

As Above, So Below

by Mark Elliott

*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players:
they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time
plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.*

~ William Shakespeare

First Incident ~ I'm lying on my stomach in the back of my family's Conestoga wagon. For hours I have been fighting the boredom of the almost featureless horizon of waving grass plains, a monotony of light brown grass and cyan sky.

I've spent the day lazily watching the earth move beneath the squeaky wooden wheels, their spokes casting stuttering shadows on the sandy trail below.

I hate the Conestoga. It represents every bad decision my father ever made. In my boyish heart, I have a hard time understanding why we couldn't stay in town where everyone we knew lived. So what if we were poor? Wouldn't we still be poor when we finally settled in California or wherever my father decides to plant us?

This wagon just reinforced the image of poverty. I hated the squeaky wheel with its thick, black grease. I was embarrassed every time the family entered a new town with this wagon's weathered pine sideboards. Grey and dry as a bone, one even had a knot hole the size of a silver dollar. I couldn't wait for us to finally quit the trail and sell off this symbol of my misery.

But wait! Now we're entering a treed glade where the road dips a bit. I can smell the stream before the horse's hooves even get wet. I sit up to see the water. It's a small stream, about the width of two tall men laying end to end, its depth only to my father's knees. As we pause mid-stream to water the horses, I resume my previous posture, staring down at the trail below. Now, in sharp contrast to brown dust, I see a multitude of colorful stones under the fast flowing stream. Reds and whites and copper ripples of the most enticing variety greet my tired gaze. Each stone appears as a precious gem, a treasure ready for the picking.

I want to call out to my father and ask if we might stay just a little longer in this shady oasis, but we're on the move once again. I know that he will never stop now. He always says that easy water draws Indians, and Mother is deathly afraid.

My reverie is suddenly interrupted by the familiar sound of my second grade teacher. She is holding a book on American history as she explains the advantages of the Conestoga wagon, and why it was the choice of the early settlers of the western frontier.

I am suddenly shocked to realize that I'm not really that "me" in the wagon, but "me" in 1958. For a while, I'm actually confused and a bit worried that this scene is the dream. Am I that boy dreaming about a future me?

The "reality" of the here-and-now eventually wins out as surely and suddenly as a dream forgotten. It dawns on me

that as soon as my teacher mentioned the word "Conestoga," I was off on this other life. I say "other life" because that's exactly what it was like.

Known as a bit of a daydreamer as a kid, I was very familiar with getting lost in my thoughts. This incident was entirely something of a different order of things, however, for rather than merely dreaming of a place, I was truly there. I wasn't asleep, as I remained upright in my seat the whole time. I hadn't needed to awaken, as I already was wide awake. This was something entirely new. I simply was another person for a while.

I never told anyone about this, of course, as I didn't want to be laughed at.

As the years went by, I pretty much forgot about my strange experience that day in second grade. I grew up without other such strangeness, as far as I can recall, until I was nineteen years old. It was then that the floodgates holding back my akashic memory let loose, setting me on a lifelong review of my past lives. This tale of mine is not about those akashic memories, however. Not directly, anyhow. What I want to tell you here is the true account of how it all began.

All of the tales in this journal are true, no matter how outlandish they may sound. They have shown me that I, and others around me, have all been here before. If you are amongst those peoples who believe in reincarnation, you will quickly understand. Others (like yours truly) who were raised in a more Western (Catholic) tradition, may be tempted to cast aside my tales as either the ravings of a madman or an idiot. I can't blame them, as my tales are tough to grasp as "reality." In my travels, however, I have found the concept of "reality" tenuous at best.

The Death Match

I'm standing in a grassy field, watching tiny hoppers bound through the tall weeds at my sandaled feet. Leather straps form a helical pattern around my ankles. My skin is a light bronze. On my right bicep I wear a wide copper band, a prize and symbol of my stature as champion.

I am thinking about how these grasshoppers are living their lives without the fear of their own kind, unlike men, who seem to hold violence as a part of themselves, loving it

as they love life. I'm thinking about the uncaring whims of the gods.

I raise my head to see a platform twenty long paces away. Made from split logs, it's about eight feet in length and again as wide. It stands about four feet off the ground on thick wooden columns.

On my right, opposite this platform, are seated a royal entourage. They sit on a raised dias, in three connected booths entirely surrounded by colorful brocades and silks. The center booth contains the Royals, themselves. This booth is marked with purple bunting. I can't see them behind the richly colored side panels, but I know just by the way the crowd speaks in hushed whispers that "They" have been seated. The two booths on either side are occupied by ministers, royal secretaries and ladies in waiting, who coyly peek over the front rail towards me, their Hero.

Across from the Royal entourage stand the plebes and serfs, straining at the barricades, excitedly wagering on blood. I can tell by their actions that the bet weighs heavily in my favor, as it should. Haven't I made many a pocket jingle already? Since being captured by these people who made me kill in order not to be killed, I have proven tougher than even they. True, I kill for their entertainment. True, I am naught more than a slave. Yet, I have earned their respect. Their women all want me as surely as their men all wish they were me, their "savage" champion.

This thought helps me swell with the confidence I'll need on this day, for directly across from me, twenty more paces away from the platform, stands a new prisoner. I size him up. He's from some unknown tribe. I feel sorry for him, not only because he is looking upon his last sights on Earth, but because he's being forced to do so against his will, in a foreign land where he doesn't even understand the curses being hurled his way. That was once me, before I proved myself.

I notice my opponent shaves his head, but for the very top, where he sports a tail of hair that falls to his left shoulder. Mine is the color of wheat, cut short, but for one tight braid on the right, reaching to my waist. His skin is the color of red dust.

