Steven Schwartz

So This Is It

Boulder, fall 1972: I'm in an honors psychology course. Make that parapsychology. It's taught by a well-respected and elderly member of the physics faculty. There are twelve of us, and we meet in the professor's living room; his wife graciously serves us tea and coffee from silver pots and offers us moist, sweet slices of homemade pumpkin raisin bread. Surrounded by handsome oak bookcases overflowing with scientific tomes on gravitational and electromagnetic forces beyond my comprehension, we host a variety of outside speakers who have something to say about the paranormal.

I'm twenty-one years old; I've dropped out of two colleges before coming to Colorado. I've never been further west from Philadelphia than Ohio, and on the drive out to Boulder, sight unseen, my worldly belongings in the back seat, including collections of Woody Allen and Lenny Bruce records, I pick up a hitchhiker, a Hare Krishna. He plays his guitar and chants across the plains of Kansas and Missouri as we cruise along I-70. A bird crashes into the windshield and presumably dies. We observe this mortal passing with silent concern, at least I do. Does this foretell bad tidings in Boulder? Is it a troubling omen, given added significance that I am traveling with a mostly companionable individual who, my age exactly, has abandoned all his earthly possessions—not that it would be hard in my case either, just dump the backseat—to devote his life to dubious Hindu deities?

He doesn't try to convert me, though I pepper him with questions. What do his parents think? (no contact with them). What did he do before? (a rock band). How did he get out of the draft? (a high lottery number). How does he (this question is asked under the cover of darkness) deal with renouncing sex? (he ignores the question to strum his guitar and chant more songs to Lord Krishna).

Reaching Boulder, we shake hands. He goes one way, I another. I pull up in front of the registration building and fall promptly asleep. When I wake, it's morning and I'm looking up through my back window at the most zealously blue sky I've ever seen, *deliciously* blue, crystalline stoned blue. Though always a teetotaler in the cannabis department, I have smoked, to quell my excitement and get some sleep, the one joint a friend gave me for the ride from Philadelphia.

But let me not digress too far into the joys of Boulder, Colorado, in the early seventies before it became the hotbed of everything it is today: hi-tech companies, herbal tea, Crocs, extreme sports, a famous child-murder case, more bicycles

than China, and party animal students. Back then it was sort of in proportion to the times, still in the realm of the curious, a place on the circuit of smaller drop-out, drop-in cities like Madison, Ann Arbor, Santa Fe, Eugene, and a few others that promised to pay off on the counter-culture vision. After three years of wandering from one college to another, with thoughts of being a filmmaker, but in reality dropping out and winding up sharing a roach-infested apartment with a high school friend in College Park, Maryland, I want to get my life back on track as a serious college student in pursuit of significant career opportunities.

Which winds me up in Boulder, taking every fringe course possible. This includes registering for fifteen hours, let me repeat, *fifteen hours*, an entire semester's worth of academic credit, for something called Spiritual Paths in America, under the university's "Experimental Studies Program." Buddhists, TMers, rabbis, priests, Quakers, Eckankar leaders (Eckists!), Zen practitioners, hatha and kundalini yogis, and even, oddly, a couple Black Panthers visit our group of eighteen students. Other speakers follow, including a whole clutch of therapeutic schools: Jungians, Rogerians, Behavorialists, Transactional Analysts. Like everyone else I know, I have the standard sixties equipment: a well worn copy of *Be Here Now*, *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, *The Greening of America*, and quotes in my Boulder apartment from Fritz Perls—*I do my thing, and you do yours, I am not in this world to live up to your expectations and you are not in this world to live up to mine*—taped to my walls next to my Desiderata poster ("Go placidly amid the noise and haste . . .").

