

# Seven Story Bus: The Story of the Trees Community - By Shishonee Ruetenik

This is the story of The Trees Community, a semi monastic Christian group that left NYC on a bus in 1971 on a journey of faith. When most of our money burned up the first night, we relied on God for all our needs and he provided! We traveled the United States growing in our new faith, finding a ministry in music and eventually becoming artists in residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Seven years, seven "stories" are woven into this amazing journey.

## TO LIGHT THEM A HOPE IN THE NIGHT: The Search

*This story is dedicated to my fellow Trees...who joined me on this amazing journey to Christianity and faith...*

**NOTE - YOU WILL NEED TO HIT "OLDER POST" AT THE BOTTOM OF EACH SECTION TO CONTINUE READING the rest of this book.**



The Trees Community - Pecos, New Mexico 1972

March 1970

Jumping quickly out of the crowded car, I turned from my road-weary companions and approached a rundown brick building at 108 Fourth Avenue, excited and a bit apprehensive. What would I find inside? Gazing upward, I scanned the derelict brownstone sandwiched between a used bookstore and an antique warehouse. Would my dreams about this place would match reality? Glancing back at my high school friends in the car, I smiled as they gave me a thumbs up. Tentatively, I pulled on the heavy door until suddenly it swung open. I leaned my head in cautiously, peering into the total darkness. I was hit with the overpowering, musty smell of cat urine. Emotions swirled around me. I felt a giddy sense of freedom and a nagging apprehension. *Finally...I can't believe it. I'm actually here!*

I didn't realize the extent of the journey I was about to embark on that spring. Young and naïve, I left a cozy suburban Midwestern town to visit a man I had met only weeks before. I was drawn to him as my Jim-Jones savior yet I had no idea what I was getting into. At 18, my life was churning with unanswered questions and a relentless desire to find "the Truth." I was sure this charismatic stranger held the key to unlocking the anxious feelings consuming me. It was the spring of 1970, a time of peace demonstrations, hippie love-ins and teenage angst. I was swept up in a tide of youthful unrest, eager to break free of materialism, big government and parental oppression. In a poem from that summer, I wondered:

Why am I here?  
 What is the point of this strange existence?  
 Caught  
 between my childhood and some unknown future,  
 chasing vacant shadows,  
 alone and weary, laying softly in bitterness,  
 longing for that innocence  
 of a child.  
 Words echoing with no one to listen,  
 longing for truth,  
 restless and empty.

It was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius with its flower children, drugs and free love. I was swept up in my generation's struggle to break free of the Vietnam War, motherhood and apple pie. In our dorm room, we listened to the Beatles and Bob Dylan. But to me, Buffalo Springfield captured the true essence of the heartbeat of my generation. "Something's happening here, what is ain't exactly clear... There's battle lines being drawn. Nobody's right if everybody's wrong. Young people speaking their minds, getting so much resistance from behind..."

Our generation was moving away from the beat poets and hipsters of the late fifties and sixties and heading into uncharted new spiritual and

cultural territory. I was an unhappy, rebellious teenager who'd been uprooted from Lakewood, a small, cozy town in Ohio to a fast growing suburb of Detroit, Michigan. Typical of many from my generation, I was resentful, restless and idealistic. I rejected the Leave it to Beaver lives of my parents as part of the "Establishment" as I dabbled in alternative lifestyles.

Standing on the sunlit New York City sidewalk, I smiled and waved a quick goodbye to the carload of my friends as they drove off, laughing and yelling, "See yah later, Shishonee! Stay cool!" For a brief moment, I felt as if I was suspended in time and my entire childhood had slipped away from me like a phantom ghost. I imagined part of me speeding away through the narrow, crowded streets of New York City while the rest of me was left standing on the threshold of my new life. The laughter of my friends floated back as I stepped cautiously into the mysterious darkness. The door thudded closed behind me as I called out tentatively, "Hello?...Hello?"

Straining to listen, I thought I heard muffled voices arguing from somewhere up above mingled with the sound of water running. Several landings above dim candle light cast eerie shadows. I climbed up the dank stairwell, feeling my way along the walls, clammy and scaly with chipping paint. *Was this the right address? Maybe I made a mistake!* Just as I reached the first landing, a head popped out of a doorway and I jumped back, heart pounding. A short, frumpy looking woman dressed in a worn grey housecoat snapped, "Who are you!"

Startled, I answered, "Ah, I'm looking for the Loft."

Wordlessly, she gestured upward and spun around, slamming the door behind her.

Feeling like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz I muttered, "Oh my." *What have I gotten myself into now!* This smelly rundown building wasn't what I had imagined for my guru's pad! Inching my way up the dingy stairwell, I cast my thoughts back to the previous afternoon...

It was Easter break, 1970, so I was home from boarding school hanging out with old friends I hadn't seen since the previous summer. I ranted on and on telling them about this strange, spiritual man I had just met who called himself Shipen. "You really have to meet this guy! He'll blow you away! He reminds me of James Dean mixed with Timothy Leary and a generous dose of Jesus Christ." I told them about his place in New York City called "The Loft" – a sort of ashram where all kinds of people came seeking answers. "I sure wish I could be there" I had mused. The next thing I knew we had piled into somebody's car and drove through the night, laughing, smoking cigarettes and singing Beatles tunes.



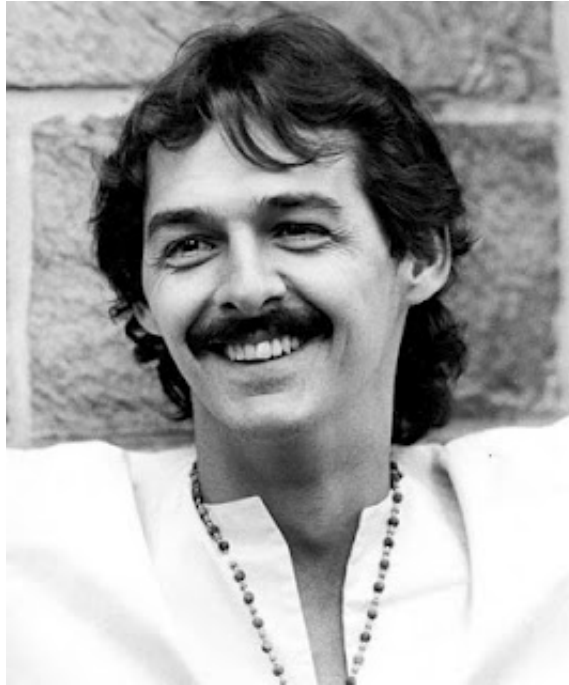
We stopped briefly at Niagara Falls briefly to do the tourist thing, then off we went headed for the City.



It was dawn when we reached the George Washington Bridge. Huge skyscrapers rose like giant black construction paper cutouts against the rose colored sunrise. As we barreled through the crowded city streets, I dug into my pocket for a scrunched up scrap of paper with the address: 108 Fourth Avenue, off 14th Street...

After what seemed like ages, I reached the top of the stairs. There was no door - only a woolen blanket draped across the threshold. "Hello?" I called out meekly, lifting up the edge of the scratchy blanket. No one answered. Peeking inside I surveyed what appeared to be a small kitchen with a clawfooted bathtub against one wall, a toilet in another

corner and a small sink. Against another wall, a teapot was rattling away on an old gas stove. Just as I was about to call out again, a dark haired man stepped into the room. He was impeccably dressed in a crisp white Nehru shirt tucked carefully into neatly pressed pants. With a dramatic flourish, he leaned over the stove and turned off the kettle. Turning toward the doorway, he spotted me and smiled mischievously.



### "Ariel" Phillip Dross

"Welcome" he said in a deep bass voice. "Come on in. I'm Ariel, what's your name?" I was so surprised and nervous all I could manage to whisper back was, "I'm Shishonee...is this ah...ah...the Loft?"

His eyes twinkled as he offered me a cup of tea and assured me that indeed it was. Relieved and suddenly exhausted, I collapsed onto a stool, feeling as if I was dreaming. He explained that he and his roommate Shipen were getting ready to go to a love-inn in Central Park and I was welcome to come along. Suddenly exhausted, I told him thanks but if they didn't mind, I'd just as soon take a nap. As he chattered on, I found it hard to concentrate on his words as I surveyed my surroundings. I felt relieved and oddly at home as I sipped the steaming spicy tea. *Finally, I was here! This was it! The Loft!*

Ariel washed up the dishes then led me up one more flight of stairs into a huge, airy room with brick walls and high ceilings. What a kaleidoscope of colors and textures! Brightly colored streamers of red and purple satin crisscrossed the ceiling in layered waves. Shafts of sunlight streamed in through two tall windows at the far side of the loft. Indian tapestries and rugs covered mattresses artfully spread in disarray throughout the room. There was a huge old canvas army tent pitched in a corner by one of the windows. In another corner, sheets of heavy gold brocade were draped around an alcove creating a private space. Ariel

excused himself for a moment and I just stood there, taking everything in.



Photograph by John Olson-Life Magazine- Jan. 1, 1969

I felt as if I had walked into the photograph I had clipped out of Life Magazine and hung on my wall back at Leelanau. It was a picture of a long haired hippy family sitting in a tent (the Bray family were photographed while living at the Mystic Arts Commune). It all seemed curiously familiar and inviting. Swept into a kind of spiritual deja vu, it was as if I had been in that exact same space and time before. The loft seemed like an earthy cavern nestled in the rainforest. Finally I was home.