Now the crowd raises a shout as the order to attention is signaled. Then they are silent, as the anticipation grows. Now I focus on the short ramp leading to the top of the wooden platform halfway between me and this human sacrifice. I know he's counting in his mind how far away the ramp is on his side. In the center of the platform stands a spear, its razor sharp blade stuck firmly into one of the split logs. I glance at my opponent to find him now mouthing what I can only assume is his death song.

Now the signal is given. Now all I've trained for comes into play. Tonight I will dine so well and fuck so many women that I'll need to be careful not to make my liege jealous!

My strong calves spring into action as I lean into a run. Within a few strides I have my right foot on the ramp. Two more steps and I'm grasping the shaft of the spear. I'm yanking the spear from the wood with all my might as I notice my opponent just reaching the top of his ramp. As soon as his foot touches the platform he leaps at me in a desperate attempt to save the day.

His fear of me has not served him well, as it causes him to misstep and land at arm's length. This is his fatal mistake, as I take the opportunity to slash out with the blade. Being too

close for a full swing, I choke up on the shaft and, holding it firmly with both hands, I throw all my weight at him, slashing from right to left at gut level. I feel the blade slice into him, then suddenly stop as the head buries itself deeply into his mid-section. He jerks as he realizes what has just happened. He reaches out to put his arms around the back of my neck for support. This only causes him to pull in closer.

The pressure on the wooden shaft at this point is too much, and it breaks in two. I quickly get a grip on what's left of my spear, which is now but a foot long, its leaf-shaped blade the size of a hand now firmly buried. He has me in a bear hug now. I worry that the double-edged blade will slice into me also. My opponent's eyes tell me this is his plan. He knows he's about to die and figures he'll take me along.

This makes me angry, and serves to give me the extra strength necessary to finish the job. Pushing away with all my might, I yank the spearhead from his belly. I have no idea if in doing so I've also sliced my own gut open, as he still has me in the bear hug and I can't move my head to look down. Anyway, I haven't the luxury of time to find the truth just now.

At this point, we can both feel his intestines falling to the platform. I can feel his warm blood on my sticky hands. The look in his eyes has now changed. Where before I saw only rage, I now see surrender. His grip loosens as I draw the blade to my side, raise it and slash down and across his left temple, slicing into the cheekbone. The blood flows, but not quickly enough.

My next move brings my forearm across his face. I hit his chin with my elbow. In this position, I pull the blade's edge from the left, across the right side of his neck. This leaves a wide gash from just behind his right ear, down and across his jugular. Now does the blood gush out and his face turn pale. In my fatigue, his dying form collapses onto me, sending me crashing to the platform on my back. My opponent's lifeless body now lies on top of me, wet and warm.

I push his body off me and slide to the edge of the platform. Jumping down, I notice the blood and gore dripping through the wooden slats, staining the shaded grass below. For the first time since the action started, I notice the cheering of the crowd. They are going wild. I guess everyone made money on their bets. I stand before the royal pavilion to receive their praises as I check my belly for wounds, happily finding none. I can't even hear the royal proclamation, the crowd cheers so loudly. I walk back to my quarters with a sense of loathing for myself as well as my masters. I'm in need of good wine and a hot bath full of young women to wash it all away.

I come back to this world suddenly, discovering to my surprise that I'm already sitting up in bed. "What the hell was that?" is the question that greets my confused mind. I've always been a pacifist. This was especially so at nineteen. (We're talking 1970, after all.) Where did this vision come from?

At this point, I can't blame the reader for pointing out that I was asleep during this "vision." What makes me think this wasn't merely a dream? To these doubters, all I can say is that, having had many dreams in my life, I know the difference. For, unlike dreams, or even "lucid" dreams, there is a sense of reality unknown here. Whereas in lucid dreaming everything appears real, the unreality of it all comes to the fore as the experienced lucid dreamer gains

Taking up the ankh/stylus, I confidently wrote my name in the next available space in the book. My hand moved deftly, inscribing a name I couldn't read, in glyphs unrecognizable.

control of his or her dream environment. In the case of these visions, however, there is no control. It is a scripted event with me as mere actor, the director hidden behind the scenes somewhere.

What are these little scenarios I'm forced to relive? Although the reader may have doubts, I declare that they are showing me events that took place in past bodily existences.

The Red Bridge

I'm standing on a sandy beach, looking out at the ocean. I'm startled by the light, as it comes not from the clear, blue sky. Instead, everything emits its own light. Each grain of sand, every molecule of water, even the air itself shines. This chiaroscuro makes the scene brighter than the brightest day ever remembered.

I examine the water before me, noticing that the surf is very light. I can see the water is only a couple of feet deep close to shore, but then gets much deeper toward the horizon. While I'm gazing at this wonderful sight, I suddenly get a strange feeling that I'm being stared at. I turn to my right and see a man standing about fifty yards down the beach. His sudden appearance is enough to frighten me, but it is the odd way he looks that sends an electric shock through my spine. I say this because, although I've already called him a "man," this appellation may not be correct.

What I saw standing there on the glowing sand was only the silhouette of a huge man. Standing a good seven feet tall, the form stood there, its right hand waving in a gesture of greeting. He shone as brightly as if he were made of chrome reflecting the August sun. This caused me to cover my eyes against the reflection and only added to my distress. Who was this? What was this?

Then, as suddenly as my fear had struck, it ended with such a wave of trust and love as I have never before experienced. I understood that this creature, in some way, had sent this pleasant wave my way as a means of introduction. Realizing I was in the presence of pure love, I instantly surrendered to it and started making my way toward him. He started toward me also, meeting me half way.