We meditate, we have an "encounter group," where a beautiful blonde coed, perish the word, who has an equally beautiful blond boyfriend also from California, somehow, yes, somehow takes a liking to me, thin, Jewish, nervous, but with a brain and mouth, let's say, *a thousand rpms* faster than her boyfriend's, with his golden shoulder-length hair, a nice guy really, until he finds out I've been hanging out, that is, my tongue has been hanging out in his girlfriend's mouth. I become especially interested in her, given my draw to neurosis of any kind in women, after she admits (we all have to "confess" something in our encounter group on an anonymous slip of paper put in a hat) that she's "frigid," yet everyone always thinks she's so "super sexy." Well, yeah, okay, that relationship lasts one day when she returns to The Boyfriend, but the point is, though I will become a rationally minded English professor with academic credentials and literary achievements and secular allegiances, back then *I am totally nuts for this stuff.* Back then.

Like most baby boomers, I eventually settle down and wonder how to explain to the kids that I once dropped acid but would no more touch it today than take belladonna. My interest in psi research (gussying up the old term "occult") comes to a screeching halt. I honor my father's Judaic devotion by raising the children Jewish,

if only culturally. (Okay, the first child gets bar mitzvahed, with the second we drop the ball.) If pressed I'll admit to being "more spiritual than religious," the standard buzz phrase. And though I have a healthy if distant respect for religious observance—my late father never missed a morning minyan—I abhor any sort of extremism: *anything* that smacks of surrendering one's individuality to group think. Am I a practicing anything? I'd say not, except a writer, and we know how that goes: it's the one faith that constantly wants to throw out the *un*welcome mat, no matter how slavishly devoted you are to it. When I have, on rare occasions, brought up my former mystical interests and other hoo-doo preoccupations of old to my levelheaded wife, she rolls her eyes and says, "That's nice." And then: "The dog peed on the rug again."

You see what I'm saying? I'm now sixty years old, my daughter, our last child, is going off to college, retirement is doable if also quite fearful, it's harder than ever to publish a literary novel, and somehow this stuff, this leftover *spiritualeze*, wants to rush in and fill the void.

So what do I do? I track down (not easily I might add) Devra.

Let's return to 1972, and the oaken comfort of my professor's living room—our final parapsychology class.

Devra is this week's visitor. She's exactly my age, Jewish, and majoring in art at a Denver college. Wearing bellbottoms and an embroidered white peasant blouse, she sits in front of us while we go around the room and introduce ourselves. She nods politely and then proceeds to tell various members of the class, although not me, about sensory images she's "getting," identifying, in one case, the objects that are on a male student's dresser. Professional as we are, we nod with clinical interest, though I remember the male student blanching at the accuracy of her "seeing" a miniature red and white striped barber pole paperweight (she'd smelled "peppermint") on his dresser, not exactly a common object such as a clock or razor.

Our professor gives her a deck of cards and asks her to "guess" which card is face down. Which she does. He asks her to guess the card two down. She gets this one also. She gets eight in a row. When she misses the ninth card down in the deck, we breathe a secret sigh of relief. Her accuracy was getting creepy. She tells us about the seven cycles people go through on Earth, the last one being the highest, and the many lifetimes you can have in each cycle before you progress to the next one, all this channeled to her by her spirit guide, Margaret Elizabeth, whom she discovered one day when as a teenager she was playing with a Ouija board.

You have to be careful, she says, because people can think you're a witch.

The class ends, we thank her for coming, and discuss amongst ourselves what we've seen. "She messed up the stuff about Adam's grandmother being sick," the hardcore skeptic in our class exclaims. "His grandmother died a long time ago." We point out the other things she got right, the card reading, how do you explain that? The skep-

tic shrugs and suggests that chance alone could account for it. What about the "barber pole" on Alan's dresser? "She never said 'barber pole'—she just described something candy-cane shaped and heavy. That could be a bunch of things." We scratch our heads. Maybe he's right. Maybe we've made the common mistake of allowing ourselves to fill in the general with specifics of our own. But why would she do such a thing? we ask. She obviously isn't in it for the money, the motivation of most charlatans. "Attention," the skeptic says. What else.