Just then, Ariel returned with a blanket and invited me to rest while he and Shipen went to the Love-in. "Thanks," I muttered and I curled up in a corner on top of a rug-covered mattress. Drifting on the edges of sleep, my body relaxed but my mind kept racing as I recalled the long series of events that had led me to the Loft...

## **School Days: Leelanau**





View from shore of campus at Leelanau School

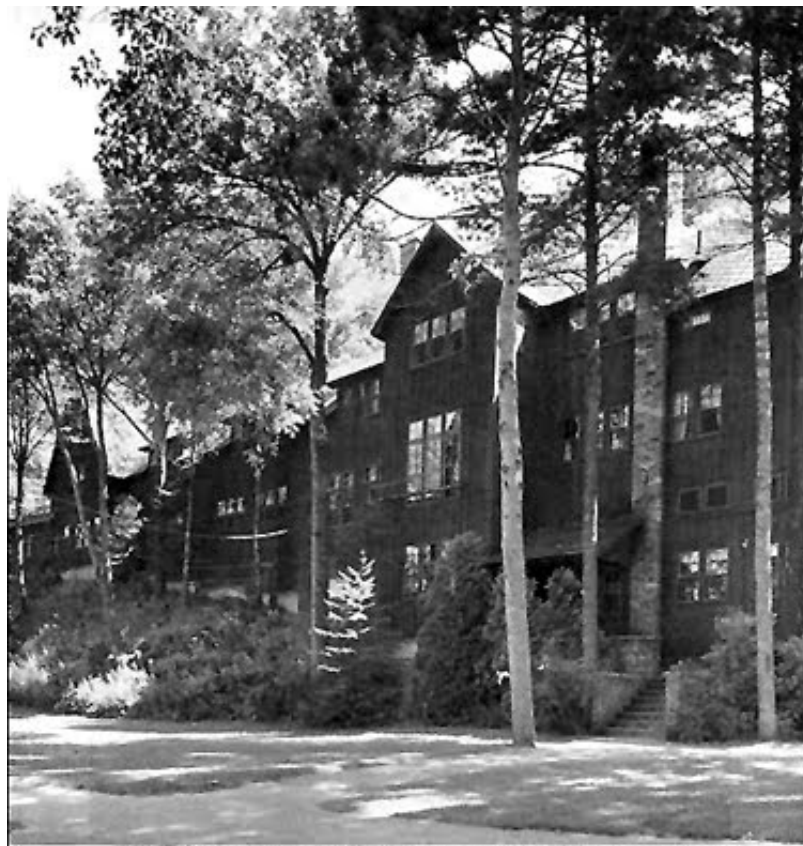
It was late in the morning on a sweltering August day in the summer of 1969. I sat restless and impatient in the back seat of our family's ancient station wagon, hot air blowing through a half opened window. My parents were silent as we drove down a winding road past the towering golden sands of Sleeping Bear dunes headed toward Lake Michigan. We pulled into a store and I waited sullenly as my Dad went to get directions. The air in our old station wagon felt oppressive, suffocating. I jumped out to stretch my cramped legs, my thoughts skipping forward to what lay ahead... We were on our way to orientation day at a Leelanau School, a Christian Science boarding school tucked away in the quiet little resort town of Glen Arbor in northern Michigan. I wondered...*what would it be like? Would I make any new friends?* Though I would never admit it, I desperately needed to find something to anchor me and heal my anger, discontent, and depression.

We drove down a narrow road lined with white pine, maple and birch trees and parked in front of the low-slung cinderblock library building. My parents introduced themselves to a stiff looking older woman as I went in search of a bathroom. Returning a few minutes later, I could hear my parents arguing in low, clipped tones. "I just don't think this was necessary, I really don't," my father muttered, sounding exasperated. My mother replied insistently, "If we don't get her away now, I'm worried that we're going to lose her. When she ran away last month, she was living with a bunch of drugged-out hippies! If we don't get her away from that crowd she's hanging around with, I don't know what will happen! We have no other choice. This is the best place for her right now." As I re-entered the room, my mother called out brightly, "Oh, there she is. Come on, let's go look around campus."

With a "whatever" shrug, I followed along as we toured the grounds. There were a string of small cabins nestled along the Crystal River and

behind them a thin stretch of sandy woods abutting Lake Michigan. My parents strolled along the sandy shore while my brothers and I ran in and out of the waves, splashing along barefoot, kicking up sprays of icy cold water on each other. My Dad helped lug my suitcases into Riveredge cottage and eventually, it was time for my family to leave. After hugs and promises to write, they clambored into the car and drove off. Waving goodbye I felt relieved yet oddly detached. Striding off toward the dining hall, I tried to look cool and confident. I can do this. And if it doesn't work out, I'll just run away again.

Though my father was a social worker at a home for delinquent girls and my mother was a kindergarten teacher, they were both at a loss of how to reach me. We had moved from the friendly, small town of Lakewood, Ohio to the West Bloomfield in the suburbs of Detroit in 1967 when I was entering 9th grade. The chaos and riots in the streets of Detroit that summer mirrored the maelstrom of anger and resentment seething within me. I never wanted to leave my friends and home in Ohio and almost as soon as we arrived my life began spiraling out of control. Andover High was full of "clicks" and a curious social caste system. Though I tried desperately to fit in, I was automatically "out" being a newcomer to the school. Feeling lost, shy, unhappy and depressed, I was accepted by the long-haired, rebellious crowd and my grades soon plummeted. They were delving into drugs and my mother worried I would soon follow!



The Homestead dining hall

I entered the huge old Homestead dining hall and climbed the stairs



headed for lunch. I was totally lost in my thoughts when I looked up and saw my best friend, "Sarah Benstein" [not her real name]! Too awesome! "Hey Sarah, wait up!" I called and she turned around, smiling in surprise. "What are you doing here?" we both said at the same time, and then we both started laughing..

Sarah and I had been friends ever since we met in high school. With long brown hair and soft brown eyes, Sarah was a natural, earthy type. Quickly, we caught up on what had happened over the summer. After lunch, I was thrilled when Sarah and I were assigned a room together in Riveredge cottage! Riveredge was a rustic wooden lodge located alongside the Crystal River overlooking Lake Michigan. It had beautiful knotty pine walls, a huge lounge area with a stone lined fireplace and our bedroom was located at the far end.



### Riveredge Cottage

After unpacking, we headed for dinner chatting away. Standing in line, we struck up a conversation with another student, "Naomi Goldman", also from Birmingham in the Detroit suburbs. From that night on the three of us became close friends. Eating dinner at the Homestead together that first night, my initial worries about fitting in melted away.

In 1969, Leelanau Schools had a sprawling, stunningly beautiful campus on Lake Michigan. Days were filled with classes but as soon as class let out, many of us loved to slip out to explore the woods and beaches. Nights and weekends were our chance to crawl out the window after lights out to sit under the stars or a stroll along the moonlit beach. I recall one warm September evening...

Sarah and I waited until our housemother, old Jinni Hinton checked in on us after lights-out. Peeking out from my almost-closed eyelids, Jinni looked like an apparition with her silhouette backlit, a ghostly figure dressed in a thin nightgown, white hair wildly askew around her faceless head and her stooped figure ominously framed in the doorway. Satisfied we were sound asleep, she lumbered off, her slippers slapping the floor as she headed off down the hall. When the sound of her footsteps faded

away, we quickly stuffed clothes under our sheets so it looked like we were still in bed. Easing the window open we slipped outside, leaving it open just a crack for our return. A huge golden harvest moon rose over the pine trees against a backdrop of stars. *How incredibly beautiful!* Barefoot, we raced soundlessly along the path through the woods to the weathered wooden bridge that crossed over the river. Half way across, I gazed down into the clear water meandering by, watching the shimmer of moonlight dancing along its surface. Then we slipped over the wooden planks following the narrow path to the sandy beach curling along Lake Michigan. I felt a mixture of exhilaration and glee.

That night I spent hours savoring the incredible beauty surrounding me. Passing near a pine tree, I was inundated with its rich, pungent smell. I reveled in the glittering lights skipping across the waves and the delicate texture of each grain of sand in my hands. My senses were electrified and everything was intensely beautiful. I felt part of the earth. Climbing into the "lap" of huge oak tree, I laid my cheek against the bark trying to sense how it felt, wondering how that old tree perceived the world. Meanwhile, Sarah lay quietly on the beach gazing at the stars, wrapped in her own private thoughts and dreams.

As I sat in that ancient tree, I wondered if indeed I could have had past lives, if reincarnation was real. I had the oddest feeling that in a past life I knew I had been an Indian. I allowed myself to be more and more apart of the sound of the waves, the delicate dance of nature surrounding me, until I felt drawn into an ancient mindset... the earth was my mother and I was connected to every blade of dune grass, every smooth pebble, every glittering star, every whispering pine, every gentle footfall around me. I could see how my decision to step over an anthill or crush it would have far reaching consequences. I leapt down and strolled along the shoreline, feeling totally peaceful and at one with nature. Suddenly time shifted and I became a mountain lion prowling through the woods and meadows, lithe and wary. Another shift and I was a young Indian striding along the beach. I glanced over and was surprised to see the dark form of a large fish swimming along the water's edge. As I walked along the beach, it kept pace with me and I felt an instant rapport. Regardless of whether I sped up or slowed down, amazingly the fish swam directly beside me along the shoreline! I felt deeply connected to the fish and wondered about the lesson of determination that ancient creature was trying to teach me. Eventually I said goodbye and it swam away. I turned back to the beach, deeply moved by the experience.

