

FROM

Dinner with Buddha

BY ROLAND MERULLO



I had a dream last night,” my sister said, and I knew, by virtue of some mysterious sibling intuition, that I was about to enter a territory of great risk.

I had just arrived from the airport in Fargo, rental car cooling in the driveway, bags not yet unpacked. Seese and I were sitting on the porch of what had once been our parents’ house, a wood-frame, white-clapboard structure that overlooked two thousand acres of prime North Dakota farmland. It was nearly dusk, the high-plains August heat had eased a bit, and we were relaxing in wicker rockers on the shade of that old porch, sipping from glasses of my sister’s magnificent mint lemonade and gazing across the acreage, leased now, that still produced durum wheat with a vibrancy the gods themselves envied. We had been speaking of her daughter, my niece, a seven-year-old girl named Shelsa. According to my sister, Shelsa was a great spiritual being who’d been born in this time and place to save the world from cataclysm. Other people—sane, good, intelligent people—seemed to believe this as well. As for her uncle, yours truly, Otto Ringling of Bronxville, New York, I preferred a compassionate neutrality on the subject. Shelsa was a wonder of a child, yes. Beautiful, quick-witted, graceful, often mature beyond her years, and she loved me with a pure love I clearly didn’t deserve. But a great spiritual incarnation? A kind of saint? A female Dalai Lama of the American Midwest? I simply could not make myself go there.

Much as I loved her—*adored* her might be a truer word—and as much as I loved my sister and her famous-guru husband, Volya Rinpoche (RIN-po-shay), there were limits to my open-mindedness. When it came to my

sister, especially, there were limits to the kinds of words I liked to hear, the kinds of food I would eat, the kinds of ideas I'd allow into the cluttered manger of my mind. I did not, for example, believe in one of her many specialties: past-life regression. I respected vegans and vegetarians but knew I'd never join them. Thanks to Rinpoche's kind tutelage, I had been a diligent meditator for a period of eight years, and even with everything that had happened to me in that time, I still clung to my meditation practice as if it were a tree branch in a stormy lake and I was a novice swimmer. But in almost every other way I'd made a sharp turn away from the disciplined life. During those years there had been several emotional/psychological body blows—I'll go into detail a little later—and I'd started keeping irregular hours, gained weight, wandered off the spiritual path into an All-American backwater of TV watching and semi-indolence, a therapy of game shows, take-out meals, and bottles of red wine. It was a dark night of the soul, maybe. Or maybe just a kind of tiredness that left me living inside an old shell of decency, devoted fatherhood, and sophisticated cynicism I associate with greater Manhattan. I wasn't sure, any longer, that there were answers to the big questions: why we suffer, why we die, why we're born in the first place. I wasn't sure there were answers, and I wasn't even sure I wanted to ask the questions.

In a series of handwritten letters sent over a period of many months, my brother-in-law had assured me that my difficulties represented nothing more than a stage on a great spiritual journey. Perhaps I should have embraced that idea. The spiritual life was, after all, his profession. But some pouty childish voice in my "thought-stream," as he called it, proudly resisted. Whatever the benefits might be, I did not want, just then, to do any more interior "work." I wanted to laze in the Jacuzzi of the well-fed life. I wanted mindless, harmless distraction. I deserved, I told myself, some rest.

"It was an amazing dream, Otto," Seese was saying. "Some kind of spirit—it had no face or body but seemed to be a woman-spirit—was speaking to me. She had a strong accent. Her voice was gentle and absolutely certain, quiet, like a breeze across grass, but there was nothing conceited about it. She was just absolutely sure, loving, unbearably kind. She was speaking to me quietly and surely, the way a loving mother would speak to her daughter."

I took a long draught of lemonade, swallowed, nodded agreeably, watched the tips of the wheat shudder in the evening breeze. “What was the woman saying?” I asked, to humor her. I knew from my sister’s tone of voice and from other conversations in our long history together that all this was leading someplace. And I suspected it was someplace I didn’t want to go. I was having a psychic moment. I was reading the aura of her words. My hopes for a restful North Dakota vacation were, something told me, about to be sent up the well-known creek.

Seese (also known as Cecelia or Celia) hesitated, made a quiet humming sound, laid her head back against the top of the chair and smiled. “She was telling me that Shelsa was destined to meet one of the other great spirits who’s on the earth at this time. She was saying—it was so convincing, brother—that Shels and this spirit were going to meet very soon. Actually, we were supposed to help them meet.”

“*We* . . . meaning you and I?”

“You and Rinpoche, I’m sure—almost sure—were the people she had in mind. But the important part was that they had to meet. Very soon. The world’s in crisis.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“And the two of them are supposed to help lead us out of the danger zone and into a new era.”

“What does the new era look like? Did the woman say?”

“Are you making fun?”

“Not at all.”

“She didn’t say. But I could feel it. They’ll usher in a world with less violence done to one another, and to the earth. Less divisiveness, less hatred and greed. Not paradise, exactly. Just . . . something better, kinder. Maybe some sort of new religion with one commandment: don’t hurt other people. I’m not sure.”

I rocked back and forth, trying hard to imagine Seese’s kinder universe, trying, through the curtain of my well-honed East Coast cynicism, to picture a world without torture and war, an America that didn’t have hungry children and billionaires living within a mile of one another, an international agreement to spend massive sums on medical research and education

rather than on “weapons systems,” a planet that was nurtured rather than poisoned.

It didn't work. I watched the tips of the wheat, our own amber waves of grain, shiver and go still. It seemed to me that it was precisely the news of the world, this harsh, real world, that had chased me from New York to North Dakota for what I told myself would be a restful three-week summer vacation on the old homestead. From every direction came reports of civil war and torture, mass shootings and sexual abuse, extremism, corruption, political stalemate at the expense of the poorest among us. Two Americas, as a famously disgraced presidential candidate had once said. The rich getting richer, the schools in trouble, the environment, the Syrian holocaust, the NSA listening in, bombs at the Boston Marathon, radical Islamists killing people in Africa and the Middle East, in the name of their vengeful God. Sadness on all fronts, it seemed.

Of course, that was and always had been part of the human condition, and I was a fool to think I could escape it, even for three weeks. If North Dakota had ever been a refuge of the quiet life, all that had gone away with the discovery of a method of squeezing oil and gas from the stone that lay beneath its surface. If our childhood home had ever been a paradise of small-town safety, of neighborliness and simple faith, much of that was gone now. I'd stopped for a leg-stretching stroll in Dickinson, the nearest city, and it had seemed hot and dead, bars, empty storefronts, chain restaurants peddling unhealthy food. Now, during every hour of the day and night, much of North Dakota was kept awake by enormous trucks carrying away the lifeblood of the Bakken oil fields. Tough men and hard women had invaded the Peace Garden state. We could feel the change all around us: bright lights on the prairie at night, traffic clotting the roads, prostitution, fistfights on the street, no eggs on the grocery shelf, a stabbing in Bismarck, people locking doors that hadn't been locked in generations.

“It sounds good,” I said to my sister. “A world like that.”

“I can tell you don't believe in it.”

“I'd like to believe in it. I really would. There's just so much evidence to the contrary.”

“That's why we're here,” she said. “That's why you and I met Rinpoche. That's why Shelsa was born.”

I clung to a diplomatic silence. I loved my sister. I did. I loved her.

“This woman-spirit said you need to go into the mountains,” Celia went on. “It was so clear, Otto. She said it several times. The mountains. You have to go to the mountains and find this person who’s going to help Shelsa change the world.”

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