I go back to my apartment and immediately write Devra a letter explaining that I would love to meet with her and hear more. I mail it that night, include my phone number, and wait for her to call, which she does a few days later. We agree to meet for lunch near her home in Denver.

Is there anybody who doesn't want to know what happens after we die? Even if you've decided *nothing* happens and feel very smug about your decision, pitying the poor fools who waste their lives believing in the illusion/delusion of transcending one's mortal form, even then, wouldn't a hint of *something more* give you pause?

Which is exactly why I bombard Devra with questions during our lunch about these seven lifecycles, her prophetic dreams, the nature of the images she receives and how certain she is of their accuracy. But instead of filling my head with more elaborate renditions of her powers of divination, we soon settle down to talking about our mundane lives: she's interested in art—sculpture in particular, but writing too. And, she explains, once she gets to know someone well, she doesn't have the same ability to read the person's mind. A barrier goes up. Her boyfriend, for instance.

I refrain from asking her to tell me anything about myself.

In fact, I'm slightly bored, not in a bad way, just with the realization that we've run out of things to talk about. Despite her being friendly enough and willing to satisfy my curiosity, she doesn't offer to meet again, and I don't ask. *So this is it* my brain appears to be telling me. The ordinary is Miraculous. Or: the miraculous is Ordinary. Either way, Devra's "ordinariness" ends my search for the soul's seven cities of gold. At twenty-one years old I will have to make my way, face reality, or reality by consensus, and get on with it. No shortcuts.

Forty years later, I enter Devra's name into a search service on the internet for $9.95 and find a listing in New York City with her email. I write that she spoke to our parapsychology class in the early 70s about her psychic abilities. I remind her of our lunch in Denver. I throw in some bona fides about myself so she doesn't think I'm a crackpot: I'm an English professor at Colorado State University; I'm a writer; I graduated from Boulder in 1973.

Soon after, I get a tentative answer:

> Steven,
> I must apologize to you, as I have no

recollection of our encounter or that honors class at Boulder. But that is not unusual, as I have only vague memories of my encounters with many people during that era. I have not used my "gift" in the way that you had witnessed, but found a more mainstream way to channel it, and gained acceptance . . . I became a Gestalt therapist, and a specialist in disaster debriefing! It's all about the healing anyway, right?

Devra,

I hope you'll feel okay about telling me anything of how you've been affected by your gift over the years. And, frankly, whether it (and I hesitate to say this) feels "authentic" to you. I remember how matter-of-fact you were about your abilities, and how I became that way myself when I spoke with you at lunch. *So this is it*, I thought, just an extension of something in us all, albeit a fascinating and mostly unattainable extension.

A month later I receive another email from her. It just so happens she's going to be in Denver visiting her aunt and uncle. Would I like to come down from Fort Collins to meet her for lunch there?

I grew up with a mother who feared the future and lived all her life with a level of anxiety that could have killed a horse, as such stress eventually did her. My father was the opposite, a lifelong dreamer to her despairing realist, a believer to her doubter, a seer of wonders to her spotter of earthly peril. Between them, they held the world in abeyance for me as equal parts favorable and frightening.

I have carried this view with me all my life, with the hope of some reconciliation between the pessimism I feel about the world and the inner purposefulness I have never been able to shake about the rightness of existence. And yet all I need to rattle this "purposefulness" is to visit my wife's elderly stepmother in the assisted living unit of "memory care," such a euphemistic phrase, and watch the carapaces of once vital lives slumped over in their wheelchairs, calling out to phantoms from the darkened recesses of their shrunken brains.

Twenty-three years ago my mother was one of the living dead. She'd suffered her third stroke in as many months and was close to being on life support. A ventilator was stuck down her throat, her hair was matted, her face and neck sweaty despite the chilled room. Unable to open her eyes long enough to do more than acknowledge me with a blink, she moved her fingers on the sheet, as if trying to tap out Morse code. I'd flown in the night before from Colorado, because we feared it was the end. I couldn't get the image of her out of my head—that tube down her throat, a panicked look in her eye like a trapped animal, despite the heavy medications.

