

THE MAN IN THE SHROUD

A Strange Encounter

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The truth does not need an organization;
The truth does not need a leader;
The truth does not need a God;
The truth only needs more truth.

-- *Ken Klinkert*

PROLOGUE

Laguna Beach by Paul Gavin

His name had an alarm bell quality appropriate to what he perceived to be his mission on earth.

He was also known as Georgia. That's where he had grown up, in a green stucco cottage on a side street off Savannah's once stately Victory Drive. His ailing mother, who still lived in the crumbling box-like house with a half-dozen barking dogs, called him Kenny. So did most women, whether casual admirers of his lithe physique or those far fewer who had been smitten by his words. Young people, especially children, hailed him as the Skipper because of the skipping gait he employed during his sojourn in California.

The first time I saw him was on a steep section of South Coast

Highway not far from the center of Laguna Beach. Propelled by that distinctive gait, he was hurtling toward me along the sidewalk in sneakers and running shorts, clutching a brown paper bag. The mid-afternoon sun highlighted his form. I was able to follow each bouncing step as it reverberated through the sinewy muscles of his chest, rhythmically jarring the gnarled strands of his beard and undulating his shoulder-length hair like cresting waves of reflecting spray. There was a curious rigidity in the way he moved. My immediate impression was that this person was animated by some force beyond his control. The compulsive nature of his gait and the impersonal intensity of his gaze made it seem that his skipping was no more voluntary than the holy gyrations of medieval victims of St. Vitus's dance. It was an assessment reinforced by hearing the Skipper's words, shouted not so much at the passing pedestrians as at the world. "Wake up! Wake up! Time is short. When you die, you won't even see the dark!"

He was about to skip past me in front of Susanne's patio restaurant, when he noticed my diagnostic stare. Too late to look away and pretend he wasn't there! I initiated a slight, conciliatory nod in case he was one of those people with the power to inflict an unpleasantly lingering stare. But the Skipper's impersonal compulsion was already melding into a personal smile, as if he had momentarily emerged from his trance. He nodded in return and skipped by without breaking his stride.

I couldn't resist turning, after a discreet pause, to look back at this outlandish figure before he disappeared in the sidewalk crowds. That's when our eyes met again. He had stopped skipping close to the bottom of the hill, and from thirty or forty paces away was also looking back. It was a strange, unfocused gaze as if he was trying to penetrate some distant obscuring mist of time and place, perhaps beyond this life and this world, to a dimension in which he and I might have known each other before.

The Skipper's act undoubtedly was an original one even in this town known affectionately for its *Lagunatics*. He reminded me of a young version of the Greeter, whom I used to see standing in practically the same spot more than a

quarter of a century ago when Coast Highway was the main route between Los Angeles and San Diego. I was then a junior naval reserve officer stationed on a fleet tanker in Long Beach, and I had frequently made the drive south - whether to spend a weekend with friends at the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club or take care of official business with COMSERVRON THREE, our supervisory command in San Diego. Not once did I fail to see the Greeter en route. Sporting a red blazer, this lanky old man with silvery locks and a radiant beard positioned himself in the center of Laguna Beach, close to the bumper-to-bumper traffic creeping past the tourist restaurants, galleries, and boutiques. He would lean conspicuously into the highway and try to establish eye contact with the occupants of each passing car; then crooking the index finger of his outstretched arm, he would come out with a cheery, throaty, *Hello!* Whether his was a case of mildly psychotic behavior, I wouldn't deign to say. But I could personally vouch for the warm feeling he invariably aroused among those he visually touched. The Greeter kept this up well into his eighties and was celebrated in the national media as the beloved symbol of Laguna Beach and its peculiar ways.

As I now continued my homeward trek along South Coast Highway, I wondered if the Skipper, too, would be remembered years hence. During that fleeting moment when both of us were glancing back, I discerned a mystery demanding to be resolved. I might have overcome any reservations, if an interesting woman had been involved, and backtracked to start a colloquy. But to approach this skipping hippie-type for reasons I couldn't articulate? That certainly wasn't part of the agenda which had prompted me to return to this prosperous, artistically oriented community at the edge of the Pacific. I didn't know how long I could afford the rent for my one-room cottage on a rocky bluff above a little crescent beach. My savings were limited and only partly replenished by occasional script writing jobs on promotional films. Why get unnecessarily distracted by a mere curiosity such as the Skipper, who probably would turn out to be a marginal mental case of the type this town seemed to attract?