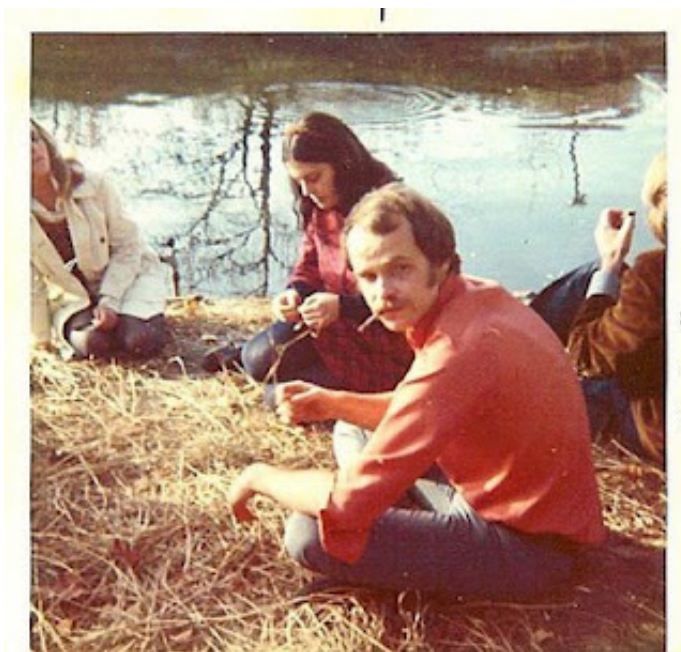
The hours passed and I felt acutely in tune with wilderness and marveled at the lessons it had to teach me. With vivid clarity as I journeyed back and forth between surreal scenarios of past lives and the beauty of my environment.



Finally, I sat by the lakeshore watching the waves crash endlessly against the sand. Fascinated, I studied the shimmering crystalline wall of breaking waves. Why had I never noticed how intricately beautiful it was? I broke open an orange I had brought along and was amazed at the delicate smell, the overwhelmingly delightful taste, and the jewel-like quality of each section. Normally I was oblivious of my surroundings and found it difficult to focus. In contrast, that night was a Zen-like experience in centering throughout which I was highly attuned to everything around me. I was able to “be one with” a tree, a leaf or a pebble. Early the next morning Sarah and I crept back into our room, exhilarated and completely exhausted.

Unfortunately, I don't remember a lot about my year at Leelanau but there was one teacher who made a life long impact on me - "Uncle Whit". He taught a class in poetry which quickly became one of my favorite subjects. Horace Whittemore was a wonderful, quirky, no-nonsense, quasi hermit who lived in a small log cabin in the woods on the edge of campus where he would hand feed deer and other wild things. Throughout the semester, he read to us from Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, E.E. Cummings, and many, many other poets and writers. I loved his class and gradually, he nurtured in me a deep love of nature, poetry and creative writing that remains to this day.

I had barely begun to adjust to the routine of boarding school when I met someone who would soon change my life. It was late fall and we had just finished the long walk to the Homestead dining hall for lunch when a stranger entered. He was a well dressed, striking young man in his late twenties with an aura of self-confidence and charm. He introduced himself as Shipen Lebzelter (“Ship-in”) to a few of the students standing ahead of me in line.



*Shipen and others outside the Homestead 1969*

I was immediately mesmerized by the rhythm and cadence of his words. It was if he was speaking in some venerable and beautiful ancient dialect like Shakespeare or Gaelic English. He used his hands like a dancer, gesturing and curving them through the air to make a point. With his lean grace and charismatic demeanor, Shipen had an aura about him that immediately entranced me - I was spellbound!



Shipen and students at Leelanau

After our meal, Shipen invited a group of students to meet with him by the river so I leapt at the chance. After study hall, I rushed over and

joined a small group of students sitting outside. He went on and on about becoming “clear” in mind and spirit and how important it was to find inner peace. He explained he had studied Tibetan Buddhism and other eastern religions which soon led into a long discussion about a new belief system he had written called *Clear Children*. What intrigued me was that he claimed he'd written it “automatically” without ever changing one word. Wow! He explained that in essence there were many different mindsets that could trap you (such as greed, envy and vanity) but the goal was to move out of these minds into higher mindsets such as wisdom and humility. Doing that would prepare you to enter the seven final minds of faith, hope, charity, mercy and grace and finally, you'd reach peace and love as you became “clear.” As I walked back to my dorm, I was totally confused yet convinced he was on to something.

Thus began a series of intense discussions about life, truth and following the path to spiritual enlightenment. After school, small groups of us met with Shipen in his sister's condo or outside on the lawn. The condo was located just off campus in an area that was part of the Homestead resort and thus off limits to students. We went anyway.

At first I was skeptical. Then a surprising event happened that truly impressed me. We were sitting inside the condo talking about stopping the constant flow of mental chatter and being more in tune with nature and its creatures. I said something to the effect that if we were truly in harmony with nature, then we should be able to communicate with animals. Shipen replied matter-a-factly, “You can do that if you silence your mind.” There was a fly slowly buzzing around the room distracting me. I thought he was going to tell me to ignore it but instead he suggested that I still my thoughts and communicate with the fly. Feeling a little silly, nevertheless, I closed my eyes and tried to let go of all the ideas racing through my head. Quietly I whispered, “Fly, come over here onto my leg, I won't hurt you.” Amazingly, that is exactly what the fly did! In total awe, I decided to try it again. Slowly I stretched out my hand and this time sent out a mental plea: *Fly, please come up onto my hand*. Again, the fly buzzed over and settled onto my outstretched palm. I sat there in stunned silence and felt an even deeper respect for nature and every one of her creatures. Finally, we opened the door and let the fly go. That settled it! I was convinced. I knew I had found a guru who could lead me to the answers I had been searching for.

Over the next two weeks, small groups of students spent hours talking with Shipen about the Vietnam War, our disenchantment with the Establishment, and the search for enlightenment and inner peace. Eventually, the school administration heard about these “sessions” and assumed drugs were involved (they were not). Shipen was informed he would have to leave immediately. I was upset and disappointed. After he was kicked out, some of us who had been part of that informal circle continued meditating and studying eastern religions. We would chant together by candlelight or read aloud from a book called *I Ching*. Sarah



and I practiced Hatha Yoga at night and sometimes meditated chanting “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” over and over sitting in a semi-lotus position. We read *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Thoreau and other spiritual writings and esoteric poetry. I recall once Shipen had talked about “astral projection” where people could actually transport their spirits away from their bodies. Many nights I would lie in bed trying with all my might to leave my body. I’d begin by visualizing a tingling, foot-falling-asleep sensation in my toes and gradually willing it up and throughout my whole body. Of course, it never worked and I just ended up lying there stuck in my body and feeling stupid and extremely annoyed!

That winter in northern Michigan was bitterly cold. Sarah, Naomi and I spent most of our free time indoors, reading, talking and listening to records like Bob Dylan, or Donovan singing “Wear your love like heaven” and “You can have everything if you let yourself be,” Buffalo Springfield singing, “Somethin’s happenin here...” Leonard Cohen singing “Suzanne takes you down to her place beside the river...” and The Beatles White Album. I read everything I could find about Timothy Leary who was calling for our generation to “tune in, turn on, and drop out.” Though my parents wanted me to go on to college, I was more and more determined to disengage from the “Establishment” and its materialistic concerns. I got rid of all the mirrors in my room (pure vanity!) and gave away my clock and watches (time is a worldly construct!). As I struggled on through classes, I longed to join the ranks of the hippies and flower children, eager to be happy and free of any materialistic ties. I grew more and more interested in spirituality and mysticism.

Sometime that year, a huge group of us gathered in the gym for a Peace Moratorium. We were protesting the Vietnam war and joined the ranks of thousands of other young protestors in America at the time.



For several hours we read poetry, sang, gave speeches and prayed silently for an end to the war. This did not go unnoticed by the school

administration.



Uncle Whit in his uniform

The next day, Uncle Whit, our dear poetry professor, strode into class dressed in his World War II army uniform covered with awards and medals. For the entire hour, he paced around the room denouncing our actions and declaring his loyalty to the Constitution of the United States, the flag, and our wonderful democratic way of life. *Well!*

By April, spring fever spread throughout the campus. More and more of us snuck out at night to smoke cigarettes or just hang out. One particular evening almost the entire campus made plans to break curfew. By midnight groups of students roamed through the woods. Somehow, Charlie Shinn (the Assistant Dean?) got wind of what was going on and alerted the other counselors and staff. They rushed around shining flashlights into the darkness. I watched from behind a pine tree as Shinn narrowed in on a small group of students. Enraged he yelled, "Freeze! Get back to your dorms!" But the group split apart, laughing as they raced off into the surrounding woods. Sarah and I took off for the beach where we ran into others who had also managed to escape. Eventually, we snuck back to our dorm and slipped into bed, exhausted but savoring every minute of the night's wild freedom. From then on the procedure after lights out included checking to be sure every student was actually in bed!

Eventually, Shipen sent us a copy of his Clear Children manuscript and I poured over it. It was fascinating but way over my head:

*MIND OF MYSTERY as fathomless as the deepest thoughts, will capture its subjects and lead them deeper and deeper into realities thus perceived, as even a tree has within it the deepest of intentions and meanings.*

*MIND OF FAITH given to constant growth into spirit, will find the physical world in complete accord with things of the Spirit, hence they are not separate.*

*MIND OF PERSONAL LOVE ever clinging to oneself or to others, will not allow the true understanding of Love to enter into consciousness, thus will continually be befuddled by its own set of love criteria.*

*MIND OF PEACE the perfection of man, will be to man, the perfection of Love the Divine Spirit – the Divine Idea made manifest in the body of the Clear Child, the pinnacle of human strivings.*

As I read through Clear Children it only fueled more questions. How could I reach this mind of peace? How could I empty myself of inferior mind-sets? Naïve and impressionable, I was more convinced than ever that my spiritual journey was dependent upon being with Shipen, my guru. I decided to go visit him in New York City over Easter break.

