

CHAPTER 6

THE COP IN THE TRUNK

FINALLY, THE FIRST beautiful spring day of the year arrived. The sky was clear, and the sun warmed the still brisk air. Kip's lawsuit against Ray had successfully allowed him to retrieve his belongings. His mother was still in Florida, but was due back soon. Meanwhile, he was still in her apartment and tending to her cat, which she had left behind during her absence. Suddenly he had a brainstorm. He would take the cat outside! The creature had never been outdoors in her life, and did little else except hide under the sofa and meow whenever anyone came near her. She needed a new experience.

A plan quickly unwrapped itself in his mind. He would get a piece of string, tie it to her collar, and take her on the grass next to the apartment building. He found a spool of string, dug the cat out from underneath the living room couch, and tied the string securely to her little collar. Then he hoisted her up in his arms, and carried her down the hallway, through the elevator, and out into the fresh air. She was meowing dangerously the whole time in a low voice that was utterly different from the usual sound she produced.

As soon as he set her down, she started slinking around, belly pressed to the ground like a snake. Then she made a beeline for the woods. The string was long enough to allow Kip to let it play out for a while, but it soon reached its limit. He lost sight of her. Some jerky movements in the shrubbery indicated that she was tangled in a small tree. He followed her, reeling in the line, until he was able to grab hold of it just near her collar. At this point, the cat became alarmed and tried to wrench herself away from him. All at once, her head slipped free of the collar, and she went bounding off in the woods.

A small grassy strip separated the woods from a commercial parking lot, completely empty on this Saturday afternoon except for a single car. Kip saw the creature go under the car, and followed her in no great hurry, sure that she would pause there. When he bent down and looked underneath, however, she was gone. He fruitlessly combed the lot and adjacent woods. Returning to the apartment building, he told a few of the residents what happened. "If you don't find that cat before your mother gets back, you'll have to move to Canada!" one of them quipped.

The remark hit home. With a feeling of quiet desperation, Kip printed up a flyer and posted it throughout the neighborhood. When he returned to his mother's apartment, he called the Humane Society. It was already late in the afternoon, so they suggested that he come in the next day

to fill out a report. By evening, he was out of ideas, so he called his friend George just to get things off his chest, and related to him the whole sequence of events.

“The last place you saw her was underneath the car? You didn’t see her scoot off anywhere else?” George asked.

“Nope.”

“They can crawl up inside the motor, you know.”

As soon as George mentioned this possibility, Kip realized that it fit the nature of the cat. Her first instinct would be to hide. What, however, if the owner of the car came back and tried to start it? It would be like putting the cat in a blender! He asked George if he could come over quickly, and his friend agreed. A couple of hours later, George pulled up in his beat-up red pickup. He was burly, tanned, balding, and always looked like he had just come from working in his yard or garage. He got on his back and peered up into the bowels of the car.

“I can see her,” he said.

“Let me look.” Kip crawled under the car, but was unable to make out a thing. “Where is she?” George showed him again. He got on his back and looked very carefully. Finally, he saw part of the cat’s head—a patch of white and gray fur, and one green eye. George slid underneath the car once more. Kip could hear him fiddling around with something, and then the hood suddenly popped open. When they lifted it up, there was the cat, sitting right on top of the engine.

As they took the animal back to the apartment, the whole incident started to sink in to Kip. “You know, George,” he said, “I’m trying to pay attention to everything that happens to me. This situation with the cat was no accident. It was trying to tell me something about my life. I wanted to play the great liberator, take the cat outside, show her the world, and teach her not to hide under the sofa all the time. She’s been ruled by her fear instinct her whole life. Am I really that different, though?”

The next evening, Kip had a vivid dream in which he was driving down a street, looked into his rearview mirror, and saw a police car behind him. The more carefully he drove, the closer it followed him. Eventually, the cop stopped him and told him to get out of the car. Then the cop started to get abusive, like in some grade-B movie. He was standing in front of Kip, getting in his face. Finally, he pulled out two magic markers—a yellow one and a blue one—and started painting Kip’s lips with them. He painted his upper lip yellow and his lower lip blue.