As I stood there, averting my eyes against his brilliance, he introduced himself to me. I learned that he'd known me through many lives, and I recognized him as a "guardian angel." We then walked down the beach, the water on my left, him at my right. I remember having a long discussion, where he let me know why certain events in my past had to happen according to a plan. I also learned of things that would occur in the future, which I found exciting. I also remember my disappointment upon learning that I was to forget the details of this future gazing so I couldn't interfere with said plan.

I say we had a "discussion," but the word doesn't do justice to what took place. It was more like this entity sent images into my mind, bypassing the filtering process of language. Simply wondering about something was enough to draw answers from "him," whom I attribute as "male" solely on the mental image I received of a strong, male presence to the entity/angel.

After strolling for awhile and experiencing the thrill of learning from my guide, I was told to turn to my left. Doing so, I saw a very large, black fish swim up to us in the shallows. It looked like a ray, or skate, with sting ray-like wings, about four feet wide. Its body resembled that of a large snake, about eight inches at its widest and narrowing at the tail, which was a good five feet from the head. The fish hovered in the shallow water, its fleshy wings and reptilian body undulating to keep it stationary. Its huge, lidless eyes stared up at us as it opened its mouth, displaying double rows of needle sharp teeth. It then spoke to me, in my father's voice.

"Come into the calm waters of the past with me," said my father, "You will live in comfort and forgetting."

Once again I was startled. At this time in my life, I hadn't had any contact with my father for years. I immediately understood why this beast had used my Dad's voice. Dad certainly did represent a more comfortable past. Yet, past it was and that's all it was.

At this point I was asked by my angelic friend which path I would choose. Would I join my father and swim away into that sea of forgetfulness, or would I choose a new life and the unknown, no matter the pain? Without hesitation I told my guide that I chose his path, at which point the fish swam back into the depths and disappeared for good. The angel then told me to turn again to my left, looking back to where we'd come from.

There, on the shore, was one end of the most impossible footbridge ever seen. Made of what looked like red brick, it sprung from the ground at such a steep angle that one would need climbing gear to scale it. At about eight feet wide, with four foot high sidewalls, it more resembled a man-made rainbow that it did a bridge.

I approached it with curiosity as well as a bit of trepidation. By sending the fish away, had I volunteered for some impossible spiritual quest? I also wondered why I hadn't noticed it earlier when I was standing in the very same spot. I asked my guide what its purpose might be as I stared into the sky, vainly trying to find the bridge's apex which had disappeared into the clouds.

"You don't need to climb this bridge," my guide silently informed me, "merely put one foot on it."

So I did. Within the blink of an eye, I found myself standing at the bridge's dizzying apex. Before me, at the very top of the bridge, stood a stone arch. Crossing beneath this arch, I noticed on the right-side wall a very large book. Lying next to this book was a silver ankh, that Egyptian cross with its typical loop and arms at the top. The shaft of this ankh looked like some sort of writing instrument. About a foot long, it terminated in a cut nub like that on an old fountain pen.

Lifting it from the top of the wall where it rested next to the large book, I noticed it was indeed a pen. Studying the book, I noticed it was a list of names. Each page listed dozens of unreadable names, and the book contained thousands of pages. The open page contained half a

dozen names, starting from the top. The rest of both pages remained blank.

Taking up the ankh/stylus, I confidently wrote my name in the next available space in the book. My hand moved deftly, inscribing a name I couldn't read, in glyphs unrecognizable. Although surprised at my confidence in writing whatever it was I was writing, I realized my hand was moving correctly. This is because there was a small voice somewhere telling me that this name was my real one. We sometimes take familial names with us upon reincarnation and we sometimes take on new names. Our real names never change, however. This is the name I signed in that big register, the name of my soul, a name unknown to my mortal heart.

After "signing in," I stood at the wall for a while, watching the beautiful cloud formations far below and listening to the high wind's hypnotic whisper. I then turned and proceeded over the bridge's crest, wondering how I was ever going to descend. I hadn't needed to worry, it seems.

On a Distant Shore

As soon as I stepped toward the dizzying downward arch of the bridge, I found myself at its base, my feet in the warm sand of a different beach. Everything here appeared more dull and earthlike. The water, now at my back, rolled in the same small swells as on the other shore, but without the glow. The sky, though bright blue, shone only as brightly as the sun in the sky provided.

Before me was a grassy rise. Its long and verdant blades arched over the sand below, creating shadows that danced in a light sea breeze. A few yards beyond stood a small beach house, painted white, with red trim and shutters. A few feet from the house's front door stood a pair of poles painted in the same white, with clotheslines strung between them. There were four lines and they were all occupied by white bed sheets in the process of drying.

I approached the house, hoping to find someone who could help me understand where I was. I did know that I wasn't in the "real world" anymore, but I had no fear. I found this lack of concern quite odd, but after what I'd just been through with the glowing "angel" and the "guest book," I figured I was supposed to be "here," wherever that was.

Walking to the door, I heard a woman's voice coming from the far end of the last line of sheets. Turning to look, I was surprised to find a young woman softly humming a tune as she held a wooden clothespin between her lips. She was arranging one of the sheets, carefully smoothing it down before taking the pin from her mouth to secure it to the line.

She then bent over and lifted a large wicker basket to her right hip as she turned toward me. I was about to introduce myself when she jumped with fright, dropping her laundry basket to the grass below, a look of shock on her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked demanding.

"Umm. I'm not quite sure," said I, suddenly concerned.