## 108 Fourth Avenue



*Shishonee 1969*

I woke to the blaring sound of someone's car alarm. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up and looked around. It was growing dark outside and I felt groggy and disoriented. *Wow, I wonder what time it is? Did I sleep all day?* Scanning the room, I saw that I was the only one around. I could hear muffled voices from the kitchen below. Light from kerosene lanterns cast a soft light inside the tents pitched around the room, making it look

like a magical forest.

Just as I was about to go downstairs, I heard voices and suddenly there was Shipen, ascending the stairs followed by a noisy crowd of people. They came bustling in, talking and laughing as they scattered around the Loft. Immediately Shipen smiled and came over to give me a warm hug. Feeling a bit embarrassed at having come unannounced, I said very little as Ariel introduced me to Bruce, Jody, and everyone else in the crowd. As Ariel spoke, I had trouble focusing as I strained to tune in to a conversation between Shipen and his friend Bruce. They talked excitedly about making changes to set for a show and about going to another theater performance later that evening. Eventually I learned that many of the people there that afternoon were visitors who were part of a theater troupe called Stomp.

After a delicious meal of Ariel's homemade Indian curry, I tagged along to see The Performance Group (Shipen had helped design and build their stage). The show was amazing to me! The entire set was built sort of like a house in the beginning stages of construction with open framework and partial walls. In each room there were different characters acting out scenes from daily life. Fascinating! As the audience, we were free to wander through the rooms, standing behind actors as they ate meals or sitting next to a couple arguing on a couch. As the play progressed, each separate scene unfolded simultaneously. I moved from one vignette to another, enjoying the voyeuristic ability to eavesdrop on each character's life. It seemed so real it was hard to believe I was watching a play!

When we returned home after the show, I had trouble sleeping and found myself re-living scenes from the play. A strange mixture of sadness and nostalgia enveloped me. Drifting on the edges of sleep, my mind kept returning to my childhood home in Lakewood. Many nights I sat gazing out of my bedroom window watching the next-door neighbors, wishing I could magically be transported into their family instead of my own. Curled up by the window with my chin resting on folded arms, I'd watch the Breiners....all thirteen of them - gesturing, talking and laughing as they ate dinner at their long dining room table or snuggling together in their family room, the faint blue light flickering over their faces as they watched TV...

Late the next morning, I awoke and looked around me at the odd assortment of strangers strewn around the room. It seemed as if they had been caught up in a wild, frenzied dance and then collapsed in a tangle of colorful clothes, blankets and hair. Looking around at everyone sleeping, I felt thrilled to be a part of that enchanting place!

Thus began a whirlwind week, a kaleidoscope of new experiences for a naïve, fresh faced teen from the Midwest. I loved the Loft! People came and went, slept, made love, shared food or got high. Everything was free-form, ever-changing. There were parties with the cast of Hair and

Stomp, and a continuous flow of visitors: New York film directors, musicians, actors, celebrities, professional dancers and artists. Tents were set up, moved or taken down as the Loft morphed and transformed to accommodate the composition of those present. There were delicious meals, meditation sessions, and long, in depth discussions of Clear Children and other topics. I was convinced that Shipen with his new philosophy was on to something.

At the end of Easter break, reluctantly I packed to leave but resolved that somehow I would return to the Loft and my new friends. I knew with all my heart that I was meant to be there. I also knew I needed to finish my senior year of high school and graduate. I had made a promise to my parents that I would not drop out.

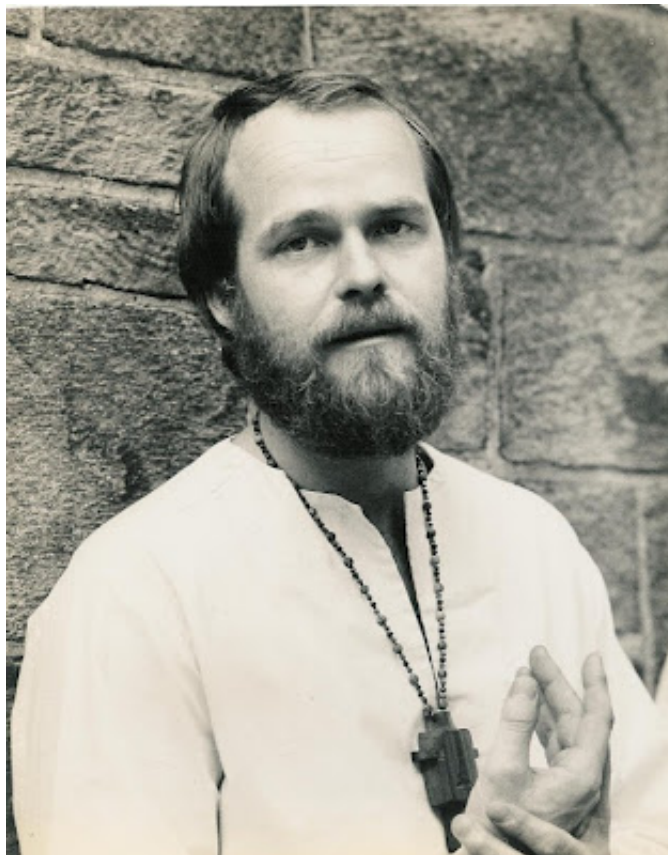
During my final months at school, I devoted most of my spare time to reading and absorbing the teachings in Clear Children. With zealous dedication, Sarah and I passed out copies we'd printed on the ancient mimeograph machine we used for the school paper. Groups of us met together after school to continue our discussions or meditate. Jokingly, I recall someone dubbed us The Clear Children Society.

In June of 1970, I finally graduated from Leelanau School. Wow, what amazing changes had occurred in that one short year! I was eager to return to the Loft. I packed up a few belongings and caught a Greyhound bus to New York City. Climbing the stairs to the Loft, I pushed back the rug hanging over the door and smelled the rich, delicate aroma of Indian curry. I was home! Once again Ariel welcomed me with a hug and I felt relieved and immensely happy. It was as if I had never left! I moved in and I was there to stay. I came seeking answers, seeking spiritual reality, seeking the Truth with a capital T.

What I didn't realize at the time was how much of an intrusion I must have been in the lives of Shipen, Ariel, Jody, Bruce (and their other roommates on the floor below). They had enjoyed an all-male lifestyle in their private oasis that was both a lover's retreat as well as the perfect space for spontaneous parties and gatherings. Though people dropped by for a night or two, the Loft was still their haven. Then I came crashing in with my naive feminine self, completely oblivious to the fact that women had been visitors, but had never, ever lived there! I realized that Shipen and Ariel were gay, but I was so smitten with Shipen-as-guru and with the Loft as spiritual-ashram-temple-space that I didn't realize that maybe they wouldn't want me to take up permanent residence in their home. In fact, I was so oblivious that it wasn't until years later that I realized how disruptive and disturbing my arrival must have been.

## The Loft





*"Shipen" William Lebzelter*

*This chapter is a rough draft from a book Shipen was writing about The Trees. This chapter is about the Loft before our arrival, as seen through Shipen's eyes:*

When our community came together in an attic apartment in lower Manhattan, it was out of necessity both economically and spiritually. We lived in one room, 25 feet square and to enhance privacy, each of us pitched tents, holding the center of the room as meeting and common ground. There was one tiny and ineffective heater that had the job of trying to heat us all, then eight, as the snow piled up on the five thin glass skylights and leaky windows. Coming in off 4th Avenue was somewhat of a trial on middle class upbringing because there were two things one would notice immediately, utter darkness and stench. To climb to the Loft you had to hold tightly to the shabby railing that wound up five flights. It was pitch dark since that part of the electricity had long ago failed. The building was condemned – yet we paid \$150/month rent. Now our beloved loft is a parking lot.

On the fourth floor was the first sign of life – a room with a single working light bulb. In the room was a refrigerator, a sink, a bathtub, a john, and a cupboard – no partitions. It was the common room for the two apartments on the fourth floor and our commune on the top floor. It was the place wherein fifteen people prepared dinner in an ancient black stove, took baths, and other things, washed dishes, and congregated to

talk and discover.

There were a few technical hindrances that were somewhat bothersome. The water pressure was such that it would take 40 minutes to fill the bathtub to 5 inches of water, which had to be preheated by a gas heater, which would explode if not carefully checked. Thermostats had not come to the Loft. Bathing fifteen people generally, under the circumstances meant at least two at a time, and certainly not every day. Bath schedules would have everyone cleaned once in about five days.

Because the water had such a difficult time making it to the fourth floor, it seemed exhausted and, like a camel, refused to ascend into the toilet box. We had to flush by bucket. To fill a bucket you had to plan ten minutes either to sit, or if organized, to prepare the flush water before approaching the john. There was one boarded up window in this room and the walls were stained off white with little trickles of muddy brown going from the sagging plasterboard ceiling down to the wainscot lumber, and below that were the usual kitchen stains and spots, which, after scrubbing, remained unharmed. The accent color on the wainscot board, around the open shelved cupboard and the chopping cupboard was red enamel.