All of a sudden, Kip got a jump on him, took his gun away, and pointed it at him. Of course, Kip couldn’t kill him. That would have gotten him into real trouble! At the same time, he couldn’t allow him to go free, because then he would have hauled Kip off to jail. He therefore stuffed him in the trunk of his car. Then he got on the highway and drove without

stopping for a day and a half. Finally, he came to a forest of Southern pine. There he released the cop, ensuring that it would take him a long time to make his way back to Belle Harbor.

As soon as Kip woke up, he had an intuition about the meaning of the dream. In the League teachings, the color yellow was associated with Soul and the color blue with the Mind. The cop had painted his upper lip yellow and his lower lip blue. The dream seemed to be referring to the spiritual principle that the Mind was subordinate to Soul. As was commonly said in League circles, the Mind was a good servant, but a bad master. The cop also had worn a blue uniform, underscoring the message that Kip was granting his mind too much authority.

He had attracted the cop's attention by driving too slowly and carefully, and took this as an additional warning—that by attempting to avoid risk, he was actually increasing it. The encounter with the cop represented the consequences of approaching life too carefully. The dream was modeling fear for him, just as the incident with the cat had done the day before. The cat, ruled by fear, had sought refuge in the most potentially dangerous part of the car. Similarly, Kip, with his slow driving, had attracted the attention of the cop. Fear attracted the very conditions it sought to avoid. If he could not eliminate his fear, he could bypass its authority by metaphorically packing it away, like the cop in the trunk, in a neutral part of his mind. He decided the dream was also telling him that he needed get away from Belle Harbor for a while, discard all his expectations, and look for something that would point him in a new direction.

Kip waited until his mother returned to town and was reunited with her cat. Then, he prepared for his journey. He needed a few days to take care of loose ends. He went down to the weekly Kiwanis sale on Saturday morning and bought a sleeping bag and some mosquito netting. He also found a light tent that was on sale at the Army surplus store. The longer the preparation process took, the more anxious he became. Getting out of town was like trying to tear off something glued to his skin. He knew that his greatest difficulty would be to go slowly. Once he got on the road, he tended to keep his foot on the gas until he reached his destination. In this instance, he didn't have a destination, and it would be crucial to avoid manufacturing one.

He finally took off around midday, and drove steadily south. He put on some folk music tapes and listened to them obsessively the whole way down. The songs expressed the sadness and loneliness of being without direction in life. On a tribute album to Woody Guthrie, he listened to Bob Dylan wailing, *I ain't got no home in this world any more*, and was touched by Odetta's soaring, soulful voice singing, *I am just a refugee. I go ramblin' 'round*. After three days, he arrived in Durham, North Carolina. He parked his car adjacent to the Duke University campus, got out, and stretched his legs. The

school term was over, and there were few students in sight. He strolled down the street and passed a bookstore, where he noticed a small handwritten note pasted on the door. It advertised the services of a psychic who was to be there the next day. Kip went in and told the manager he was interested.

“I’ve got her on the phone right now,” the manager said fortuitously. “Do you want to talk to her?”

Kip took the phone from him, introduced himself to the psychic, and arranged to come in at noon the next day. That evening, he drove to the Falls Lake region, a little ways out of town. He parked at the furthest point of a dead end road and pitched his little tent just barely out of reach of some swampy ground. The next morning, he drove back into Durham, and got to the bookstore by noon. The psychic greeted him moments later.

“Oh, a reporter, I see,” she said. She was a youngish woman of medium build, with dark hair, and wore a short-sleeved sweater that was a soft indigo color.

“What do you mean?” he asked, as she led him to a back room. She sat down behind a desk, and he took a seat opposite her.

“I can sense you’re a reporter. Have you ever done any kind of work like that?”

He thought for a minute. “I’ve had a some experiences in that direction,” he replied. “I once wrote a few brief articles for a local paper. More recently, I had the idea of doing sketches of people in my area and building up a portfolio to show to some local magazines. I heard a young blues guitarist play at the Gypsy Café in Belle Harbor who impressed me. I went up to him and asked to do an interview. He agreed to meet me, but we failed to hook up, and I never followed up on it after that.”

“Well, it sounds as if you’ve gotten a couple of nudges in that direction. You just never listened to them closely enough. I see you writing short pieces about your travels, or about the people you meet along the way. That’s the direction you should be thinking in.”

Something about her statement rang true, but it was at such variance with what Kip had been doing for so many years that he needed some time to process it.