I saw the Skipper again a few days later not far from our original encounter. I was at Marriner's Stationers paying for a couple of typewriter ribbons, a ream of twenty-pound bond, and several little bottles of white-out when I happened to glance through the back of the book display window and see the Skipper's unmistakable form whip by in the street. Like the passing whistle of an onrushing train, his message was too muffled to decipher more than the phrase, "My only enemy is death!" By the time I made it out of the store, the Skipper was already at the end of the block and turning onto South Coast Highway. As he rounded the corner drugstore, the last thing I saw was his bobbing brown paper bag.

I didn't see the Skipper again until months later when I was returning from working on a publicity film on the Seminole Indians in Florida. It was well after midnight as the Orange County Limousine with its few remaining passengers from Los Angeles Airport came to a stop at a red light by the main boardwalk in Laguna Beach. My thoughts had reverted to the macho tribal chief, who had made me an unwitting accomplice to poaching an eleven foot alligator from a sawgrass swamp by having me hold the gaffer tape he used for tying up its snout. Now, only a few feet from where I was sitting, stood the Skipper in the glow of a street lamp. He was in animated conversation with a young woman in heavy black pants and a thick white cardigan. This was February when even Southern California could become penetratingly cold at night. Yet the Skipper was in his usual shirtless attire. I was near enough to notice that his khaki running shorts were frayed and his sneakers were worn through. Watching his breath condense in the yellowish light, I almost shuddered inside the heated van. Surely the Skipper was pushing his act to unnecessary extremes! What was it within him that drove him so? If it was merely warm clothing he lacked, the Salvation Army would have undoubtedly fixed him up. His actions made me realize he wasn't impervious to the cold. I saw him grab the lamp post with one arm and spin himself around several times, which he followed by rapidly doing a half-dozen of his skipping steps in place. Then for a moment he stood still, and I caught a glimpse of his face in full repose. How

hauntingly familiar his features seemed! I felt as if I had indeed known him from some other place, from some other dimension that was close by - yet I couldn't quite grasp.

Our next encounter was in front of Gene's Market at the end of March, when balmy weather had returned. Gene's was a small general store on South Coast Highway, about halfway downtown from where I lived. Since neither shirts nor shoes were required, I could go there directly from the beach. The cashiers didn't even grumble about being paid in sippy dollar bills.

I had just emerged with my shopping for the evening meal, which included an outstanding bottle of Beaulieu Burgundy - a real buy in the under-five-dollars range that would complement the rack-of-lamb which had also been on sale. The large grocery bag against my chest was partly shielding my face when I spotted this unmistakable figure out of the corner of my eye.

Unobserved by him, I watched the Skipper hop into the store in those same ragged sneakers and shorts he had worn weeks before. I felt acutely conscious that no more than a decade separated our lives. He couldn't have been much beyond his early thirties - yet how disparate had been our fates! I suspected he didn't have a place to stay, and that signature paper bag was for stale bread and other edibles he could scrounge. I already had the nagging realization that if I were to eat my dinner in peace, I would have to make at least a token gesture to equalize things a bit. In that same spirit I had often handed out dollar bills to hobos and drunks when I lived in New York, and occasionally sent a hundred-dollar check to some African hunger fund. But wouldn't the Skipper perhaps take offense? He fitted no category I could readily identify, and maybe money wasn't his problem at all.

Weighing the various pros and cons in front of Gene's, I instinctively checked the little front pocket of my bathing suit. That's where I usually kept a twenty-dollar bill in reserve. Just then the Skipper appeared on his way out of the store. Before he could wind up for his first hop, I placed the twenty in his free hand.

The Skipper's face expanded into a grateful smile. "Hey, all right," he said, after glancing at the note. "Thanks a million, brother." He dropped the money unceremoniously in his paper bag, and with a wave of the arm, jauntily skipped away.