"You shouldn't be here. At least not at this time!"

"This ... this time?" I stuttered.

I could see her trying to formulate a way to tell me something I might not grasp as she pursed her lips, her eyes focusing upwards and to the left. Now focusing back on me, she spoke in arcane phrases.

"We have ... a season. Yes, that's it. There's a season for such as you, and this is not it!"

Seeing that I was still as clueless as I was harmless, her demeanor softened. I felt that, despite my continuing confusion, I could at least trust this woman's intentions.

"I'm afraid I still don't quite understand," I replied. "What is this 'season' you mention?"

"It's a holiday, you see?" she said hopefully.

I was about to ask her more when she suddenly stiffened with fear. Taking me forcefully by the arm, she dragged and pushed me through and between the rows of white sheeting until we reached the beach. There, where the grass met the sand, was a row boat turned over to allow for drainage. Its rough planking was painted in a light green, its oars resting on the lawn. She directed me to crawl under this boat to hide.

"You want me to hide? Why?"

"Don't ask why, just do it!" she fearfully whispered, "I'll explain later."

So I crawled under the boat as requested, wondering just what I'd gotten myself into this time.

"And whatever you do," my mysterious lady then demanded, "do not give in to the temptation to peek out. I mean it. Keep concealed! It will be very dangerous to us both if you don't. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand. I'll hide under here until you tell me everything is alright."

"Good. Be patient."

She then returned to her laundry hanging a few feet away. I could see her slender ankles, her white leather flats, and the hem on her flowered sun dress. I could hear her humming, a bit nervously it seemed, or was that just my imagination?

Then I heard the dulcet tones of a distinctly male voice. It was a clinically polite voice; friendly, yet slightly menacing. My heart pounded as a pair of shiny black shoes stepped into view. Resting precisely on the third lace from the top was the hem of a very well tailored pair of black, pin-striped pants. The owner of the fancy suit was having a rather animated conversation with the lady. Although I still couldn't hear the man's side of the conversation for some strange reason, it was obvious from her side that she was being questioned by some form of authority. I wondered what kind of cop it could be. The suit was too expensive for an ordinary police detective, I figured.

After a minute or so of this kind of questioning, they both walked away, back toward the house. I wondered if it was safe to peek out of my hole yet, but the force of the woman's admonition to keep out of sight held me there for the seemingly interminable minutes it took her to return. I watched her feet approach and stop at the boat. Then her smiling face was peering into my hiding spot.

"It's safe now. You can come out."

I woke then to find myself fully awake. Now, you may find this statement quite ridiculous. Doesn't everyone awaken "fully awake"? To this question I could only answer that I never just "wake up." That zone between wakefulness and sleep has always been an issue with me. It takes me a good twenty minutes before my mind is at a state I consider "awake." The only time I ever go directly from sleep to awake is when these incidences occur—these "dreams" that

are as real as this world. I may have an active imagination, but all this was way beyond my abilities.

I wondered if I'd ever have such a weird dream vision again. I needn't have worried, for within the following eighteen months, I'd revisit this strange land many times, often three times per week. It always began the same way. Step on bridge. Step off bridge on the other side. I no longer needed to stop at the arch at the bridge's apex, having already signed the "book of life."

The Twins

I am once again in the strange land. I stand before a fine, if modest, house. The territory reminds me of the wooded hillsides of Los Angeles. The place sits among tall pines on a quiet lot, its dark brown wood a camouflage against prying eyes.

My heart jumps as I realize I'm being observed by two people peering at me from behind a corner of the house. As they laughingly approach, I can see they are twins, brother and sister look-alikes. Twenty something and attractive, they both share the same carrot-colored hair and spray of freckles across the bridge of their noses. They ooze wealth, not so much in the downscale clothes they both wear, but in the way they seem to glide over the ground as though they haven't a care in the world.

"Uh oh!" says the young woman with a tone of mock conspiracy, "someone shouldn't be here." They both laugh at her joke, leaving me more confused.

"Why am I not supposed to be here?" I sheepishly ask.

"He really has no clue," says the male of the pair. He's finding all this very amusing.

"Come inside with us and we'll explain everything," says the young woman. "Don't worry, we're safe."

We enter the well-appointed house with its thick wood paneling and gold trim everywhere. All the furnishings are top shelf. It's obvious that these twins are quite spoiled and, I suspect, quite decadent.

Then the explaining starts, and I'm out of my league again. They tell me that this place, where I am at this minute, is another "reality." The word rolls off their lips with some effort, as though it is the only word they can find that might explain the true situation to this poor ignorant savage: me.

The story they tell is that this version of "reality" I presently find myself in is what the Vikings of old called Valhalla. They tell me that everyone in this land is between lives in that plane I call "the real world." I am informed then that this place is where all the violence in "the real world" comes from.

They then tell me the most outrageous thing; that no one really "dies" in Valhalla. In Valhalla, I'm told, death only comes about through murder, and that even then, death depended upon surprise. When I ask for clarification, I am told that, for instance, a gunfight might result in someone's death for ten seconds or so. This is simply because both parties expect it. A surprise assassination, however, might cause the victim to be out of commission for hours.

At this point, they could clearly see by the look on my face that I didn't believe a word of what they were telling me.

"You mean death isn't permanent here?" I asked, trying to form words that didn't sound too ridiculous.

"Well, not for us. We do 'die', but only for awhile. For you though, it's a different story."

"A different story?" I asked weakly.

"Yeah. You get hit, you're out of here. Back to the plane where you came from."

"But what about an explosion? What happens if someone's head gets blown away?" A gruesome thought, but I needed answers.