“You’ve been blocked,” she added. “Something has prevented you from discovering your true vocation. You’re on the right path, though. Do what you love to do. That’s the most important thing in life.”

He thanked her and paid for the session, feeling that she had given him a lot to think about.

From Durham, he drove all the way to the Outer Banks, the whole time thinking about how he could develop his writing potential. That evening, he camped near Kitty Hawk. The next morning, he went out to the beach and swam in the tide, the sun still red and low in the sky. In the

afternoon, he visited the Wright Brothers Memorial, which was inscribed with the following words:

In commemoration of the conquest of the air...conceived by genius, achieved by dauntless courage and unconquerable faith

The inscription brought tears to his eyes. It seemed strange that he would cry at a mere inscription, and he wondered why these words had touched off such a well of feeling within him. It had something to do with the idea of greatness, of making a difference in the world. He knew in his heart that he was not a person who was destined for great achievement in this lifetime. Yet the desire, the ambition to make an imprint, a singular difference, or a contribution to his fellow man appeared to be a hidden, but important, aspect of his personality.

Kip had only been on the road a few days, but was ready to head back to Belle Harbor. He felt he had already gotten the answer he had been seeking. He returned flush with the intention of doing a series of interviews. He rented a tiny room of his own, and began looking for suitable subjects. One of his first encounters was with Ronnie Sutter, the blues artist whom he had once met at the Gypsy Café. Now Kip bumped into him again at the local metaphysical bookstore. He entered around ten o'clock on a Friday evening, near the end of his performance. Ronnie was seated in a corner of the upstairs café, with an electric guitar and a small amplifier set on a chair next to him. Kip was just in time to hear him give a rendition of 'Frankie and Johnnie' in a traditional style, followed by songs of Mississippi John Hurt, Robert Johnson, and Sylvester Weaver. Even with the amplifier set low for the small audience, the guitar overwhelmed Ronnie's voice, but the instrumental work was so spectacular that it didn't matter. The atmosphere was intense and intimate, and the audience's response exceeded enjoyment, ascending into the realm of gratitude.

After the set, Kip reminded him of their previous meeting and set up another date for an interview. When he finally met with him at his home the following week, Kip told him right off that he didn't know anything about country blues, except that he liked it better than just about any other kind of music.

"It's the most passionate," Ronnie said.

Kip agreed with him, and asked him about the relationship between blues and Gospel music.

"They're closely related," Ronnie responded. "The early Gospel singers would mix traditional songs with their own style of field hollers and blues. Instead of 'I woke up this morning and shot my woman,' it was 'I woke up this morning and prayed to God.' It's the exact same music, though. The guitar player would do the same thing. On Saturday night, he'd be

singing about drinking, gambling, and women, and on Sunday morning, he'd sing about God. It's just the subject matter that's different."

"The subject matter is different, but IS it different?" Kip asked. "Last week, when you were playing at the bookstore, you mentioned that most of the songs you were playing were either about Jesus or about murder. What's the difference, though?"

Ronnie laughed. "I know what you mean. Whether I do a murder ballad about a pair of lovers or listen to Gospel music, I really get the same feeling from both. In both cases, extremes of human emotions are involved. There's a truth in that type of music. It's just the human condition."

Kip felt that although they were talking about art, their conversation also touched on his concerns with spirituality. "You said the blues is the most passionate genre of music," he reminded Ronnie. "Passionate, to me, means true. So if the most passionate is the truest, there must be something very true about murder."

"I agree," the musician replied. "Strange as it seems to say, I can't really think of anything more spiritual than a murder ballad. What is more spiritual than a person confronted with pain, grief, loss, and the consequences of his own actions? I feel that spirituality is everywhere and in every thing. I don't think it is inherent in any type of experience more than another."

Kip found himself in powerful agreement with Ronnie on this score, but he was interested in exploring another issue, which concerned the nature of art and creativity. "I've been told that the blues is not a complicated form, that it's a matter of certain basic chord changes," he commented. "If that's true about the chord structure, it's certainly true of the lyrics, as well. So if the musical structure is not complex, and the lyrics aren't either, then what does it take to give a blues song a character of its own? How do you develop a distinctive voice as a blues artist, a style of your own?"