Our pivotal meeting came that summer at Susanne's patio restaurant, where I often stopped on my daily trek through town. Susanne was a recent friend who didn't hesitate to share with me her interests and her woes. An attractive German bride of a former U. S. serviceman who had left her with two children and the insolvent restaurant for another woman, Susanne compounded her problems by becoming more devoted to learning how to read past lives than to planning a menu for Sunday brunch. The restaurant on this particular occasion was closed for the brief afternoon respite between meals, and Susanne invited me to join her on the outdoor patio for a slice of gourmet mocha cake. Sitting with us was her headwaiter, Michael, an aspiring photographer. And next to him at the table in his familiar garb - awkwardly examining a color contact sheet - was the Skipper.

The first surprise came on shaking the Skipper's hand. It was an aphysical act on his part, as if from his innermost self he shunned the contact. The febleness of his grip was all the more incongruous because of the energy radiating from the lean musculature of his body. The handshake seemed to be a denial of his existence in physical form.

I was no less surprised on hearing his name. Ken Klinkert sounded so incongruous with the way he appeared (I had yet to recognize its alarm bell quality) that I asked him to repeat it and then spell it. I had expected a person with such a metaphysical air to have an appropriately metaphysical name. Like the exotic Baba Ram Dass, with his flowing beard and Indian robes, who played the guru role in his frequent visits to Laguna Beach. Yet only a few years earlier, Baba Ram Dass had been Dick Alpert, a mundane, middle-aged associate of Timothy Leary on the Harvard faculty. Couldn't this fellow Klinkert have come up with a more fitting handle by now? Or hadn't I still heard him right? No, Ken Klinkert assured me with bashful pride in a rapid

torrent of words, Ken Klinkert really was his name, though he didn't at all mind being called Skipper or Georgia. "I know I seen you around, but hey ... you sure we haven't met before? I feel like I know you real well, your soul, your inner self. Maybe you just remind me of someone, but I really think we met some place. I also don't forget you handed me the twenty as I come out of Gene's. I thought that was durn nice, I mean for a total stranger to do that in the street!"

Ken literally effervesced when he found out I was a writer. "I sort of figured that all along," he beamed. "I can't say I'm really surprised. Y'all may think it a coincidence. But I know that's how the universe works." He reached for the large, empty-looking paper bag on the chair next to his. He pulled out a curled sheaf of papers, about a dozen pages stapled together, and handed them to me. "My message to the world," he muttered with a laugh that didn't disguise his earnestness, and then inquired cryptically, "How can people be free if their destiny is a lie?"

I read aloud the first few lines: "My fellow friends of the truth, this is my inner feeling about how we can save the earth from another cycle of pain, fear and death. I need your help. I pray that the line of communication will be open to the human race and that our eyes, ears, and hearts will sense and know that we are all part of the light. The message of life over death is up to us to figure out."

I continued turning the pages and glancing momentarily at each. "It still ain't exactly how I want it," Ken interjected. "I'm no writer ... I hardly know my ABC's." He paused, a bit uneasy, but then the words again started to tumble out. "This girl I met helped put it together for me. She typed it and all. I'm too disconnected to do anything on my own. I wish I could get hold of her again, but she was just visiting. I should have at least gotten her address." Ken let out a self-deprecating laugh which nevertheless betrayed a touch of pride. "Heck, I can't help it if I still haven't learned how to function in this world."

At about this point I had an overwhelming realization that surprised me incomparably more than the Skipper's limp handshake or his unexpected

name. Glancing at this Ken Klinkert mere inches away, shuffling restlessly in the chair across from mine, I suddenly knew the reason for his familiar look and where I had seen it before. It was as if artists from the earliest medieval times had for some inexplicable reason used his face as a model to represent the Christian savior of the human race.

"I guess I'm not the first one to notice ..." I ventured.

"Yeah," the Skipper interjected, "people come up all the time telling me that. That's why Michael here wanted to take pictures for his, you know, his ..."

"Portfolio," Michael filled in.

"Sometimes I get tired of it all," the Skipper said with a mixture of exasperation and that same underlying pride. "I mean people don't give me no peace."

During the next hour or so on the patio, the Skipper held forth in a continuous torrent. There was an evanescent quality to his words, and though I realized he was elaborating on the message he felt was so urgent for the world, all I could later recollect about his non-stop monologue was that it ranged from poetic eloquence to disjointed mutterings. What I would remember far more vividly was how I had managed to resist Susanne's entreaties to indulge in a second piece of her moist chocolatey cake.