The floor was gray widely spaced planks with patches of gray and red linoleum here and there, but mostly under the bathtub. Because of the piping arrangements, the sink, which was meant for doing dishes, had given up, and so we returned once again to the bathtub to fill all our water needs. There was one interesting phenomenon concerning this bathtub water. It tasted unlike any New York water I had had, and was in fact, delicious! People would come all the way up just to drink it. It actually tasted as good as any artesian well, and was the subject of much excitement and wonder.

On the walls over the tub there was a picture of the Last Supper and over the refrigerator a Mandela of seven energy centers expounded in Kundalini yoga. Also there was a post card sized picture of the enshrined Madonna with a prayer, and that hung on the side of the cupboard. The size of this room was eight feet by 14 feet or thereabouts. It was not a terribly generous room. But the botherations seemed an inherent and unchangeable part of her personality, and somewhat charming. As I remember, our having lived for one year in the Loft didn't change her at all except in the last days when the water and refrigerator completely gave out and our water had to be carried from the church basement down the block, in canvas bags to sustain us. The priests at Grace Church were somewhat unbelieving of the whole situation, some of the younger having been refused permission to investigate both the premises and the people. But they did tolerate our coming for water. Also by that time we had incurred a Frenchman named Paul Greiner who lived two blocks away and had a shower with hot and cold water that came out like a mountain stream. It was a luxury we tried hard not

to abuse; but somehow Paul had caught wind of the emerging affair in the Loft and was properly and sensibly sympathetic.

Alongside the kitchen were the two apartments that shared the bath/kitchen. Robert, who was tie-dyeing his way to fame, and David who was painting his way to the sky, lived in them. Robert's room was the result of his failing in a 4 room apartment and having to move, without sacrifice, everything into the one room. One could see a small desk being totally overpowered by stacks of reference books and magazines, artist's supplies, rugs, and furniture that seemed to run everywhere. If ten people were to enter and sit down, they would all be in complete privacy – and the room was only 14 x 14 square. The only place for intimate relationship was the bed, and it was not used infrequently. Most of the time Robert's door, which came off the bath/kitchen by the refrigerator, was locked – and somehow a stigma was placed in that room so that one would feel relatively uncomfortable there, especially when urged to use the telephone. Telephone privileges were granted us at the beginning. But by the time the water quit, all privileges had been suspended.

David's room was quite large. About 25 x 12 feet and it was typical of an art student at the School of Visual Arts. In it was a pot bellied stove, a bed, and many canvases of half finished work that accompanied perfectly the personality of our Jewish mystic. David had been the one to invite two of us to occupy the Loft when we were homeless. We were terribly thankful for his kindness.

David would hear only within certain auspices. He was involved in working through trying to discover existence on the Buddhic plane, while studying the teachings of Don Juan, and carrying on with his Max's Kansas City friends far into the ecstatic Lower New York evenings. A natural Boy with a forehead of constant questions, wax in his ears, and heading for parts unknown. Traveling with David into conversations that he constantly pursued would have you left and abandoned at the gates of confusion every time. He was dead set on obliterating the natural line of logic and relative thought, and conscientiously held to his position of leading one to, I think, what he hoped would be an instant sublimity. Somehow I did not trust him fully, and generally left the conversations desperately trying to subdue my anger and regain whatever basic sense I felt endowed with. I suppose our common attraction had to do with the intensity of an underlying desire to find out something, he in his way and me in mine. We touched philosophy briefly in clairvoyance and auric discernment and sometimes would become involved in conversations dealing with the colors that shot out of people's brains and bodies; but to David it was beautiful, to me mostly a subject of concern. By the time the water quit there was no successful line of communication. The time between the beginning and the end of the Loft, as I have said, was one year. The year of great changes. Now our Loft building is a parking lot.

It was in David's loft that Ariel and I first pitched our tent. This is a literal truth, which afforded us privacy and a few more degrees of warmth. Burning good cannel coal in the ancient pot bellied stove gave us sufficient heat in our lonely corner of the room, and being in the tent allowed us to discover a marvelousness that could only be equaled somewhere in the wilds. Transferring the sounds of Fourth Avenue into the sounds of the sea was a feat that we sometimes accomplished except for sirens. They were difficult to translate. Because of Ariel's fastidiousness and my middle class upbringing, the tent was most always in a pleasing arrangement. There was a bed at the far end of this 6 x 10 foot space, a low cut lamp stand, a kerosene lamp, a pretty stone on the table and horsehair pew pads taken from a Quaker meeting house in the front area where the bed wasn't. Suspended from the ceiling of this small monster shaped Abercrombie and Fitch tent was a circular wire mobile where a single dove swung and a single Persian sheep bell hung. Climbing into the tent by guests would make the bell ring and the bird spin. Inside this space only sitting was possible, and there were times when there may be 10 or 12 people sitting there while the greater space of David's Loft was left unoccupied. David, infatuated with this general effect was soon to construct a tent of his own, but seldom was it occupied save for moments of intimacy with loved ones, or a place for a crasher to hide out for a while. I can't remember ever going inside it. For that matter, at the first I can't remember leaving our tent much except to chop the onions for the beans that would cook during the day for our evening's meal.

Ariel continued to work as a butler for Benjamin Sonnenberg on Gramercy Park. He owned a 40 room mansion on the park, each room filled with incredibility's of the world of art and literature, but because of Ariel's sub-butlerhood, earnings were medieval, but did allow us to pay David \$50.00 a month, plus share the phone bill and utilities and to buy food. Ariel's main duties at the mansion were to lay fires and polish brass. This was his full time occupation.

I was not working at all by the time we came to the Loft. My past had been a generous mixture of success and Madison Avenue madness and because of my college education at the University of Michigan, I was endowed with a certain ambition toward the finer things and worked my way to a commercial film director cameraman with Bert Stern with good earnings, and private work that brought me around the \$400.00 a day bracket for my work.

The circumstances of my success was short lived due to sacrifices I was not willing to make concerning the cost of having money and fame. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul, seemed to be a long truth that hung on to parts of me, and I couldn't successfully cut the cord to allow my freedom to gain what in essence it despised.

On the same day we moved to the Loft another also came to share this

space. His name was Bruce and he had come, all 6 foot of him, including a foot of blonde carefully glowing hair, from Minnesota with special designs on New York City, same as all of us – and as green as we were eight years previous when we entered the great Babylon with trepidation overpowered by a curious movement in the stomach toward excitement and fantastic fulfillment. Bruce was an actor, and like most actors was successful at incorporating this condition into his private life. His lines were light and full of breathy life. His talent came probably from the very same qualities inherent in his physical structure – innocent but seductive, and he was old enough to know it and use it. And somewhat joined to the idea that this would be his route to fame and fortune. Not soon after his arrival he was found by Richard Scheckner to portray a bankrupt Christ in his new play. It seemed that Bruce's calculations were correct; in spite of everything he became dearly loved and full of an amazing cosmic humor that was truly and delightfully innocent.

There were times, in this humor, when he would confuse an issue to such an extent that minds would be interchanged and we would be left wondering which mind was ours. A curious relationship this kind of insanity, and a perfect escape into the identity of another. Even though haphazard, it was a real release to the growing pressures that began inwardly to turn us. Somewhere in this humor, small glimpses of the unicorn came between visions of reality.

Bruce also pitched a tent of blankets, shapeless and hung by cords. It was not in any way reminiscent of a tent as the mind would choose to see one and so for us it was quite invisible.

So there we were in a triangular arrangement, doors facing center where the pot bellied stove was and worlds behind the doors of cloth. Norway, Germany, Israel, and Egypt – Egypt and Germany occupying the same territory, a feat of extraordinary vigor because of the problems that yelled for solution. This was the relationship between Ariel and myself. Anxious and removed. Time after time we would attempt conferences of the more weighty matters that concern nations, and our conversations would run something like this:

I have seen the light in my Bankrupt Christ.  
Did you ever meet George? Oh!  
Nothing is everything and everything is nothing.  
What are you trying to say?

Norway, Israel, Germany and Egypt. Now our Loft is a parking lot.

None of us relished the idea of living together, but because our lives had grown accustomed to dealing with circumstances however grave, we learned to toss off our alterior hopes and be thankful with what we had. Questions concerning the filth, the smell, the lack of luxury, were insistently not entertained, and we began to look in other areas for our



joy. The contradiction between my Riverside Drive fully automatic apartment and this situation went far beyond any hopes to explain rationally and so I learned not to deal with the whys. Small changes, I suppose, would lend themselves to a sensible suspicion, but this was ridiculous and beyond explanation. I merely know that it had happened, and best make the best of it.

One thing had been discovered to this point, and that was the celebration of life in its marvelousness and its absurdity. The drugs had accomplished another awareness, reducing life to its essentials, and then just being in it and letting it be in us. Of course when we were not in it or it in us, then came the heavies, the searches, the reasons, the systems, the answers, the religions, the “you can be happier.”

There was also a pinch of curiosity, “You’re so pretty and lovely, what makes you tick.” Why is God? What is his will for mankind? How can mankind be made aware of the mystery of God’s power? How can I be powerful? How can I be God? And other riddles and attempts.

Celebration would go on nearly every night as soon as Richard came to feed Bruce a joint, sit him in a chair, put goggles on him, turn him into the Red Baron and then go sit and watch. The kerosene lamps would be lit, the beans and onions and rice would be served in the tent, and all would enjoy certainly nothing but the enjoyment itself. If you tried to enjoy the tent, you could only go so far not too much could hold the eye’s fascination, but there was a sense that somewhere in this limited space, was the feeding ground of the unicorn.