"Why would anyone do that? Yuk!" said she.

"That's just not sporting!" said he.

"But ... let me see if I get this right. You two can't die?"

"Correct!" said the young man as his sister shook her head in happy agreement. "Allow us to demonstrate."

He produced a gun from under his brown corduroy jacket. It was a small, semi-automatic pistol with a long silencer attached to the barrel. The pistol was small, maybe a .22 caliber. Its color was olive drab. The silencer was polished brass.

He pointed it at his twin sister's chest as she smilingly stood a few feet away, facing him with outstretched arms. He pulled the trigger, causing the gun to kick back with a sharp cough. His sister reacted to the shot, her face now blank as she sank to the floor.

I could clearly see the red hole in her blouse made by the bullet, just above her heart.

"Holy shit!" I exclaimed, stuck to my chair. I was nervously wondering if I was next.

After a few seconds, the young woman opened her eyes and smilingly arose. She approached me, unbuttoning her blouse to display the area just drilled by her brother's bullet. The skin there was soft and warm, with no sign of injury.

"We enjoy doing this here," she said with a smile.

I was dumbfounded, but figured I'd play along at this point. I was here for some unknown reason and I needed to get to the bottom of things, so I decided to go along with anything these two said.

They then asked me to do something that I considered totally against everything I believed in. Yet, after my dream of killing a fellow slave earlier, I had to wonder just where my boundaries were drawn. What they told me was essentially that they wanted me to kill their parents.

"Oh, it will be such a surprise!" they both said. "They have no idea someone from the outside is among us. That hardly ever happens. What a treat!"

So, against my better judgment, I said I would.

They took me through the house to the basement, where their parents were watching a movie in their private theater. I was led to a pair of swinging doors with port hole windows, as in a restaurant. These doors were covered in red tufted leather.

I peered through one of the round windows to see a pair of silhouettes in the front row. I don't recall what they were watching, as I was too intent upon my bizarre mission. I lifted the gun and released the trigger safety as the twins stood with backs against the wall, giggling like children playing a naughty trick on mom and dad. I quietly pushed the door aside and stood there for a few seconds. I wondered if they'd notice me standing there, but they never turned their heads. I lifted the pistol and aimed first at what I figured as the father's outline. I pulled the trigger twice. The gun kicked back only slightly as the bullets left the silencer. Then without skipping a beat, I fired a pair of rounds into the back

His black suit and tie and his crisp white shirt gave him a look of noblesse authority. Yet, something was entirely wrong because, you see, he had no head. Not that there was nothing at all above his shoulders, for instead of a head, there was a large white egg.

of Mom's head. They both slumped to the floor as I turned to hurriedly leave. Back out in the hallway, I found the twins in a state of hysterical laughter.

"Oh man, we got them good this time!" exclaimed the male.

"Thanks again," said the girl, smiling broadly.

I handed the pistol to her then, wondering what to do next. One part of me wanted to stick around to see if the parents would really come back to life. The other half just wanted to leave. This caused me some consternation as I wondered why I could perform such an act on just the word of this odd pair. Deciding that I couldn't bare to know the truth if they were lying, I turned and left without further word.

I rose from these "events" with my usual sense of wonder. The gun, for instance, had a balanced weight that surprised me. When I fired it, I was at first alarmed by the kickback from the sliding chamber when the shell ejected. At this point in my life I had never fired a pistol. Thus, I had no clue about these things. Many years later, I attended a shooting class where I discovered that those little details were exactly as experienced in... where? Where, and what, was that distant shore? The twins had called it Valhalla, that grand hall of the Vikings, the heavenly reward of those who died bravely in battle. If the place truly was occupied by those who enjoyed killing and being killed, then maybe these twins were right.

Valhalla

Over the course of the following year and a half I visited Valhalla often. I soon discovered that Valhalla truly was what it was called, though it was far from the gargantuan wooden hall described in writings of old. It may have begun as such, but time in this "alternate" reality seems to have been affected by culture just as it has in "this" reality. Both cultures overlapped in numerous ways.

I decided then and there that I would keep my eyes open in this place of nasty surprises. I also determined that I would be careful in my "real" world to avoid any situation where I might cause another's death. I figured that maybe if I could get through my life without killing anyone I'd be achieving something. As for Valhalla, I figured that I had been sent there for a purpose. I decided that purpose was to find its base of power in the golden towers and destroy it. I figured if all the violence on Earth came from there, then stopping it there would free the Earth.

During my adventures there, I eventually met up with compatriots. These dozen or so men and women were, like me, a bit confused as to this world, for, like me, they usually resided in the "real" world. Those who had been there the longest taught the newcomers. We had a kind of "rebel alliance," as it were.

Here is what I learned of Valhalla:

The entire land is located upon an isthmus that juts out into a sea. There is a city bordered by suburbs which eventually turns to farmland and thick woods. Different peoples inhabit these different areas.

If you were to enter the city from Valhalla's outskirts, you'd find the forest very lightly inhabited. When in the forest, one does not want to run into any of the residents. The deep forest is home to those who, when on earth, create evil magic. Any evil poisoner or kidnapper/torturer who ever dwelt on earth resides here. Some declare them wizards capable of the black arts, but they are mostly just vicious and clever charlatans.

The next zone would be the farmland. This area is occupied by stupidly violent and brutally idiotic farm boys who enjoy slaughter and revel in their own animalism.