"I've had similar conversations with a lot of musicians," Ronnie said. "Anybody can learn how to do something verbatim. If you've got the right instruments, at some point you'll be able to do it perfectly. For a time, I wanted to do the acoustic blues to perfection. I wanted to do a player-piano type of rendition. After a while, I found that I had a lot more fun when I was just completely myself. It's a constant struggle for me to get rid of all that 'I should be this' and relax into what I am. Filtering what you know through your own personality and background is the only way."

Ronnie Sutter had confirmed Kip's sense that there was a kinship between art and spirituality, between an artist and a spiritual seeker. He had made Kip thirsty for the blues and hungry to find some channel for his own creativity. He went out on the porch to smoke a cigarette, and Kip joined him. Their breaths were visible in the cold under the porch light. They shook

hands in parting, and Kip left his house feeling restless, as if somewhere in the distance someone was calling his name.

Another early interview Kip conducted was with a family of martial arts practitioners. He was hanging out at a Greek restaurant on Main Street one day, when he noticed a young woman enter, buy a cup of coffee and leave. She was in no way extraordinary in terms of her appearance, but something about her captured his attention. He watched through the window as she sat down on a bench in front of the restaurant. He paid his check and boldly sat down beside her. They started up a conversation, and Kip was immediately impressed with her intensity, as well as with her sense of relaxation and ease.

Still a high school student, Athena Marcus was a martial artist, cross-country runner, and horse trainer, as well as a talented writer and musician. As they talked, Kip thought of William Blake's famous aphorism: "Energy is beauty." Here was something worthy of investigation. What gave her that energy, intensity, and awareness? Did her martial arts training have something to do with it? When he found out that she attended a weekly class with her parents at a nearby martial arts studio, he arranged to meet with them at the same restaurant the following Saturday, right after their class. He arrived to find Athena seated with her parents, Lauren and Steve Marcus. Wedging a chair in at the periphery of the small table, he began by asking them how they would define the martial arts to someone like him, who knew nothing about the subject.

"The martial arts evolved from a pure, combat-oriented, self-defense technique to a method of self-improvement and cultivation of the self—physically, mentally, and spiritually," Steve explained. "Eventually, they came to be used as a path to self-awareness and self-enlightenment. In the Japanese culture you can use anything—the tea ceremony, or calligraphy, for instance—to reach the same goals of self-awareness."

"Are you saying that any activity can be used as a spiritual exercise?" Kip asked.

"Sure," Steve said. "Anything we do can be used as a mirror to examine ourselves. The martial arts force you to look at yourself on a deeper level. When you're doing *judo* or *karate*, you're trying to improve your technique, constantly becoming aware of your failings or weaknesses. You can choose to not see them, or pretend they don't exist. If you have the correct attitude, however, you look at them as offering you a chance to improve. To do this, you have to be able to look at yourself honestly. The idea is that it's an individual quest. It's different from the Western monotheistic tradition that puts God at a level above man, and results in man trying to please God. The Buddhist tradition teaches that divinity is within you, and your task is to discover it."

He commented on the sense of balanced energy that they all seemed to possess. “That’s one of the things that you really work to achieve,” Athena replied. “In the ancient times, back in Japan, you would have to spend many hours per day training in martial arts, and then you’d have to learn to balance that with the rest of your life, with outside chores and family duties. The whole thing is about achieving an inner balance within yourself that helps you to cope with that life outside the martial arts center, or *dojo*.”

Kip came away from this conversation questioning the discipline of the League’s contemplative practice. If writing could be considered a type of spiritual exercise, was it a fair substitute for his daily contemplation? This practice was tool to maintain, refresh, and renew one’s connection with the Force. He had always felt it produced in him a sense of balance, but he was now skeptical about this feeling because despite it, he hadn’t been able to make positive choices in his life. He actually craved the feeling of being out of balance, because in this state he felt more active, more impelled to get out into the world and become a greater participant in life. Instead of relegating his contemplative practice to a tiny portion of the day, he desired to make the very act of living a spiritual exercise.

He soon became immersed in his writing and allowed his daily contemplative practice to decline. There was something refreshing, even liberating about freeing himself from this discipline. He felt that writing was giving him a different perspective on his experiences. Since producing a shift in consciousness, awareness, or perspective was the very essence of a spiritual exercise, he questioned whether he was really failing in his spiritual discipline by substituting writing for his contemplation.