Sometimes for hours, we would sit, after hilarity, in silence, just looking around in expectation at each other and at the sloping irregular cloth walls. Ariel wanted to paint fresco’s on the walls, but I thought he had missed the point. Bruce’s eyes would go from blank to comic suspicion, to wonder, to expectation, to discovery almost continually as if he were constantly walking up a spiral staircase that was escalating down. And David, when he was there, was content to start seven or eight unfinished discussions, that erupted out of the silence like volcanoes of cold pea soup. I would allow myself a few brief insights per night, but generally merely generated the discoveries as they happened around me. I was looking for the unique insight, not a restatement, nor a compound statement – but really a new insight. I knew the blanket of doubt between heaven and earth was so thick that it was virtuously impenetrable, even by the virtuous. Even if a single virtue could penetrate the gross darkness, it would seem to be ineffective. A drop in the bucket merely erases the good drop. It seemed that the only movement was for man to seek union with God. And so our occupation, from the time of the Loft, and before was narrowing to find God in all truth.

The first speculative accounts of our attempts centered around the basic premises of paradox and how they seemed to be present as an

understanding gap between us and full knowledge. Being in awe of infinity was not consoling since we were not free of Logic and rational thought; and going before the yo-yo of life's extremes presented an ever increasing complexity of philosophical dilemmas and confusions. In attempting to hold to a rigid transcendental purity, we merely discovered that we were trying to become escape artists, yet we tried and we tried, never fully capable of bending the oceanic emotional changes into obedience by sheer will power. The drugs helped in lifting us to planes of possibilities and more refined simplicities, but then the thought that we were stoned never left us, and so there was no real contentment in establishing even a transcendent fantasy and only a few laughs in operating within the fantastic.

Early in our discoveries, and to promote freedom from paranoia, groups of us would rent costumes (cheap) from Brooks Vanhord, buy Sunday's cheap daisy's from the corner flower man, and walk down 5th Avenue, handing the flowers to whoever might be wearing a mink coat, saying "God is Love" and getting off on the varied and splendid reactions of the oft frightened ladies.

In San Francisco that was the time when groups of hippies would run alongside the tourist buses as they traveled through Haight Ashbury, holding large mirrors up to the windows so that the tourists could be occupied watching themselves for a change.

It was also the time of the Mime street theatres, and happenings. The grandiose attempts at cosmic identity that put each freak in his own world of make believe – except that it was not meant to be make believe. It was meant to be a real alternative, an other world where ideals were realities and human beings were stripped to yield to their wildest and freest fantasies and desires.

It was the time of unspoken politics, when Bob Dylan could say, "You don't know what's happening do you Mr. Jones." And that was enough to convince the sensitive and the aware that somehow a silent, eye winking, revolution was in hand to shatter the rigid and frozen nation of souls that somehow could not love nor see love, nor even desire to have it. It was the subtle politics of the Love generation. A noble enterprise that was to interpret the American Dream in terms of its active fulfillment.

But naive and innocent it wasn't, and so by the time we reached the Loft, the subtle new "hip" policies had gone into effect and once again we settled to reflect on the hypocritical inadequacies of our generation and retreated from the whole world altogether.

**SLAM!**

Actually we couldn't slam, because we didn't have any doors to slam, only curtains to tie shut.

## TIE!

It seemed the only thing left was to walk the weary land alone, bereft of a meaningful insight, but aware of the possibilities of freedom and love, and depth and height and breadth, and unity, and the virtue of submission. There were to be no teachers specifically, but all must be listened to. There was to be no formal and serious joining of sect or faith – no life commitments as we were already too involved in the comfortability of change. Joining was a thing of the past in the Loft as already, Nicheren Shoshu Buddhism, Scientology, Kundalini Yoga, SUBUD, Integral Yoga, SRF, had at one time or another been joined and abandoned.

If there was a formal lonely cry it was “we don’t know where we’re going but we are going where we know.” And we were pretty sure of that.

The family of adherents to this basic search philosophy was small and unobtrusive. Ariel and I, and Bruce to an extent, and David to a different extent, and Roger and Claudia.



Roger

Roger had been my colleague in the film business and was equally disturbed by it. We had worked together for three years. Roger was a Park Avenue raised New Yorker and we met when I was a green Northern Michigan New Yorker. Roger was into Cardin, Vogue, New York restaurants and delicacies and Elaine’s and a bit of curiosity for the bazaar. He was tall, fitted the sleek fashion line of New York 1968, with

an uncomfortable sense of knowledge as to New York ways and attitudes that somehow didn't quite fit him. He was a boy, fascinated with authority was terribly suspicious and unsure of himself. There existed under the carefully chosen appearance of Roger, a distinct failure to be 100% given to what he was doing and so he was like all of us, involved in the mystery of discovering something more meaningful than the superficial garb and goals of the fame seekers of Madison Avenue.

It was Roger who renovated my naïve self and replaced my country worn blue jeans with several Cardin suits, Gucci shoes, blue silk ties with white poka dots, and to travel in all this by way of a BMW motorcycle.

Roger and I entertained life in the jet era by flying to New Orleans for lunch at Brennan's; handling \$75,000.00 commercial productions at poolside, Beverly Hills Hotel; lining up schooners for voyages through the Caribbean; and Lobster Boats for more robust commercials; trampling deserts and mountains for the proper locations for the moods that would sell the products. We trampled through three years of an adventure in commercial making, that offered us unlimited exposure to life as it existed in the tastemakers of the 60's, and presented to the American public in one minute segments hundreds of times a day.

It was also Roger who opened the door of his E. 63rd apartment to me a year after I had quit him and the business. I was holding a tab of clear dot acid with a look of curiosity and invitation in my eyes, saying Roger, I think it's time you made some real discoveries. He nodded, let me in, and a new relationship was under way. Shortly thereafter Roger left the Business, grew his hair, started wearing blue jeans, buying Ravi Shankar records and books and books of discovery techniques, that would occupy his whole day until the acid evenings would come around. He seldom left his apartment, save to come to the loft, and that was seldom. I was there quite often and Ariel sometimes.

On our first acid trip we proclaimed Love and its possibilities, and were, together, hopelessly tied to that hope of meaning in relationships. Realizing that we loved each other brought a certain relief from a 27 year old headache; but now the systems were upon us and the wisdom of the world was sought as ample embellishment to this situation of vocally proclaimed Love.

Claudia was Roger's wife. She was a ballerina and lovely beyond description. I introduced Roger to Claudia many years before and their relationship began immediately and didn't stop. Claudia was the strongest of the three of us and disciplined in mind and body as her craft began when she was 8 years old and continued, uninterrupted into her fame as a dancer. She was known as America's Baby Ballerina and went from there into one of New York's finest ballet companies. But Claudia was like all of us, involved in the mystery of discovering something

more meaningful than the superficial garb and goals of the fame seekers of the dance world. It was many years before I discovered that she had already found the meaning she was looking for in Roger. Roger and I were mainly concerned with the discovery, Claudia was very patient in true love and pretended to be interested in change, but she was in love with Roger, something neither Roger nor I fully understood as we were preoccupied with Love's definition.

But she went through the changes, listened to the records, was a dear and loving friend, got scared on acid, got worried a lot, watched the changing scenery in Roger's apartment as it filled with incense and rugs and fascinating things. Claudia had originally stated that she was a middle class girl, and so for her, our two year intensive search was confusing, yet she loved us both, was committed in her heart to Roger, and patiently sat and watched the tennis match of philosophical TRUTH that bantered between Roger and I almost continually. I am convinced that Claudia almost never understood what was happening; but poor love abided it all beautifully, even to the extent of being thrust bodily into a tub of icy water that was somehow to wash her sins away; she along with the dog and various articles in the apartment that Roger and I felt needed cleansing took frequent trips to that icy bathtub.

I'm sure Claudia's stomach began to rumble when Roger and I decided that we must eat only the purest bread and drink only the purest bottled water from Poland, and read only the purest literature, and live in only the purest vibrations. I am convinced that Claudia was an active Christian from the beginning, but was just having a tragically difficult time with the impetuous men in her life.

Roger and I would have many "A-ha's" a day to Claudia's confused wonderment and because she had wonderment, Roger was occupied with constant attempts to convert Claudia to the school of insight toward which she remained confused until the advent of our Christianity. She would, however, smile, nod, and be interested in every aspect of the discovery, but could not participate fully. She was in love with Roger and that was the simple truth. The unicorn knows.

I mentioned a two year drug association with my friend Roger. This period came before the Loft, but led up to and into it.

The school of thought was open and unending. Our ears were open to authority when it was involved in pure motives as opposed to political intentions. Politics were an abhorrent attempt to establish battle lines based on someone's conception of right and wrong, and since so many past wrongs had been changed in us, we weren't about to re-moralize a world that seemed to need understanding and acceptance more than it did coercion and judgment.

I had once talked to an Episcopalian priest, who after many years as a missionary in Africa, suddenly came to the conclusion that the African



culture itself was quite lovely, and virtually unsuited to American Liturgy. His missionary efforts to change Africans into Americans, frustrated his Christianity so much that [he] came to the conclusion that he had no right being there until he could successfully view Christianity as possible within the African culture. How many conscientious priests there are I don't know, but he was refreshing. I think many times culture and religion get interchanged so that one means the other. Culture becomes the religion, and then becomes political, whereas the only politic in religion is the eternal nature of its dogmatic truth. Culture changes. Truth remains constant, as interpretation changes. Culture is interpretation and a valid expression of religion.

