

Private Universe

Part I: Microcosmic Traveler

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Prologue:

“Our planet, our society, and we ourselves are built of star stuff.” Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

Our bodies carry elements that go back to the birth of the universe. Every single atom in our body – the calcium in our bones, the carbon in our genes, the iron our blood, the gold in our fillings– was created in a star billions of years ago. We live, because stars died.

Astrophysicist Peter Tyson explains that we are a walking galaxy of fossil stardust, originated during the Big Bang. Great minds of the East and West have believed for millennia that the complete drama of the universe repeats in our own bodies.

“In each atom of the realms of the universe, there exist vast oceans of world systems,” declare the ancient Buddhist scriptures of the Great Flower Ornament.

In the 19th century the German writer and thinker Johann Wolfgang von Goethe still pondered the connection between microcosm and macrocosm. “In the inside, there is also a universe!” Search for the whole truth within, he asked, so that you may understand the basic reality of the cosmos.

If we understand our bodies completely, these philosophers say, we can comprehend the entire universe. Unfortunately, it is difficult to really understand our own bodies. Often we treat them much the same as our cars. We refuel and wash them, but other than that, we simply expect

them to function without much complaining. Usually we don't think about the inner workings of our bodies' organism or the mechanism of our car's engine until the pebbles hit the windshield.

Chapter 1: The Power of Hair

"If my hair were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man." Samson and Delilah, Judges 16, Old Testament

February 1976:

A three-quarter moon and a few distant stars struggled through the thin cloud layer covering the dark houses of a German suburb like a down blanket. The street called Filderstrasse had been quiet for hours. Squat multi-family homes with red tiled roofs and small windows had been built rapidly and without imagination in the recovering Germany of the 1960s. Bare lilac and berry bushes in the front yards fulfilled their purpose of separating the properties, rather than decorating the gardens. Orderly sidewalks, swept by housewives every Friday afternoon glistened under the street lights.

Inside their houses the inhabitants slept deeply. Only one first-floor window disrupted the quiet night. Pebbles crashed onto its windowpane, crackling loud enough to wake the entire six-family apartment building.

Vega tried to ignore the noise, but the stones hit hard enough to damage the glass. The gravel's signal got louder and more persistent. Trying to sleep was out of the question. There went another one. What if Vega's mother and brother woke up? What of the family living right underneath Vega's room? She imagined the lights going on and Mr. W getting up in his doubtlessly striped pajamas. What if he yelled out the window? Other sleeping burghers would awaken and then she'd be in deep trouble.

Vega carefully peeked through the curtains. She knew what the thrower of the pebbles wanted and had no intention of giving it to him. Tom looked up at the window with a grin. Of course, he'd seen the orange curtain move. He knew she was watching. The light of the street lantern reflected off the long mass of hair which reached halfway down his back. That thick wavy hair first attracted Vega to him. It was one of the reasons she constantly forgave him . . . but that was much later.

Right now, she was just furious: How dare he make such a racket. Just because she let him walk her home? Just because they missed the last tram? How could he expect her to let him in? She would not give in, but she had to stop the commotion. Resigned, she pushed back the flimsy curtain and opened the window a crack. His grin was wider now.

“Shush, be quiet!”

“Let me in. I'll be very quiet,” Tom said.

“Go home!”

“It will take me all night to walk home.”

“I don't care. You figure it out.”

He hesitated. Vega suspected that finally a small doubt had crossed his mind whether he would be successful in achieving his goal.

“When will I see you?” he asked.

“Friday. Go now.”

“Friday,” he said as he turned and walked off. The metal-tipped heels of his cowboy boots clattered loudly on the sidewalk of the empty suburban street. He didn't look back, only slowed down for a moment to light a cigarette. The glow from his lighter outlined his tall silhouette. His tight jeans and black leather jacket didn't fit well into the quaint street scene. Tom

didn't try to soften the noise of his bold footsteps. Although Vega was relieved to see him go, she knew that she would see him again. His pushy behavior annoyed her, but she sensed that this was just the beginning.

“Where are we going?” On Friday evening Vega sat in the back of a taxicab. Tom occupied the front seat next to the driver, smoking a cigarette. He wore Levis with a denim shirt and had tucked his hair behind one ear, baring a silver earring.

“It's a surprise,” he said.