Before leaving the restaurant, I discreetly tried to slip my new friend another twenty-dollar bill, which he openly declined. All he would accept were the sixty cents it cost at Kinko's copy center in Boat Canyon to replace the handout he had given me. I then casually volunteered to help him in whatever way I could with his message to the world. It was an instinctive reaction, not unlike the way two acquaintances who occasionally bump into each other on a city street say, "Let's have lunch sometimes."

I nevertheless sensed a mounting compulsion to follow through in this case. What was prompting me was a traumatic experience the previous year while spending Christmas holidays at my parents' Massachusetts home. For several eternal minutes on a snow-covered field at dusk, I felt as if I were being chastised by God himself for the superficial and self-indulgent life I had led. I

suddenly could see how I had misused my talents and gifts to make the world as comfortable for myself as I could, even if it meant abusing the truth in my public relations work or not being wholly forthcoming while seeking partners for relieving my carnal drives. I had always thought that if the impossible did occur and God decided on this form of personal address, it would be to commend me on the good and considerate life I had tried to lead. After all, I had merely been heeding the mantra of the day: *Enjoy yourself in this one and only go-around on Earth!* And I had been relatively moderate in doing so. Yet, at that moment beneath the darkening sky, no amount of sophistry or rationalization could make me look one iota better than I was being shown to be. That's why I had come to Laguna Beach, and that was the project on which I wanted to concentrate: to try to integrate those irrational, unforgettable moments on the snowy field into the rational world view I had acquired during four years as a liberal arts major at Yale. While such an endeavor might end up casting me as another Lagunatic, it also qualified me for helping Ken Klinkert with his task.

In seeking a new synthesis - or at least a new perspective - I recognized the importance of keeping a truly open mind. Was it possible that in some unexpected way Ken Klinkert would help me make sense of those fleeting moments which meant as much as the rest of my life? Would he help me recognize not only what sort of a person I was - but also the sort of person I should become? Instinctively, I felt he just might; rationally, I didn't want to risk *not* giving a chance to this unlettered ex-G. I. with his message.

My only firm idea on how to go about this task turned out to be a fortuitous one. In view of the difficulty I had in remembering the Skipper's words, I would rely on a tape recorder and limit myself to drawing him out. This shouldn't prove difficult considering my subject's propensity to overwhelm any willing listener with non-stop monologue.

In the years ahead, there would be delays and detours in this project - as well as inexplicable, bizarre events to spur me on. Occasionally I would wonder: who is this Ken Klinkert anyway? Yet all such considerations would

ultimately carry no more weight than my own original interest. The reason for reaching this stage of conveying the Skipper's message would rest solely in his words as transcribed from those tapes.

Only within those words glimmers whatever meaning is to be discerned.

ON THE BOARDWALK

Orange County Register photo

The summer of '80 - the year Mount St. Helen's blew up and dusted the Northwest repeatedly with ashes - that's when my collaboration with Ken Klinkert begins. We have agreed to meet on the boardwalk that runs several hundred yards along Main Beach. It is a warm Sunday afternoon. The sandy stretch on the ocean side is covered towel-to-towel with visitors from throughout Orange County and beyond. The more youthful locals congregate around the boardwalk steps jutting out onto the beach at intervals of fifty yards so. Their activities include smoking pot, quietly ogling each other, and sporadically playing volleyball. On the other side of the boardwalk is a lawn spotted with family picnickers, and beyond them winds Pacific Coast Highway, clogged with its usual holiday traffic preponderant in late model and foreign luxury cars.