Writing forced him to examine himself more than he had before. This was particularly noticeable in the process of revision. This was a never-ending process. Kip likened it to combing a longhaired cat in summer. He always found some flaw or lack of perspective, no matter how many times he repeated the process. It made him highly aware of the constant need to develop a greater perspective or adopt a higher viewpoint.

Kip’s loss of interest in his daily contemplative practice was troubling to him, however, for this constituted the most fundamental discipline and obligation of a League member. The assumption was that by neglecting this practice, an individual would ultimately lose his connection with the Force and abandon the Path. Initiates were constantly reminded of the necessity of remaining steadfast in their practice of this discipline, so much so that Kip felt ashamed to admit to any fellow initiates that he was having trouble doing so. Was he just using his writing as an excuse for his lack of discipline, or was he actually trying to exercise a higher type of discipline?

He decided to call Lynne Silva for advice. “I’m not sure I want the safety of the contemplative exercises any more,” he said to her. “My life has

been too static, too motionless. If I have to abandon this daily practice in order to throw myself into a crisis, then so be it. What do you think?”

“I think you have the right idea, Lynne replied. “Spiritual crisis is not the same as spiritual failure. It can be productive. It can invigorate us and lead us in new directions. Sometimes we need a crisis to have spiritual growth. Simply adhering regularly to one’s spiritual discipline isn’t necessarily a ticket to salvation. A person who makes their contemplative practice simply a routine or habit could get the idea that this is all the discipline they need to do in life, whereas this is far from the truth.

“Of course,” she added, “the idea that you can simply substitute your questioning and writing for your contemplative practice may also be a false assumption in the long run. There may be a point when you realize the need to come back to it. The most important thing, however, is to be true to yourself. If you’re doing your contemplative exercises out of a sense of duty, obligation, or even fear of the negative consequences of not doing them, that’s not a proper motivation. Rules apply mainly to beginners on the spiritual path. You’re not a beginner any more. You’re ready to make your own rules.”

Shortly after this, Kip paid a visit to the Flaming Heart Center, which offered teachings of an ancient Tantric lineage—part of a non-monastic, non-celibate school of Tibetan Buddhism. He had come to attend a public teaching with the American lama Sangsu Rinpoche, formally recognized as a *tülku*, or incarnation, of a great Tibetan *yogin* from the last century.

He had little idea what to expect. The entrance hall was already hung with dozens of coats as he came in. The meeting hall, decorated with colorful Tibetan wall coverings, was packed with over sixty people, most sitting cross-legged on the floor, some in chairs against the back wall. The lama entered, his palms pressed together, fingertips pointed upward in a traditional Tibetan greeting. He was dressed in a broad, white skirt, with a maroon sash slung over his shoulder. The assembly bowed and began a chant that lasted for five or ten minutes. Some had liturgical books open before them, but most sang the Tibetan words by rote in remarkable unison.

Lama Sangsu opened the meeting in a relaxed and informal manner. He began his discourse by quoting a well-known Sufi aphorism: “One should gauge the quality and level of one’s activity the way a good camel driver gauges the weight of the halter. If the halter is too heavy, the camel will lie down and not get up or walk at all. If the halter is too light, the camel won’t listen to any directions.”

The lama illustrated this principle by recounting the history of the Tibetan saint Milarepa, who began his spiritual search by choosing the swift and seemingly facile Dzogchen path, but found that he could not master it. He then took up the far more physically demanding Marpa path, in pursuit of which he was given tasks of mythic proportions, and thereby achieved

enlightenment. The lama's point was that a so-called 'light halter' would not work for some people, and a 'heavy halter' would not work for others. "Each person," he explained, "has a 'soft limit' and 'hard limit'. If you never go beyond your soft limit, you will not progress, but if you go beyond your hard limit, you will be hurt, and feel crushed or ashamed about your constant failure.

"Those who never go beyond their soft limit relax into their habits, and sink into their slovenly, animalistic nature. Those who go to the opposite extreme tend to be people who want to be admired for their spirituality. Given that we are all camels, metaphorically speaking, we tend to limit ourselves both with our 'soft' and our 'hard' behavior. In certain areas of our lives we won't go beyond our soft limit, and in others, we insist on punishing ourselves by going beyond our hard limit.

