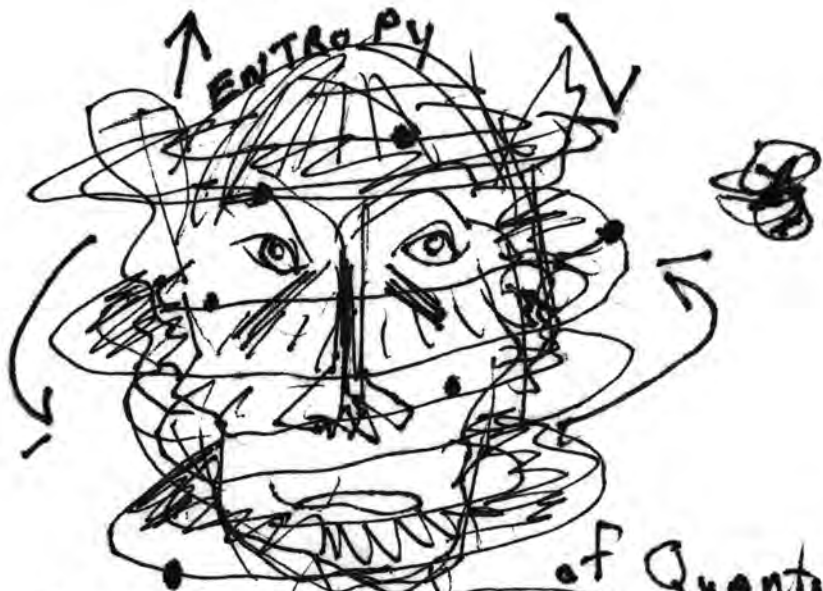


MY FATHER WAS A WONDERFUL GUY and he was extremely kind to me.

Once, when I was only about four or five, my father was carrying me to the park. It was called Baby Park and there was a brick wall around it. Some kids were playing baseball with an Indian rubber ball. Just as we walked around the corner into the park, a guy hit a line drive. Even though I was in my father's arms, the ball hit me right in the head. I was sniZing, but I didn't cry.

My father said, 'Aw, you're a brave boy, Johnny, for not crying. But you know, some people in this life aren't very lucky, and I think you're one of them.'

Thanks, Dad.



the god/goddess

of Quantum  
Mechanics



the elementary  
PARTICLE

## Shiva's Scary Gifts

BLUE-NECKED SHIVA is the most subtle of the gods in the Indian pantheon. He is called the god of entropy or the god of destruction – but he's not the god of death, like some think, and he's not the great destroyer. If Shiva taught at Princeton, he'd teach quantum mechanics and have a minor in philosophy.

A long time ago, when I was much younger and didn't understand a lot of things that make slightly more sense to me now, I had just come back from picking apples in the Okanagan Valley and I was living with Cathy, who had educated me when I was practically illiterate.

Cathy looked like a Jewish Virginia Woolf. I always thought she was really beautiful. She, of course, never agreed. She had a sister who was extraordinarily beautiful, so Cathy ended up taking the role of the brain – but she always wanted to be the great beauty. This is the tyranny that exists against most women.

Even though Cathy was intensely interested in philosophy and was doing her doctorate, what really began to take over her interest was this dance company that was run by a woman who was a devout Buddhist – the freaky sort of 'let's go to Tibet,' deeply spiri-



tual Buddhism. Cathy, who wanted to be a dancer, was selected to be part of the company. She was elated, but as it turned out, Nadia, the head of the company, really wanted her to do the accounting. This broke Cathy's heart. She really wanted to be a beautiful dancer. But she was short and had very large breasts – far from a dancer's body. She was a very talented actor, but she always got character roles that she didn't want.

Nadia brought her spiritual master to North America. This guy looked like he was totally sexless and a million years old. He was a tiny little man. Imagine Mother Teresa with a white brush cut and a band of orange rather than blue on her garment. And he was carrying a staff. He was the cleanest human being I have ever seen; his skin seemed to glow, as if it had been scrubbed a million times.