Then you enter the suburbs. Here the architecture is Mediterranean. The streets are narrow and confusing. It doesn't take long to realize this confusing layout is purposeful. It's done to trap the unwary. None of the houses have windows on the ground floor, just a heavy wooden door. Any windows are on the upper floors, with a small porch overlooking the door. If you knock on one of these thick doors, the homeowner will appear on this porch so he can see who's there. In short, everything here is designed with defense in mind.

These suburbs are occupied by those who spent life on earth in isolated tribes. Paranoid of any not their kin, they make the streets dangerous for those caught out after dark. Getting through this zone on your way into the city is fraught with danger for the outsider.

A small group of us had managed to find proper disguises that would allow us to safely walk the streets. Our mission was to create a map. Dressed in the same kind of Moroccan robes common there, we managed to blend well enough not to raise suspicion. We followed some twisting alleys until we found ourselves on the edge of a large, open air market. Sticking to the edge of the crowd with our hooded heads low, we were making our way to a street opposite.

Suddenly, the background roar of the market stopped as though someone had given an order to be quiet. We all looked toward the center of the market, as everyone else did. There, in the middle of the teeming crowd stood a tall "man," wearing a very well tailored black, pin-striped suit. I couldn't see his feet, but I just knew they were shod with those same, shiny cop shoes I'd glanced from under that skiff during my first visit.

His black suit and tie and his crisp white shirt gave him a look of noblesse authority. Yet, something was entirely wrong because, you see, he had no head. Not that there was nothing at all above his shoulders, for instead of a head,

there was a large white egg. It was a little larger than a man's head, but featureless and blank. We all shivered at the sight.

This being was making some kind of official proclamation to the effect that there were outsiders in the land and all citizens were expected to be vigilant. We knew that meant us. The being's voice was hypnotic as it was authoritative. I marveled at the obedience displayed by the citizenry toward the egg head man and had the impression that he was the very last person you'd want to cross in this crowd. The being's words rang in my ears as though he were standing right next to me. It gave me the creeps. I noticed my compatriots were all suffering the same effects.

"It appears he can broadcast three hundred sixty degrees around his head!" whispered one of my older compatriots.

Then we witnessed another marvel. The egg head directed his voice to a member of the crowd who stood a good hundred feet away. The man received the message and shook his head in agreement with the egg head. We noticed that those closest to the recipient couldn't hear what the egg head was telling him. We suddenly realized with a start that the being was speaking directly into the recipient's ear, and his ear only! Those who were mere inches away couldn't hear what the egg head whispered across the distance.

"So he can not only broadcast to everyone, he can also whisper in your ear from a hundred feet!" I said as quietly as I could.

We then observed the egg head break off his silent conversation and stand at attention for a few seconds. He spun on his heels to face a woman in the crowd at his back. We then noticed he was performing the whispering trick on her this time, as she shook her head in a way that told us she was receiving instructions of some sort. What was informative in his sudden pirouette was that it clearly displayed to us that, not only could he speak in all directions, but he could also see in all directions! He had been scanning the crowd when he appeared to merely have been standing still. No wonder that lady I met on my first visit told me not to peek out from under the boat.

"These guys are just too powerful," said my older compatriot, "we better skeedaddle!"

It was then we noticed the egg head wasn't alone. Another, looking just like him, was snooping near the corner we needed to get to. We decided on another route which led us into a dead end. We eventually backtracked, using our map drawn to that point to get back to our hideout in the farmlands.

During that eighteen month period there were many misadventures and numerous harrowing failures at trying to get through the "burbs"; until we discovered a railroad bridge that allowed us to sneak into the city above the heads of the tribals.

We had to get into the city in order to destroy whatever "it" was controlling things in there. It had to be destroyed because it was also responsible for all the violence on the Earth plane, this present "reality." The denizens of Valhalla weren't happy just staying put, you see, but were continually being reborn onto this planet for the purpose of keeping the pot boiling. We were determined to enter the city and possibly bring about heaven on earth.

The city itself occupied the aforementioned isthmus. It resembled New York in many ways, not the least of which were a pair of twin towers. Mind you, "our" twin towers of 9/11 fame were not even finished when I was experiencing

these visions. True, they had been in the news, but as a nineteen year old, I had much better things to concern me.

What makes me doubt these visions of mine weren't merely dreams is the clarity of being one experienced there, and also the continuity of the scenery. The steel railroad bridge always had the same dark green paint job. The riveted girders were always the same, with the same four sets of tracks spanning it.

As to the twin towers of Valhalla, any similarity to "our" former landmarks ends at them being twins. These towers were not only much taller and wider, they were entirely made of some sort of golden material. You couldn't even glance their way when the sun bounced off their massive walls without risking temporary blindness.

No one knew which tower contained the "beast" we were after. All we knew was that we somehow had to enter these towers and destroy whatever ran the place. To this end we attempted many times to infiltrate the city. It was a learning process whereby we first suffered in the forest, until we learned how to protect ourselves there. Then we learned to avoid the idiot yokel farm boys. Then we were constantly "murdered" and forced out of phase with the Valhalla plane by the guardians of the suburbs.

When we finally did discover the bridge, it looked too simple. We suspected a trap. The bridge is long, a good half mile to the train yard on the other end downtown. It is constructed of open steel beams mounted on huge stone pillars about sixty feet high. It's quite a frightening prospect attempting to sneak across, hoping no one looks up.

So it was in small steps that we, one at a time, crawled across the trestle, peering through the railroad ties to the crazies below and hoping an unscheduled train didn't come by. This was a major reason for the holdup, in fact, as we were forced to waste a lot of time just hiding away while copying the trains' schedules.