It is well after two o'clock, the time of our rendezvous. I'm beginning to wonder what's keeping Ken, when I suddenly spot his unmistakable form emerge from the crowds at the other end of the boardwalk. In his khaki shorts and clutching the brown paper bag, he's skipping in my direction at a frenzied pace, his feet thudding against the wooden planks like the steady beat of a base drum. He truly seems propelled by some inexorable force, yelling his non-

stop torrent of insistent words. Though hailed with sporadic greetings of, "Hey, Skipper!" he seem to be a familiar enough sight to receive little more attention than the ice cream man hawking his wares. He barely nods as I intercept him and fall a couple of steps behind him with a microcassette recorder in hand:

"We can change the whole universe, we can make our paradise here on earth. It's your birthright to know where you belong on earth and within the universe. I don't care if you're rich or poor, Christian or Jew. I don't care what group, what organization you come from. Let's come together with knowledge and information about the truth. Truth, truth ... I pray that you all wake up to the truth. I pray that we all unite. I'm just a man of flesh and blood. I know my faults. I'm not here with righteousness. All man's righteousness is filthy rags. I don't have to look to nobody for the truth. I don't have to pay three hundred dollars to get high from no guru, because I've already got the truth. The truth is in no book. It's in the book of life in your heart. I'm telling you, you can have the loving shepherd of the sheep if you don't fall asleep. Wake up, wake up! Become alert! Time is running out. Is man getting any better? I say let's start today! Take time and pray to see the light. You can see the promised land. Make a stand, together; together, we can be free ..."

Ken points toward the crowds on the beach: "And you can be free, too."

A shout from a group of bronzed high schoolers lounging on boardwalk steps: "Hey, Skipper!"

An admiring female whistles from the same group.

"All right ... we can all be free! Perfect love, the perfect love will cast out all fear. Then the universe will appear ..."

A chubby young man on a bicycle rides along the boardwalk, ringing his bell as he passes Ken: "Alleluia, Skipper!"

"All right, there's a man who says 'Alleluia!' Well, alleluia to you, brother! This man has seen the light. He shines just like Moses when he came down off the mountain 'cause he's got truth. And we can all shine with the inner light. Let's encourage each other to reach our God-potential of the light. All we're

doing is looking at everything that's false. Well, we've got to look at the truth. Only the truth will set us free ... Let's be free, let's be free, break the chains of bondage, break the chains of death. D'you want to be free? D'you want life? Alice in Wonderland will have nothing on us when we're free. All our fantasies will become reality. Yes, I'm free, I'm free, praise the Lord I'm free, this crazy mixed up world ain't got no hold on me ..."

A derisive shout from another part of the beach arouses Ken to react: "I'll defend what I'm talking about because I'd only be defending the truth. I don't need to defend it with my body. I'll defend it with the spirit of the living God within me. People want to destroy each other; people want to kill one another. We should learn how to encourage one another. We should learn how to love one another ... "

Ken vigorously pumps his free arm in the air in sync with his rapid skipping to emphasize his point: "Earth, earth, hear the word of truth! We can be free, we can be free. Wake up! Wake up! Wake up before it's too late! If we wake up, we can reach the pearly gate. But we can't debate. We can't hesitate. We have to use the reality of life over death, mind over matter. Then we can climb the mental ladder to reach the highest supreme, the reality of the glowing Godhead ... I pray that the Holy Spirit would descend upon Laguna Beach, would descend upon every country, would descend upon the earth ... and we would be free. Let's work together to make a new earth and a new universe! As you sit in the grass, you think about the holy task. Man has not made his move. He's got to come down off his throne and leave his ego alone. What is truth is truth. What is dust is dust. Who wants to rust? All we need is a little trust. It's up to us. No one else is going to do it. We're either going to work together to make a new earth and a new universe, or everything is going to be destroyed."

The Skipper's Sunday audience around the boardwalk seems indifferent, even with the added spectacle of a person running alongside trying to record his words. As he comes to the end of the boardwalk, Ken does an about-face and begins to retrace his steps. His tone turns plaintive:

"Our children have a right to be free. Freedom, freedom! Let's break the bond. Let's start today. Perfect love will cast out our fear, and a new universe will appear. And then we'll all be branches of God's mind and we'll all have a new body, a new mind ... and we'll be free of death and destruction. As you sit in the sand, look not to the left, look not to the right, look not to religion because that'll make you uptight. But look to the inner life. The word, the word of God is in your heart. It's in your soul. And you better behold the Only Begotten Son ... because if you want a rerun then this earth is done. It's time for man to make a move. We got to make a move now. As you look to the sea, you think about the one from Galilee. He came once to set us free. But man didn't want to be free. He wanted his misery. Well, I'm telling you, you can know the promised land. You can be free from this misery. We're all brothers and sisters. Let's all become free together."

