter was recruited to choreograph this convincing conspiracy. My friends are *well* coached. Each of us on board *Mahayana* harbours a secret love for *drama*, in our sexually ambiguous hearts. Our *dharma* is *drama*.

Adam, sticking to the script, perfectly plays his predictable part as quantum Casanova. "I'm afraid you'll need a little *background* on that," he slickly explains, sliding his friendly arm around Linda's shoulders just as smoothly.

He leads her away from the group and abandons the *rest* of us to our own *devices*. The maddening, magnifying matrix of mutual covetousness!

Actors, I remind myself. *None of this is real*. Observe disinterestedly, play *your* role, have a good time, and *for Goddess sake* don't get *emotionally entangled* in *onstage romances*. What a *fool* you'll make!

You have a girlfriend that you love.

Cherie, taking Adam's cue, shuffles me aside for private consultation. We walk a good distance in silence, enjoying the contrived peacefulness of San Francisco's communal back yard.

No one, even the superrich scumbags controlling reality from their barricaded Presidio estates, can afford to waste spare acreage on *dog turd turf*, so by common consent this landmark park is preserved, to remind the very synthesized people here what life *used* to be all about for the *whole species*, before bureaucrats decided humans are more suited to inhabit duplexes, than the forests that birthed our kind.

Trust...paranoia begins, for those of us who fail to socialize with a belief in the benevolence and omniscience of our elders, with the dawning suspicion that the tyrants who control *every item of information ever provided*, in *home* and *school*, may be *lying to us* about the world where we live, and that which preceded us.

History is obviously *bunk*. What's *Ourstory*?

For the nascent freethinker, developments make apparent that we are *routinely* misled about events as current as the *most recent irrelevant lesson*, which our social indoctrinators assure us is for enriching our intellect, but was *clearly designed* to acclimate students to the *habit* of submitting to daily drudgery and makework, doggedly depriving us of the critical faculty to even wonder *why*.

How could we *fail* to suspect the overwhelming powers, who conspire to *compel* our *allegiance* before we could *possibly* be capable of comprehending what the *word*, let alone the *concept*, entails?

Eventually we form a worldview, in which *everyone* deals in bunk information, and harbors inscrutable ulterior motivations.

As evidence for this shaky hypothesis mounts, so does the sense of *alienation* and *paranoia*.

We start to imagine that perhaps *nothing* we've been told is *true*.

We even toy openly with the questionable verifiability of external reality.

Does that notion hold any water at all? What if this is all just me, me, me...

Solipsism, according to philosophy profs. Perhaps, we wonder with frightened fancy, if all of This is just a *ruse*, for *my personal benefit*, and only *I* even *exist*?

When you clip away all the suppositions and third-hand reports and categorical logical abuses that compose what we are taught to regard as *History*, the past is like a fat larffy bud that turns out to be just so much leaf after all.

How deep does the lie go? And who is the Liar that has the *power* to clear up all this nonsense, but never *sees fit* to?

Every once in a while, usually after dropping too much acid, Cherie requires that I state, for some internal record, that "*I*" exist.

I cannot comply, while retaining any sense of integrity. Instead, I ask her to define what *she* means by using the vague terms, "*you*" and "*exist*."

She charges me with deliberate obtuseness, and knowing *damn well* what she means, and I *do*, but I have not resolved the issue for my *own* purposes, let alone my lover's ontologically insecure ones, and it would be dishonest to mislead her.

" '*You,*' " she grudgingly seethes through gritted teeth, "means '*whatever faculty is capable of perceiving and responding to that painfully simple question.*' Stop *playing stupid*. If there is *no such thing*, that must be my answer. Otherwise, please *just* say so. *Are you for real, baby? I need to know, now!*"

I protest that I am being, not *obstructive*, but *precise*. " '*Exist,*' " she continues. "That this faculty perceive *itself* more or less *as I do*, as a *separate being*, with a distinct *personal history, thoughts, beliefs, emotions...* damn it girl, I'm tripping *hard*...you know what I'm *asking!* Tell me you are a *real person* and *not a figment of my imagination*. Tell me I am not alone *at this very instant* jabbering to *myself* in some invisible psych ward after *years of sustained hallucination!*"

By this point, she may be teary-eyed. I pity her, but cannot do as she asks. Not because it's not *true*, but because it wouldn't *mean anything anyway*. A figment's reassurances only confirm the *wholeness* of the delusion.