The strange thing about this railroad is that it was the only form of transport in the land. From the hilly suburbs that overlooked the city on the shore below, not one other form of transportation was to be seen. The streets were designed for pedestrians only, while no boats graced the harbor. Whatever was on that far shore remains a mystery.

Even the trains had no passenger service. They only carried freight. They'd take off toward the forest region to return later loaded down with goods. We determined to someday sneak on board to find out what might be on the other end of the line.

When we finally did all manage to sneak into the city successfully, we found ourselves stymied once again by purposely confusing territory. We never made it out of the train yard before we were overwhelmed by the well-armed citizenry. I saw my compatriots get chopped to bits before getting hit in the back myself and fading away.

The Eight Planets

I find myself standing in an open market. I don't recognize anything here. Looking up, I am amazed to find I'm standing directly at the base of one of the golden towers.

"This is different," I think as I look around, trying not to look suspicious. It's then I notice other compatriots whom I recognize from past adventures. A man here, a woman there—they all appear as confused as I feel. We eventually manage to gather together at the edge of the crowd, which seems especially loud and festive for some reason. We

exchange furtive glances at each other, wondering what the occasion might be.

“Well. If it isn’t our outsiders!” bellows a large man a few feet away.

We’ve been discovered! My heart is pounding in my chest as I expect to hear a gunshot or feel a blade in the base of my spine.

A good portion of the bellow’s face is occupied by a red handlebar mustache. He wears some kind of overcoat with epaulettes and gold braid. I can’t tell if he’s a general of some sort or a bandleader. Beside him stands an egg head, his featureless blankness frightening me to my very core. My blood runs cold as I think, “it’s over.”

“Ha ha ha!” laughs the bandleader general, “you folks have it all wrong!”

It’s at this point we notice the gathering crowd. They’re smiling, but not in their usual mean-spirited way. The large, laughing man then tells us the following tale.

He tells us that, once every seven years, all eight planets in their system come close enough together to allow for a grand festival. He tells us we’re on the largest of the eight planets and that Valhalla is where the celebration is always held.

“Didn’t you notice the sky?” he asks, poking an index finger heavenward.

It’s only then that I notice that, sure enough, seven planets are visible in the daylight sky. They spread out in an uneven line across the dome of the heavens like multiple full moons.

“During this festival,” he tells us, “no one can commit any form of violence. For five whole days, our brothers and sisters come from the far reaches of space in order to party here. So enjoy yourselves while you may, you are completely safe here!”

As they left, the egg head quietly whispered to us all, “Don’t let us find you here afterwards.”

As soon as they departed, the crowd moved in on us, wanting to shake the hands of these strange outsiders. We were quite the oddity, it seems. Then a few of them took us under their wing, showing us a technology we’d never before seen. They handed us what appeared to be a small piece of white plastic. It was the thickness of a credit card, about four inches wide by eight long.

“What do we do with this?” we asked.

They then demonstrated what they were for. Holding the thin piece of material horizontally before them like a wing, our newfound friends suddenly lifted off into the sky. Then by tilting it in different ways, they could start, stop and turn with ease. We followed suit, finding flight to be as easy as holding a bit of paper. We swooped and swerved like happy children with our wonderful new toys. Our small group of comrades and friendly natives flew over the golden towers, out over the quiet harbor and then back towards the countryside. Landing in a field surrounded by trees, we rested for awhile. I used this opportunity to question the locals.

“Can you answer a question for me?” I asked the man who had earlier demonstrated the flying device.

“Maybe,” he replied with a friendly grin.

“What, or who, is in the towers?”

He looked away, pausing as though searching for the correct words.

“I can’t explain it to you. Actually, I could, quite easily, it’s just that...,” again, he paused, “mind you, I don’t mean any insult when I say this, but... I’m not sure you could understand my explanation.”

“Just answer this, then...,” I said, “is whatever resides there evil?”

“Ahh, now there’s the big question. Let me ask you, what is evil? Is it something you disagree with? Something most or all of society disagrees with? When a baby dies, is that evil? Is nature, in her daily rounds then, evil?”

“Well,” I stammered, “there’s ‘nature’ and then there’s ‘evil.’ The theological arguments on this subject go back and forth...”

“The old, ‘why doesn’t God prevent this sorrow and pain’ argument?” he interrupted.

“Exactly!” said I.

“Well, think of this ... if not for pain, how would you know the opposites of joy and ease and comfort?”

“But this doesn’t really answer my question. Why can’t we exist without pain?”

“For the reason I just gave! If there was no pain in the physical universe, you’d never learn.”

“Learn what?” I demanded.

“Whatever it is you are supposed to learn.”

I sat there considering what a clunky universe I found myself in. I still couldn’t fathom why all this pain was necessary.

“I see you’re still confused,” he said with a bit of exasperation. “Well then, let me tell you this, then I won’t say another word on the subject of exactly why the world you know is the way it is. Imagine being the first cause, or whatever ‘it’ was at the very beginning. Imagine the scene; there’s nothing but... what? ‘You’ don’t exist yet because ‘you’ have no way to recognize your own individuality. Floating in space, a sudden curiosity grows as it’s seen that there is some ‘out there’ separate from... ‘I’! With this ‘I’ realization comes a realization that ‘I’ am alone. The outside is not like the inside.”

“Now imagine a baby born on the Earth plane. This baby is born with the most awful handicaps. The poor thing is blind, deaf, and missing vocal cords or any other means of making a sound. This poor baby has no nervous system. It has no way to experience the outside world. In other words, this poor being, born with a conscious mind, has no way of knowing where, what or when, it is. In short, there is no reality, as we experience, for this poor creature. This being, with no idea of language, still manages to create a world of thought images. It creates a world occupied by things that itself would consider right for its creation. Can you understand this concept?”