We were sitting on the floor and he sat on a chair. Out of the blue, he pointed his little staff at me. He said, 'Shiva is very strong within you.' At the time, I had no idea what he meant. I turned to Cathy and said, 'Who is Shiva?' She said, 'Perfect for you – he's the god of slobs.'

My entire life has been a series of bizarre occurrences. A lot of them have been in the form of disaster or bad luck mixed in with really wonderful opportunities. As it turns out, that's what Shiva's all about. So I decided to make a list of Shiva's really scary gifts. This starts really early. Probably the place to begin is in the womb. Considering the relationship that my parents had, the fact that I'm on this planet is a bizarre trick of Shiva's. I think they only slept together



once. After a thirteen-year separation, they only managed one night, and I was the result of that night.

Apparently I came out okay, but as I grew up a lot of little things started popping up. I only found this out later, because my mother never wanted to admit anything was wrong.

For instance, I didn't know until later that I had borderline cerebral palsy, which manifested itself through a lack of coordination. I was always falling down. And everyone was terrified to play baseball with me because I let go of the bat during every swing. No matter how hard I tried not to, I would always let go of the bat. Everybody would have to duck. *Swooiisshhhhhh*.

And I could do this really weird pitch. No one had ever seen pitches like I used to throw. I would baZe people. I didn't know what I was doing, I was so uncoordinated. My childhood was spent falling down.

By the time I was in Grade Two, everybody thought I was on drugs because I looked so spaced out. I was spaced out. I found my imaginary world a lot more interesting than the real one. As a result, I migrated to the imaginary world a lot of the time, so I just wasn't 'there.' At first they thought I was retarded and they did all these tests on me. But I was one of those people who could do a Rubik's cube really fast and play instant chess, things like that. I drove them crazy at school because I was supposed to be a retard, but I could do all this stuff.

Once, when I wasn't paying attention to the real world, I got football and baseball confused and ended up thinking that the person





both his parents were  
Deaf Mutes

who had the baseball was supposed to be tackled. I wound up getting hit in the mouth with the baseball bat really hard. This guy was trying to knock the hardball out into left field. Instead, he hit me square in the face with the bat, which broke my jaw and knocked all my teeth out. I remember being knocked off the ground and flying backwards, and then, for some reason, reaching over and noticing a pebble. I could feel blood dribbling down both sides of my face. But the pebble seemed very interesting. I remember picking it up and looking at it, wondering what it was doing in this field, this perfectly beautiful pebble. I thought it was green volcanic glass. I flicked it away.

There were people standing all around and I heard someone say, 'Aw, fuck, he's really messed up.' I probably should have gone to the hospital because my jaw was broken, but I didn't know it. It kind of got ignored. My jaw didn't heal back to normal. I became, like, the ugliest kid in the world. I mean *really* ugly. But it's funny, it didn't really bother me. I was already interested in science fiction; I had read all of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

This is a true story, I swear: when I was about ten years old I decided that since I already looked kind of monstrous, my hero would be Lon Chaney. Lon Chaney was the original phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*, he was the lead in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, he was in *The Miracle Worker*. He was spectacular – he could make himself look incredibly different, and people couldn't recognize him from one movie to the next. He was an incredible star, capable of bringing great pathos to these creatures. In *The Miracle Worker*, he contorts his body into this horribly twisted shape. There's this



10 years old

Blanket

Ash...  
tight

contraption that twists his body and he does this thing where he loosens the straps and stands up. He was really amazing. There's a scene in *The Phantom of the Opera* where he's on the roof of the Paris Opera House. It's one of the first uses of colour in film. They tinted the inside of his cape. He stands above the Paris Opera and his cape is billowing and the inside lining is tinted red. I just fell in love with this guy. I wanted to be the next Lon Chaney. I figured I already looked like a kind of a monster, and the other kids were saying it, too. I thought that I might as well get totally into it.

When we used to have to talk about what we wanted to be when we grew up I would say, 'I want to be the next Lon Chaney.' The teacher would say, 'Who?' Then I'd have to say, 'Well, Chaney was the first man to exteriorize horror, to give real shape to our deepest primal fears.' Of course, by today's standards, this trend that he started has gone to such excess that people practically have to have sixty-foot holographs pull their heads off in the theatre to get the same intense reaction Chaney did with only a few gestures.