In the Loft, it was religion that was important, not culture or interpretation. Either the truth hit or it didn't and if it was true it needed no interpretation. We had discovered truth, and pursued it as a lover to find its source, so that we could participate fully in it as opposed to merely watching from a distance as critics might. Then we were not involved in heresies, as we trusted our inherent intuition as guide, thinking God was not basically a deceiver. Since our eyes were on God the ever-present, God the all powerful all merciful, invisible finality, we felt safe and protected, with a degree of integrity, and appreciation, and child like carefreeness. Nothing was more powerful than God. Not acid, or people, or spiritual wickedness, or Satan, or even mistakes or poor judgment. And so we were involved.

Truth was our fair sister, it was the Book of Wisdom minus a few prejudices, and St. Paul minus a few hang-ups, and Buddhism minus Buddha, and Christianity minus Christ. It was the time of visions and locutions and special revelations, and angels and saints and creatures of the sun and the wood. A time of being embarrassed by the sense of discovery, of becoming, of realizing, of guiltless enthusiasm, of free morals, of freedom itself. It was the time for every poet, but more especially every saint that had understood the mind and spirit. It was the time of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, The Oral Tibetan teachings and secret doctrines, the Sacred Liturgies of the Lamas and Bodhisattvas, the Mantras and Mandela's of self realization, and cosmic identity, the transcendental systems of purity and magic, fascination and discipline, the floating relativity of anyone who had ever discovered anything for sure to anyone else who understood the yes; but it was all transcendent and unconcerned with the worn out knowledge of who human beings were with their limitations and boundaries of fear, their petty prejudices and ridiculous intentions. People had failed utterly to give other people what was needed – they failed to give love, to find acceptance, to accept love, to choose the good, to be at peace, to be themselves. They confined God to a small area of life where He was kept in check and under complete control – He was systematized, categorized, filed, and dealt with accordingly. He was a small and ineffective agent that somehow was connected but aloof. He was kept in the sanctuary, let out once a month, and locked in the Big 5th Avenue churches after 7:30 p.m. He was put into guns, and computers, and

psychologies, and nations, and politics. He was thrown about by people who could run a better world than he. He was killed by an incensed mob of lynchers who wanted their own governorship. He was put behind every good intention gone wrong. He was the guarantee of a good social position (only certain denominations of him that is), a good Broadway Show, a prosperous job. He was all those things to all those people. There was no question that God was very much directly related to the affairs of men and to men themselves whether acknowledged or not.

In the Loft, we sought to set God free to be Himself and so we headed directly to the East for enlightenment as to how to accomplish this. It seemed that the Christian's relationship with God was mundane and selfish and careless and crass. In our feeling sorry for God, we didn't fully realize that he cherished each of the people who held these relationships with him, and we didn't fully realize that we were in fact, in no better state than the worst sinner all loving not rejecting, still persevering with the kind of patience that indeed created us all, and united us all, and defended us all, and above all, waited for us all. In our attempts to find God, I guess what we wanted was to be free of Him, free not to have to consider his suffering, we wanted to be perfectly invisible from Him and like Him, not to cause pain – to be removed like a thorn, to take His place. We had not discovered Love in the Loft in the early days. We had discovered enthusiasm, and felt good about the cause, it was a step out of mediocrity, out of failure, out of the normal HAYDAY of imperfect relationships. Isolation seemed to be the key – the forgotten corner of the room, the tent, the single lantern, and the simplicity of beans and rice and onions. The studies and meditations brought environments beyond description or execution, and paintings, and writings that could not be uttered. Secrets. Discoveries. A magician's knowledge. A wizard's amazing feats – a baby. In our bodies we discovered enough energy to alter the structure of the world.

The studies also brought people, and with them, stronger and more precise drugs. After experimentation and chemists, we finally came to Jack the alchemist and 250 hits of clear dot acid – not for sale, and only for the closest friends – certainly not for novices or new friends. That meant that we were tripping almost continually.

The acid was discovered miraculously in our lives by an illusive creature called Jack. Just Jack – a last name would not be forthcoming, only a penetrating stare that tended to check on one's courage and stamina, a strangely concerned boy with a mission – had seen all trips, and indicated a sort of compassion for than inward pressure that continued turning us. Somewhere in Jack's eyes was the same curiosity that we all had, a sort of vicarious fever to observe. The Acid came on a piece of plain white absorbent paper, it could not be seen, and to take it, you just tore a small piece and ate it. It was bitter to the taste, but honey to the stomach. It set us to 8 months of heavy tripping.

Our trips experience involved the same preliminary conditions. First

there was to be no chance of interruption. A free 12 hour period. Second only two or three people, or four at most so there would be no major confusion. No food would be taken that day. Third the first hour would involve no talking, leaving the room, listening to music, or nervous laughing. No communication whatsoever. Each person was expected to pass certain barriers unaided. Fear, vertigo, confusion, claustrophobia, shattering, and insanity must at all cost be persevered as atmospheric conditions, and stepped through as they came – and they inevitably did, every time. All hallucinations and untamed imaginations and insights were also to be avoided as unessential. Eyes were generally closed. If bodily energy became evident, it was to be channeled up the spine, through the neck, into the medulla oblongata, toward the forehead and back to exit the crown of the head. Other than those particulars, there was no instruction, no purpose, no specific hope, and no planned direction. During this first hour we followed no advice and listened to no one. Ariel, Roger, and myself would go – and sometimes Claudia and sometimes Bruce.

After the barriers were seen and surmounted there emerged a great calm – it was everyone's calm as it had been everyone's battle – and a nod and a glance from each other indicated that we had reached the first plateau. Here we would rest as if in free space, and just be free. Free of thoughts or intrusions from earth and its noises, free of speculation, of question, of annoyance, of separation. The condition was qualityless, formless, colorless, personless, and tireless.

From this point we were free to move, still no talking as it was unnecessary. The movement would be windy and pure, each muscle acting exactly in tune and with the wind that came from the center of our being – effortless, graceful, but intentional and creative, and it seemed to comply with the laws of gravity. Levitation had not been discovered, but no matter. Unity with the existent condition involved a full association with body, mind and spirit – all being in obedience to the latter, in full trust and mutual admiration. If the arm moved up it was observed, felt inside and out, and guided by a cooperation of the mind. It had no other intention than to move by the prompting of the spirit within. There was no conflict, no frustration as any limitation was accepted as normal, as was our natural restriction. Only once did the spirit leave its body, but its freedom was not enjoyed, since it was still connected by the silver cord, and seemed disjointed and unnatural. At one point I remember the real possibility of cutting the cord and entering death, but my mind was quickened by a strange sense of responsibility, and I decided against it, attractive as it was. To be away from the body was like forcing the eyes to cross, which was not a natural move, and so we did not encourage astral projection or bi location. To be away from the body was something that we could never fully accept, even though we were being taught that our fulfillment was in the land of spirit only – that the end of all things was to melt into the continuing love energy that was in all creation and become oblivious in our bliss. But somehow these ideas, no matter how glorious they became

intellectually, didn't seem to fit the pattern of our deepest needs, we didn't know if we could get accustomed to being merely a floating disembodied spirit. If that were to be the case it would seem that we would be always seeking material to enter. In the Christian sense this would mean that we would become possessing spirits, demons of sorts. Without a substantial body of our own we would naturally seek to possess another.

In this world of discovery of the spirit, we made an allegiance with the spirits, and we were curious.

This welcoming of the realm of living spirits came after the plane of peace was reached. At this time we would experience a sense of rapture – the clear windy movement of the spirit would begin to reach profound areas of meaning. This would produce an ecstasy - showers of bliss, nirvanic pleasures – like being rained on by pure Love, or standing in front of the sun with no awareness of separation or difference – the barriers were down, and we would look at each other and laugh. I remember Roger and I once went into the garden in this state, looked up, and laughed gloriously for an hour. It was the freedom one would feel by standing under a waterfall that was chanced upon while walking through a mountainous green glade. Our efforts to escape the mundane had been successful. After the showers came the instruction. At this time we would separate to contemplate and to receive teaching from this world of disembodied spirits. To us these were not elemental haunting spirits that came to séance tables but were instead, high officials of knowledge and mystery.

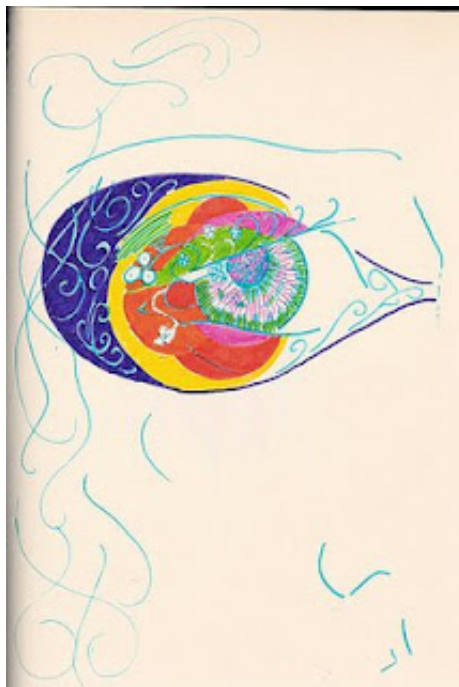
I remember once finding myself in a very large room, huddled just inside the door looking up to a table of very important governors. I could not see their faces, but I heard them speaking an unknown language with such calmness and authority that I was totally taken up in their conversation. I felt somehow that I shouldn't be there, that I was an intruder since they didn't seem to be aware that I had somehow snuck in. Then I had the feeling that they did know I was there and that they didn't mind, then I realized that I was a messenger boy, summoned to carry something of the discussion, back to earth. I became aware that I was being given a special revelation of truth to impart to the world.