"Have you and Mom ever talked about dying?" I asked my father in the hospital elevator. We were on the way to the basement cafeteria for

a quick dinner, not that I could eat much.

"Of course!" he said, salesman extraordinaire that he was. He wasn't going to let anyone beat him to the punch. "Go toward the light, go toward the light. That's what I told her. We know all that." He might as well have slapped his hands together, well, *that's* done. A week later my mother was dead.

The answer was so simple for my father. He took faith at face value. He didn't need someone like Devra to prove it to him. Go toward the light, make a right at the heavenly mile marker, and watch for God or whomever up ahead. I believe this was the only time we ever discussed dying or God or anything remotely related to life beyond the senses. What was there to say, after all? You accepted or you didn't.

And now I am at the same age when my mother first started having her strokes, and I find myself thinking about my father's quick dismissal of any complications about the beyond with his "Yeah, yeah, go toward the light" while I posit that against the terrified look in my mother's eyes as she lay in bed hooked up to tubes, her existence courtesy of machines. Once again, I am right smack between them. And on my way to see Devra for, if not an answer, a nudge one way or another.

Devra has short gray hair and is wearing a neck brace, a consequence of a long-standing degenerative illness. I faintly recognize her as the tall person I first saw years ago. But I'm a complete blank to her. We chat in the high-rise apartment with her uncle and aunt for a while and then head off to a restaurant, not far from where I met her for a similar engagement four decades earlier.

"It was too much," Devra tells me over lunch about why she turned away from her abilities. "I wanted to shut myself off from knowing so much."

She had been well known around Denver, studied and tested and taken under the wing of a Denver psychiatrist who had an interest in the paranormal. Her father had also encouraged her to "perform" at times. She would read a deck of cards face down as she'd done for our class or be asked while blindfolded to recite the serial numbers off a dollar bill. She never tried to profit from her abilities. Her chief feeling during such times—when she was "on"—was of humbleness. "An emptiness but not a sadness, more like I was an open and blank vessel." At one point she'd been scheduled to appear on PBS, but her mother put the kibosh on that when she decided her daughter was becoming overexposed and risked being exploited.

"Smell would come to me first when I was on." She tells me of a time when the relatives were invited over to the house to see for themselves. It was 1967. She was blindfolded and a picture book was opened to a random page. She smelled bacon. The relatives shook their heads. Nothing about the picture had to do with bacon. Then, an image came to her: a man being shot in the head. The blindfold was taken off. She looked down at the picture—of John F. Kennedy.

But the bacon? the relatives wanted to know.

"The Bay of Pigs," Devra answered.

Let's say you're listening to this over the course of a long lunch, and you're wondering how to reconcile the well-regarded disaster-relief specialist with the Scheherazade tales you've been hearing: the tables that move by mind alone; the prophetic dreams of death; the personal objects that tell her of events in the possessor's life; the automatic writing about reincarnated souls. After all, you have only her word for all this. And she herself used to wonder how she did these things, and if she did them for attention. She would no more believe the feats when they were over than anyone else. Only when she was "on" and "empty" did she feel confident that it was true.

And then you ask if she will do something. She's told you that a sign of being on, at least in the old days, was when her fingers tingled and became cold. She reaches out and touches your arm and sure enough they do feel icy.

"Maybe you're just cold?" you suggest, because it is a little chilly in the restaurant.

"No," she says. She never gets cold—she *schvitzes* most of time.

"Do you want to hold something of mine?" You can give her your wedding ring or your wallet.

She says she'll just try it on her own and settles back into the booth. She smells something. "Do you have a dog?"

"Yes," you say. Who doesn't have a dog?

"Does he have a strong odor?"

"No." Your dog doesn't have a particularly doggy odor.

"Cream colored?"

"No." Wrong again. Black with brown markings and a white aging muzzle.