The bicyclist who previously greeted the Skipper now rings his bell vigorously as he passes him, and again elicits a response: "Like the man pedaling the bike, we can all be pedaling with Jesus. Not a man-made Jesus. Not a church Jesus. Not a picture of Jesus with flowing robes. But the inner Christ, the inner truth. I don't care whether male or female, young or old, Christian or Jew, we can all have a love that's true."

Ken's words are interrupted by sustained applause from a group of about a dozen high school boys and their female companions. Some are standing, some are sitting as they congregate in the sand around one of the sets of steps from the boardwalk. Ken takes this opportunity to pause. He has been skipping and shouting non-stop for a good ten minutes. Though not sweating in the afternoon sun, his wiry tanned body is glistening. When one in the group calls out, "Hey, I like what you're doing," Ken walks down the few wooden steps to talk to these young people.

"Hey, I like y'all, too. What is y'all feeling?"

A bronzed, well-shaped girl in a skimpy thin bathing suit addresses the Skipper from within the hubbub of the group: "I want to know ... I want to know what drug you're on. Are you on any drugs?"

"I don't have to get stoned. I'm high on ..."

The girl strains to hear as she takes a couple of steps forward: "What are you talking about?"

"Well, if you had ears, you could hear."

"But I can't hear what you're saying."

"You know why? Because you have an ego problem. You have to come down off your throne, leave your ego alone, and let your inner spirit take you home."

The chubby young man who had been riding the bicycle now is standing at the edge of the group. Like the others, he is in his late teens yet he doesn't seem to belong. He is the only one who is pale and wearing long pants and a shirt. He appears to be in a world of his own as he calls out, "Hey, John ..."

Same girl as before: "I still can't hear what you're saying."

Ken: "I can look at another person and know when they feel the truth." He turns to the chubby youth who had just spoken. "Like this man. Just like the water sparkles in the brook, the love of God sparkles in his heart. Every fiber of his being ..."

The young man interrupts to announce to the group: "You're talking to John the Baptist."

Girl points to Ken: "What, this guy?"

Ken to young man: "What's your name?"

"Shawn."

"Shawn? Oh, Shawn represents a new day that will dawn."

Voice within group: "Oh, wow!"

Ken: "If the people knew what you had, they would set off an alarm in their mind, and they'd see the design of the truth. And we'd all be free."

Another male voice in the group: "Keep it up, keep it up!"

Ken: "But I need the help of the people. I need the help of the people. Tell the people ... tell the people to write in to different talk shows. I have a message to earth. I know how we can be free. I've seen oceans get cleared. I've seen ... you know when they had this fire here in Laguna Beach? I told two

people, I said, 'If y'all believe with y'all's minds that you can stop the wind, they'll be able to put the fire out.' They didn't have time to doubt. And a tree limb just broke off, the wind had been blowing at thirty-five miles an hour. And the minute I said that and they believed, the wind stopped. I've been telling people for the last two or three months now that they're going into dust or nothing. And we've had the volcano, and we've had the dust all over. I tell people the heat is on, that nature is going to wipe man out. Because man is wiping himself out, nature is going to help. Nature is a part of man. We're all part of the elements. If we work with the elements, with love and harmony ..."

Shawn: "We *are* nature." He squats down to rest one knee in the sand, close to where I'm standing with the recorder.

Male voice within group: "But we've gotten evil where we aren't any more. That's the problem."

Ken: "But we can get it back. If we don't get it back, we're going to fall on our sacroiliacs. Then we're going into the dust, and we will rust. But if we have trust, we're going to be free and go through the galaxy. Then we can say, 'Hey Milky Way, we want to play with all those billions of stars.' And we shall be free to be one with the one from Galilee. We'll all be one with the one from Galilee. Like a tree has different branches, we're all branches of God's mind."

Ken focuses on the boy nearest him: "Just like when I look at you, d'you know what I see? I see Christ."

"Yes, the God made the man in his image." Shawn is speaking directly into my recorder. For the first time I notice his weird accent. It certainly isn't Laguna Beach or Gaelic. His speech and demeanor are more characteristic of the Middle East.