She needs to settle the question for *herself*, as do we *all*.

I'm not sure what to say to her, what to make of this decision she seems to have made, Freud-style, in choosing to celebrate my birthday with this monstrously dishonest gesture. What intention for the *future* is she thereby announcing? This question, more than the details of her little skit, is what concerns *me* at the moment.

“Okay,” Cherie decides, “I am only going to ask you this *once*, and I *beg* you, in the name of all we have meant to each other: please, please, *please* answer me as truthfully as you can.” I nod agreement, more to find out where she’s taking this, than out of any conviction that I-*of all people*-am qualified to *clarify* the murkiness my lover herself has generated.

This is where they catch you looking stupid on KALI’s funniest home videos. Probably be watching this on Holy Fool’s day next year.

Here’s where she drops the “*Gotcha!*” I scan the bushes nearby for lurking eavesdroppers, jittering as they await their cue to burst onstage catching me red-faced, and totally, *thoroughly* duped.

Nothing left to do but be good-natured about the whole thing and accept gracefully the ribbing every participant will be sure to generously bestow upon me, until next year, when this production will surely be trumped by even greater mischief.

She’s going to ask me something like...how many **hippies** does it take to **forget** what **day** it is?

Or...did you know that the word “**gullible**” is **not** listed in any **dictionary**?

To my great surprise, she offers instead, “What the *fuck* is going on with the day of the week? I *swear* on a *stack* of *Vedas* that *yesterday* was *Friday* all *damned day long!* *Come on, 'Mana*, we spent the whole *day* on the horn with people, trying to get them out to support *Synergy*. How come not *one* of them said *anything* about it *really* being *Thursday?*”

Wow. She really is *working* this shit! I almost *buy* it in *spite* of myself.

Blowing me away with a blast of prime irony, Cherie continues, “Be straight with me, for once, before I lose my shit...if this is some kind of *game*, you *win*...go collect on your bet. I give up. *Tell me the damn truth*, or I’ll *never* forgive you.” She

inhales deeply, centering. I've seen it a thousand times. Hyperventilation. Her antidote to hysteria.

Never have I known Cherie to let the faucet flow on demand, but now, in this absurd null state of doubt about the date, her face is full with genuine wetness and stressed redness. "Is this all some kind of *trick?*" she blurts accusingly. Her certainty is wavering, and Cherie is melting before my very eyes.

Goddess forgive a fool, but I am forced to concede, contrary to all reason, that she actually *means* it. Cherie can't keep a straight face to save her life. Besides, my girlfriend's no *actress*. Her style is an almost painful *directness*, a guileless bluntness that fails to fake even courtesy.

I surrender to the inexplicability of it all. So much for the *simple* explanation. If I am victim of a gag, *she* must be as hoodwinked as *I* am.

Time for a radically revised conspiracy theory. Back to the drawing board. Paradigm shift. Did Matt, or Lucia, sucker us *both*, fearing that Cherie would spill the beans to me? This *is* more *their* style.

Or *did* we actually bop *back* a day in time, the way we'd return to an erroneously skipped highway exit?

She stands shaking before me, once again begging me to anchor her to certitude. How could I suspect her? *My lady's as honest as me*. And *I'm* as honest as a rambling girl can be.

Once again, not knowing how else to respond, I embrace my distraught lover, relishing the feel of her bony boundaries. "Oh, baby, damn it *all* to Hel and back! *I* was going to ask *you* the *same question.*"