“Sure, I guess so, though it does take some mental calisthenics. It’s hard to imagine so much nothing.”

“Good. Then you understand the true nature of what you call ‘God.’”

I sat there, stunned. I’d never considered such an idea. I tried to parse it all out in an attempt to find a hole in his logic, but I couldn’t. This explained every spiritual question I’d ever had. It all made such wonderful sense. Of course such a creature would invent pain if it needed experience. I still had a question though.

"If, as you say, this god-creature is using us as mere actors in some great passion play, then what is the expected result?"

"To wake up, what else?"

"Wake up?"

"Of course. Think of the creature described. It controls what we lovingly call the 'universe'. Your world. My world. They are all in 'Its' head! So, what we have here is the equivalent of someone in your plane, trapped in a coma. Our creator knows all the worlds are mere substitutes for what 'It' is missing."

The shock of this idea hit me. "You mean...we're all just a dream? If the godhead ever comes out of its comatose state...?"

"Yep," he said. "If 'It' ever awakens, all worlds end. But this is a good thing because then we'll all be integrated into the godhead, you see? There will be no more pain then."

"When do you expect this to come about," I asked.

"When we all have experienced everything there is to experience, or when 'It' has had enough to awaken."

"So, in the meantime, we're all just actors on some stage? Puppets?"

"No. You are one spark of a greater flame. You are the Creator's eyes and ears."

"And this is why we have evil?"

"Yes. Without 'evil' there is no adventure. It appears that the godhead is hooked on adventure," he said, smiling broadly.

"We here in this plane bring violence to your plane in a measure decided by the godhead, you see. All of the so-called evil people in your plane cycle through here. Some, like those denizens of our suburban zone, are as mere children in your plane. These 'people' are all fairly new creations of the godhead. After a number of lifetimes, they eventually sicken of violence, but until then, their actions can be very informative to the godhead. You see?"

This is why, when you inquire as to the inhabitants of the towers, I can't truly answer, for we know not. We, on this plane, are as in the dark on this subject as you."

"I see. Sorry for trying to destroy your towers."

"That's alright. There's no way that ever could have happened anyhow. Not unless 'It' wanted it that way, that is. These towers will exist as long as evil is needed in your world."

Istanbul

After this "holiday" visitation, the visions stopped. No longer did I visit Valhalla. After what I'd learned about the nature of evil in that plane, I figured going back was redundant. Thirty years later I found myself in the unique position of having both the money and the time for travel. Whereas most might use the opportunity to go to Paris or Rome, I had an itch to visit Turkey because I kept seeing scenery from the country in movies that thrilled me. The snow white pools of Pamukkale. The "Fairy Castles" and tunnel systems of Cappadocia. I just had to see these things myself.

Thus it was that I found myself booking a flight to Istanbul. In doing research, I discovered that September is the best time to visit, so I made reservations at a small hotel

called the Sultan's Inn for September 11th, 2001. This choice was completely random. (Or was it?)

I left New York on the evening of the tenth, landing in Istanbul on that historic morning. A driver was there to take me to the hotel, where I showered, shaved and took a walk around the beautiful neighborhoods of that ancient city. At eight A.M., New York time (one P.M. in Istanbul), I returned to my hotel for a nap, planning to go out again later that night to check out Istanbul's vaunted night scene.

As I slept the sleep of happy innocence abroad, terrible jets were crashing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. As I slept off my jet lag, thousands of people who showed up for work that beautiful blue morning back in New York were launching themselves skyward.

I woke at 10 p.m. and set out onto the street. I was walking up the hill toward the Blue Mosque when I was accosted by a local tout, employed to drag tourists into the restaurants and carpet shops along the boulevard.

"Excuse me sir," called out the Ringo Starr look-alike, "what country are you from?"

"America," I answered.

At the mention of "America," Ringo slapped both palms over his heart, saying, "Ahh...America! My heart goes out to you!"

He could tell by the perplexed look on my face that I had no clue as to what he just said.

"You don't know?!" he asked incredulously.

He held a closed fist before his face, and with the other, smacked it, saying, "Your huge towers! Planes! Bombs!" He then spread his hands, palm down, at his waist. "Your place of generals! More Planes! More bombs!" Then he pointed a finger into the air, making a circular motion. "Your president Boosh! In the air! No one knows!"

I stood there for a second in stunned silence. What was this guy trying to tell me? I'd heard these touts could be tough, but this was beyond the pale! He couldn't be saying this in order to get me to buy something? Could he?

At this point his boss came out of the restaurant to talk to me. Fortunately, he spoke English very well.

"It's true," he said. "The Twin Towers were attacked by planes, as was the Pentagon. Not so much damage there, but New York is bad."

I returned to my hotel later that night, where I climbed the stairs to the rooftop restaurant. I knew it was closed and dark, and that's how I wanted it.

As I stood there at the rail, observing the majestic beauty of the nearby Blue Mosque, I recalled the words of my guide on that Valhalla holiday all those years ago. "These towers will exist as long as evil is needed in your world," is what he'd said.

I cried there on that rooftop in Istanbul that night. I cried for all those poor people who should have called in sick that day. I wondered if those towers of gold still stood on that other shore, if "'It' wanted it that way," as my guide had said.

©2008 Mark Elliott. Mark Elliott is a writer, Assistant Editor of *Paranoia* Magazine and cancer survivor. When existing on this plane, he resides in the wilds of Rhode Island, playing his hand drum for the local belly dancers.