"All external events can be taken as the communication of teaching," Lama Sangsu continued. "Over and over again we have to assess what we're doing. We ought to be shocked at our ability to rationalize our own behavior. All fingers should point to our selves. When people undermine their whole life by trying to do what they are unable to do, it's annoying to see. Our whole culture is designed to make us forget what our potentialities are. The constant stimulation represented by this cultural production is endless. Disengaging from its influence is the first step to putting you in greater touch with yourself."

After the teaching was over, Kip went up to Lama Sangsu, introduced himself, and asked if he could talk with him. The lama agreed, and eventually they sat down cross-legged on meditation cushions in the empty meeting hall, with pleasant incense wafting above them. "I'd like to return to the subject of your teaching on Sunday, specifically the Sufi aphorism about the camel," Kip said.

"This is actually used in a series of instructions for teachers," Lama Sangsu replied. "The idea is that if you lay a halter upon your students that is too heavy for them, then they won't be able to function at all, and they'll become despairing. On the other hand, if one has no discipline at all in one's life, then the mind wanders about randomly without any ability to tell that it's wandering.

"You therefore have to be careful not to burden people with too much, not to tell people that they have to take on all kinds of disciplines that they're not capable of taking on, which are beyond their ability at that phase of their practice. Sadly, in some groups this happens on purpose. You cause the person to feel broken and incapable, which is a very good thing if you want to exert control over other people. First, you make them think that there's something their life depends upon achieving if they're going to be worthwhile human beings. Then you make sure they can't achieve it. They

depend on you, or on your system of teaching, for the achievement of the thing. No other teaching will do it.”

Lama Sangsu’s words struck a chord in Kip. The situation he was describing was disturbingly similar to that in the League, whose spiritual goals often seemed so lofty that it was easy to become disillusioned with one’s own ability to achieve them.

“You can find people with a high degree of realization, a mediocre degree of realization, as well as downright mean and nasty people in almost every spiritual tradition,” the lama continued. A well-functioning group will almost necessarily include some people with strong aberrations, because spiritual life is meant to help those people. Most groups are mirrors of society. The group doesn’t control the psycho-dynamics of any individual, but each individual contributes to the dynamics of the group as a whole. The group develops an ethos, an overall *Gestalt*. Groups and their members are like a river and its banks. The banks shape the river and the river shapes the banks.

“Are you familiar with Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*?” he asked. “His analysis of technological society is that it shapes the apparent needs of people, and then people are bound by what they feel to be their needs. You can find groups whose function is the fantasy that they’re all very spiritually advanced. Therefore, they never apply any discipline to themselves, so they never discover that they’re not.”

To Kip, the lama’s words accurately described the League, whose members universally considered themselves a spiritual elite although their actual disciplines were meager. “So, every spiritual group is actually attuned to a halter of different weight?” he asked.

“That’s correct,” Lama Sangsu replied.

“It must be difficult, therefore, to judge or evaluate any group. To external appearance, a group may offer a very loose halter. However, there may be a lot more going on under the surface.” Kip was fishing for some way to reconcile his faith in the League with the doubts that the lama’s analytical perspective was raising in him.

“At least for some people,” the lama replied. “Membership in a group alone does not bestow anything on a person. Some individuals take advantage of the spiritual discipline offered by the group to which they belong, while others do not.”

“In the League, one of our guidelines is to be at all times an example of joy and happiness to other people. Well, Jesus Christ! That could be a very big discipline,” Kip commented.

“Exactly... Jesus Christ!” The lama joined him in laughter.

Kip left with a very different perspective on the League than when he came in. The lama had analyzed it in sociological terms, like any other group. Seen in this light, the League was not special at all. It functioned in

accordance with scientific laws and principles. Its chief distinguishing characteristic appeared to be only the high esteem in which its members held themselves. From a spiritual point of view, however, it epitomized what Lama Sangsu called the 'light halter' path. This could be the most demanding type of path. As Lama Sangsu had noted, rules were easy to follow. The less structure provided by the group, the more people tended to impose rules on themselves and extend those rules to others. Thus, the League was a testing ground. Those for whom spirituality was a matter of rules and guidelines served a role in maintaining the outer organization. Those who could not fit their spiritual sensibility into such a mold would have to look deeper for their own discipline, and their own truth.