"No strong smell?"

You shake your head again. Then, something occurs to you just at the instant that she says, "Time has no meaning for me."

Winston. Your family's pug, who died prematurely of heart failure several years ago. He always did have a *very* strong odor, so much so that it was a joke in the family. Passing by him, you'd sometimes have to hold your nose he farted so terribly. And all that gunk in his face folds.

"Do you have another dog? Like a snoopy dog?"

Yes—a purebred beagle. Now thirteen years old, with her aging white muzzle.

Devra smiles. "I did it!" she says, excited as a child.

Maybe. Maybe not. But close enough. And maybe "close enough" is all that thinly separates true faith from being duped.

You have to laugh, though. You'd expected to give her your wedding ring or wallet and find out something monumental about yourself. Maybe some communication from your dead parents. Or a secret no one knew. Indisputable proof. Instead it's about your dead and smelly dog.

So This Is It.

"Why did you write to me?" she asks.

I explain that . . . well, I don't know exactly. The kids are grown, I kept thinking about the past, I'd been feeling apprehensive about the fu-

ture, I thought I might write something about this subject that once fascinated me . . . I was *searching.* And maybe, though this is the hardest part to admit, I was afraid. *I'm now the same age as my mother when . . .*

"It was more than curiosity," I tell Devra. "I had to know if I could trust my feelings all those years ago."

I am so glad that Devra only nods and doesn't ask what I've decided. I'd have to tell her I still don't know. What I do know is that I want not to tremble, as did my mother, nor gloss over, as did my father, when standing in the presence of the unknown. I thought coming to see her would help me with that.

Devra's degenerative disease will eventually turn her spine into bamboo when the vertebrae fuse together. As a one-year-old, she contracted polio and suffered from post-polio symptoms later in life. Injured seriously at twenty-three, she needed a catheter for two years. Fibromyalgia afflicted her. Why so much suffering? I ask her. She believes her body is a casing for all that she gained in her lifetimes. Now in her last cycle she is about to give it up for good. "I knew very young that I shouldn't get attached to it."

She never married, has no children, but her life has been rich in friends and work, she explains.

At her aunt and uncle's apartment, I give her copies of two of my books. "Oh," she says, looking at the author's photo from the earliest book. "*Now* I recognize you."

On the drive home I'm floating. I have all that "lift" I've come for, the sense of rightness, that contentment that I haven't felt in a long time.

Needless to say, this wears off in the weeks that follow. Just as it should. Faith for me has always been porous. It's those very holes that keep it dynamic and preserve what's most important: the mystery. It's no coincidence I became a writer. Writing, indeed all of creativity, both addresses the mystery and creates more of it. Writers aren't out to answer questions; they're determined to raise them. If I've answered any here, then I haven't done my job.

Yet I cannot completely discredit my once youthful enthusiasm for mystical realms and for those putative ambassadors of the inexplicable like Devra. What I was really after, however, was something more of the here and now—not some dazzling proof of precognition or life after death, as I claimed to have wanted so much from Devra, but evidence of what happens when profound empathy intersects with infinite imagination. The paranormal was always a metaphor for me. As a young man, a mostly bored student, with a dream of becoming a writer, I yearned to have enough clarity of vision and dexterity with words to help create a small measure of beauty in the world—an artful answer to sorrow.

It's all about the healing anyway, right?

That is the question. The last time I saw my mother alive was one morning just before I was to fly back to Colorado. She was in and out of consciousness, and I couldn't tell if she knew I was in the room with her or not. The sun was rising,

and we were alone. For a moment, her strained face was luminous in the dawn light. What to do? I'd been gone two weeks and had to get home to my job and to my very young children at the time. My mother had been in this condition for a while, and the doctors couldn't say how long she would last—a week, a month, even a year if she could pull through. I stood up to leave several times, then sat back down and watched her some more. Finally, I kissed her on the forehead and departed, with the tremulous hope that I would see her again in this form or another.