In the seventeen years of her life Vega had never ridden in a taxi. She couldn't afford it, and neither could her parents. They went places using the streetcar or the bicycle, or they walked. Tom could not afford a taxi either, she was sure of that. But he liked irrational gestures, extravagant, and unreasonable. Taxis were part of his image. He never owned a car, never drove. He was driven. His hair hung over the backrest in front of her. It was so thick and wavy, she couldn't help herself - she *had* to touch it. Gently taking a handful of his mane, she let it slide through her fingers. It felt cool, soft and strong at the same time. One handful was not enough. It was not silky and pliable, but slightly coarse and untamed like horses hair, and so abundant that her hands disappeared in it.

Tom sat very still; the smoke of his cigarette hung suspended in midair. Unable to stop herself, Vega kept playing with his hair, even though she knew she was crossing a threshold, touching what was taboo, and what should be left alone. Now, she was in danger of getting entangled, as if she had touched the fibers of a magic spider, whose threads would draw her into a dangerous web without release.

Tom turned toward her with a little smile. He understood what happened, and savored the magic of the moment, which stretched like the strand of hair in her fingers.

Falling for Tom was Vega's first offering to Samson's descendants and capitulation to the power of long hair.

They never made it to the promised surprise that Friday night. The taxi dropped them off at an inner-city park, where they planned to smoke a joint to enhance the experience of the Jethro Tull concert. Alas, they got delayed, and ended up on a park bench. Between drags, their hands and mouths explored each other. Tom clicked his little golden lighter again and again to relight the joint and to warm their hands. Vega had goose bumps on her arms, not just from the cold, but also from the charge they shared at each point of contact. The attraction drawing their lips and hands together was like opposing poles of a magnet - soothing and electrifying at once. A strange energy pulsed through Vega's veins. Was it Tom's presence or the joint they smoked? Tom was the most physical being she had ever met, and he knew it. When he looked at her over half closed eyelids, she felt light headed.

"Shouldn't we go to the concert?" Vega asked.

"Maybe in a little while. How is the concert hall?" Tom said lazily.

"You have never been inside?"

"No, I just moved to here."

"From where?" Vega had never left her hometown, except for short family vacations to Austria or Switzerland.

"I spent some time near Basel. And before that I lived in Cologne for a while."

"What were you doing there?"

“I was in rehab. But I am all good now.”

Rehab? Drug rehab, Vega assumed. She had never met anybody who took hard drugs, let alone attended rehab. Vega imagined rehab as an intriguing place in the country populated by exotic, fascinating inmates dressed in colorfully morbid outfits, discussing deep and existential problems. In contrast, her life was sheltered and predictable. She attended the local all-girls High School and lived in her small dysfunctional family of three, where nothing ever happened. Her divorced mother and younger brother led quiet lives. A little too quiet for Vega’s taste, who felt stifled and craved adventure. Tom’s life sounded exciting; exactly what Vega was looking for to get out of her bubble. She did not know it yet, but her infatuation would have extensive consequences – dramatic and destructive consequences.

The chill of the February night enveloped them. A white mist rose from the grass and appeared like a veil in the diffuse light of the street lamps. It mingled with their breath and the smoke of the joint that hung in the air. Vega unsuccessfully tried to find her name sake star in Lyra among the few celestial lights that broke through the spotty cloud cover, which barely concealed a pale moon. Almost full that night, the moon did not radiate a warm glow. Instead it looked small, and cold and very white. In the German language the moon is male, *der Mond*, because there is nothing soft or female about it. It looked distant, no brighter than a small bulb on this cold, interminable night.

Vega did not mind the bareness of their surroundings, the barren branches of the birch trees and beech shrubbery. Tom held her tight and she could feel his body heat inside the leather jacket. They sat close, sharing what little warmth they had, putting their hands into each others’ pockets. Around them the swaths of smoke from their faintly glowing joints began to spin the fabric that would be the foundation of their invisible fantasy. They sat suspended in their own

private world. There they would rule as king and queen, separated from the rest of humanity by a flexible, but durable membrane.

After missing the last tram, they walked far that night. The taxi money for the day had already been spent, and they had to rely on their feet to carry them through the wet, empty streets. Stiff with cold, they entered a disco called *Mousetrap*. Inside a warm, noisy and busy space greeted them. They danced to loosen their arms and legs. Vega watched Tom move effortlessly like a large cat. She found herself moving in unison with him, as if he were her puppeteer. She did not mind. Other dancers shared the floor with them, but they seemed to be part of a large background screen. Vega and Tom remained separate. They stayed untouched on their observation post, two three-dimensional creatures in an otherwise flat world.