Chaney got me really interested in horror films. There was a magazine called *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. It was edited by a guy named Forrest J. Ackerman, who is around only in spirit now. When I was about eleven, they had a contest. There was a movie being shot called *Valley of the Monsters* or something, and the idea was that any person could enter to design the makeup for the monster. The winner of the contest would play the lead monster in the film.

My older brother had a polaroid camera. He came back from university one weekend, and we projected a flashlight on my face and



HORMONE  
HAIR

A FEW  
YEARS

+  
SOME  
DENTAL  
WORK

took a picture. We didn't use any makeup. This was about a year after my baseball accident. My jaw hadn't healed, so I was pretty bizarre looking, and I had really got Lon's monster movements down. We sent off the photographs as is.

I got an honourable mention out of thousands of entries. Well, maybe a couple of hundred. My mother was very proud of me. It broke her heart that this was the one accomplishment she could feel proud of me for. The funny thing is that she gave me back the letter when I was twenty-four and had just come out of the hospital after having meningitis. I always thought that was really strange. I guess she had probably been waiting for some substantial alternative, like winning the Nobel Prize or finishing high school, but goddammit, this would have to do.

Getting an honourable mention in that contest has had a certain impact on my life. At the very least, it created a really tenacious sense of individualism. It certainly had a dubious effect on me as a kid.

Another thing that had a strong influence on my life was seeing Jack Kerouac on *The Steve Allen Show* one Sunday night when I was about nine years old. Steve Allen played the piano, tinkling out a few bars in the background, while Jack Kerouac read from *On the Road*. I couldn't believe it. I'd never seen a human being like Kerouac before. He had on a suit like normal people wore but he also had a big wide belt with an Indian buckle on it and cowboy boots. This was the early sixties. His hair was long – it touched his ears. And his prose was so flipped out. I couldn't believe how amazing Kerouac was. So I decided that I wanted to be a beatnik monster, a kind of Lon Chaney

'CHILDREN!

Behave!



with a beret – I’d hang around New York writing poetry late at night, and then I would retreat to my bell tower.

Setting goals like that, though, is bound to make life a little difficult. You just know a beatnik monster is going to have problems in high school. ‘Everybody else is wearing penny loafers, but *aaaaaaarggh*, I think I’ll wear my leather jerkin today.’ And just imagine the problems finding appropriate footwear. Anyway, it sure made the educational process a nightmare. The degree to which people demanded conformity then was astounding. Children are allowed so much more freedom now, it’s hard to believe how restrictive things were then.

It’s never entirely clear whether or not Shiva’s gifts are actually curses. You get certain things from them, but always at a price. Or you think something’s been taken away, but some other good thing comes from it.

For better or for worse, Shiva’s gifts isolated me as a child, which is a really precious gift in the end. In my childhood, I was treated like a dreadful contagion. Other kids said I was too ugly to play with, and other kids’ parents didn’t want me touching their kids. My physical malformity gave me an almost divine form of cooties. It allowed me to have a great imaginative life, but it sure was lonely.

But in keeping with the complexity of Shiva’s nature, what had seemed like a curse developed into a gift. In high school, I suddenly went from being a tolerated member on the periphery of a fairly normal group to being the de facto leader of a group of long-haired





Want to see my cat  
watching me watching  
endless stretching

beatnik wannabes. My lips had regenerated to the point where I ended up with a mouth that was like kissing a plunger. I also let my hair grow long, even before the Beatles did, as a way of hiding myself. I hated going to the barber and, anyway, Jack Kerouac had long hair.

So, with my long hair and my gigantic lips, I suddenly became a marketable commodity because I looked like Mick Jagger – but an intellectual Mick Jagger. Soon there would be a glut in the market but, hey, I was there first. And the contagion thing soon rooted only in the minds of the most blazing crimson of redneck truck-driver parents, fearful of a hideous end to their daughter's – or son's – virginity, in every sense of the word, that it would be sacrificed on the altar of a psychedelic Dionysus. My lonely leper colony was completely filled with Venus, Pan, countless satyrs and nymphs, and the full cast of Woodstock. Ti-i-i-ime was on my side.