Six weeks later I found that I had completed an automatic writing called Clear Children. It was a complex psychological dissertation on the hang-ups of the mind as viewed from 32 standpoints of reality, e.g. anger, fear, benevolence, jealousy, lust, desire, despair, vanity, pride, covetousness, illness, confusion, apathy, etc., etc. What the work tried to do was to approach these realities of the human spirit by means of the mind and to accept them as tools that the mind could reject after sufficient work had been done. Its intention was to get the mind so accustomed to these situations that it could finally choose to be finished with the work and enter into the free states of existence, namely hope,

faith, grace, mercy, love, and peace. Finally, by a work of understanding in the mind, all the ills of human nature could be washed away. We were not clever enough at the time to realize that secretly we had put the spirit and soul in charge of the mind, to be obedient to the mind.

Clear Children was written from beginning to end without mistake and in perfect order. It claimed men's right to be God. That he was totally responsible for his own realization – that what he thought went, that he had powers that were unimaginable. It seemed that even the gospels of Jesus Christ were in full accord with this attempt at perfection and power. Faith can move mountains, I believe was our chief encouraging scripture. It was quite clear that we ourselves were our own saviors, and that we had no need of intervention by another. We were brothers of Christ and co-equal. We were the embodiment of the same spirit that possessed Jesus of Nazareth and so we knew him by proximity and through the mystery of what we were being told was our human right. Jesus was the first fruits of a long line of Sons of God. Sons that could do even greater works than He. Sons that could understand the things that Jesus couldn't tell his generation. "There are many things to say, but you can not hear them now." Jesus was Buddha's brother, he sat at that table of the most accomplished spirits in the universe. He had conversed and learned from the east, from Buddha, from Rame Krishna. He was mainly in charge of the western culture whereas Buddha's teaching dominion was based in the east. The involvement was mysterious and the excitement to power was mysterious. We began to realize that we were in the company of the great teachers, and Clear Children was our ticket back into that room. "Every good boy deserves favor." We had obeyed, we were welcome, and we knew it.

## **Summer in the City - The Loft Days**



*“...breathing in the darkness under the bridge,  
who rose up to build harpsichords in their lofts...  
who scribbled all night rocking and rolling  
over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning  
were stanzas of gibberish...” Alan Ginsberg Howl*

Thus began a whirlwind summer of exploration and ever changing new experiences. One afternoon, we walked up to 59th street and meandered through Central Park, listening to myriad street musicians playing steel drums or strumming guitars and watched tai chi dancers move fluidly in their ancient slow motion dance. On another especially windy late afternoon, we took down all the streamers of fabric from the Loft, tied them into interconnected pieces, and fastened them to a subway grate. As the subway roared by underneath the grate, the streamers floated up into the air creating a beautiful dancing sculpture of undulating colors. *Cool!* Another time, we marched through the Bowery on an impromptu parade playing bells, a tamboura and other eastern instruments as we processed along. There was so much to experience, so much to learn!

One night, we went to hear Alan Ginsberg recite poetry in a smoky, basement coffee house. Another summer evening, I remember sitting with thousands of others in Central Park listening to the melodic and mournful songs of Joan Baez. There were Ravi Shankar concerts and strange underground theater about politics and torture in Latin America. I especially loved the dance performances by Twyla Tharpe, Alvin Ailey or Martha Graham, and lively Broadway shows like Stomp or Hair. Each day was a new adventure.

That summer, Shipen and Ariel introduced me to the gay community



and opened my eyes to an entirely new subculture. I saw the movie *Boys in the Band*, attended some outlandish drag queen shows, and discovered a world I had previously never known. It didn't seem any more unusual than other aspects of the hip, post-beat New York City culture. The gay lifestyle was just one more beautiful facet in the prism in which my new life was reflected.

I felt giddy with the freedom of this vibrant counter-culture. Experimentation and celebration was interwoven into life in the Loft. I was thrilled to explore spirituality as I sought to improve myself "on the path to enlightenment." People dropped in and out. Shipen had started these amazing communal sketchbooks called Trip Diaries that others drew in while tripping in the Loft. One was of an intricate eye with another universe inside (see picture above).

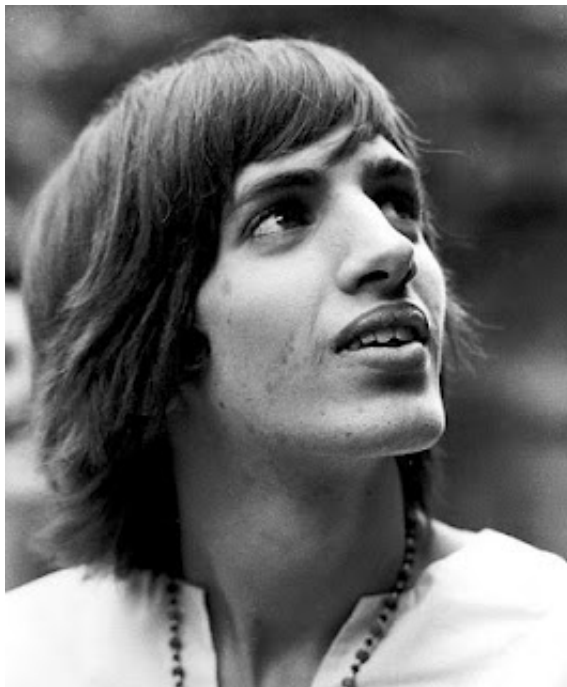


A page from the Trip Diaries

The pages quickly filled up with beautiful drawings and writings about exquisite experiences or profound realizations. Their ever-so-deep realizations like "Life is the meaning of what" that were so mind-blowing just seemed kind of ridiculous the next day.

Our studies included the *I Ching*, books on Transcendental Meditation, Shintoism, Taoism, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, and most importantly books about Jesus: the *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*, *The Urantia Book*, *The Impersonal Life*, and the *Bible*. Like a shepherd, God was calling me but still I wandered, lost, searching for answers and trying to find my way home.

## The Young Painter



*David Karasek*

In early September, another lost sheep found his way to the Loft, David Karasek. At first glance, David struck me as shy, gangly and a bit clumsy. I soon discovered he was a gifted artist who could paint a kitchen wall or cover the side of a bus with intricate, beautiful paintings. David writes about his entrance into the Loft family:

"I was seventeen and lived very independently. I had one survival tool: a wooden stick with hair on the end of it, covered in paint. Someone would pass me a marijuana cigarette, and I would usually refuse, holding out the paintbrush, or rather on to it for dear life. I knew I was an artist since I was 11, when I painted my first painting, a seascape that I hated because it was so full of my anger and turbulence. But everyone around me loved it.

Art also drew me into a separate world, with a different set of people and experiences that I would not have known otherwise. It led me to the Music and Art High School, one of New York City's specialized high schools now called LaGuardia High School. It also led me to many creative friends and acquaintances that, while having their own problems and struggles, all had a sense of inspiration and with that, direction in their lives.

One of these friends from school was "Charlie". He had not been a friend, but just another kid in my homeroom. It was 1970 and that summer we worked together as camp counselors at the 14th street Y, taking the kids to Staten Island by ferry each day. The bond from school and our work together gave us the time to know each other.

Charlie insisted that I meet ‘these people’, but did not say where we were going, or provide any sense of what I might experience.

We turned the corner from 14th street at Union Square and 4th Avenue, and walked down two blocks, past the ‘Green Painted Bookstore’, where he confidently opened the unlocked door to what seemed like an abandoned building. With familiar casualness, Charlie led me into a pitch black foyer . “Come on,” he said, in a throated, jovial laugh. And then we began the darkened climb up broken stairs that would change my life. Around and around we went until there were no more steps left. At long last we reached the gateway to our destination, the curtain leading to the loft..

It's batik-patterned surface of swirling reds, whose thinness was translucent to streams of natural light behind it, as if it were stained glass. Reverently, he peeled the fabric back from the doorframe, revealing another half flight of steps, painted gleaming white, and reflecting blinding sunlight in contrast to the black treads we left behind. With each step a most unusual attic room showed more of itself. The irregular space's white wood polished floor, immaculately scrubbed, seemed to flow around many, intimate corners, while reflecting so much light that it gave me the sensation of being afloat.

The room had 3 alcoves, and a broad central area. The walls were a mosaic of open brick, earth toned relief surfaces covered in paintings, so that the walls were not boundaries but additional dimensions and pathways. The ceiling was deceptive in height. It was low and pitched near the window to our right, but high and flat where we stood at the stairwell. Translucent at the skylight, the sun penetrated the roof at its center. Where the lowness might have been too imposing, it too was dissolved, by the red geometries of rugs pinned up to form an artificial sky.

Then there were the tents. In sanguine colors of ochre and sap green that faded into the warm tones of the open brick, they were pitched into the glossy floor with bolts, like ships anchored in a harbor. These inner-shelters were positioned in the alcove to the left of the steps, in the corners of the attic. One alcove was opposite the steps, against the far wall from where we stood. It was raised up by one step, behind another white railing and was tent-free. Instead it supported the statue of a Buddha, a sculpture of a lion head, and the sole chair in the whole room. This was a very elegant, Balinese, fanned seat of rattan. In addition to the artifacts on the floor of the alcove, there was an orderly stack of books and writing pads. The book titles included The I Ching, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, The Bhagavad-Gita, Siddhartha, and Kundalini Yoga. The texts belonged. It felt as if we had left New York and had materialized in the places where they had been written.

One of these men now sat alone, in the lone rattan chair. He sat as if he had always been there. At first I didn't even see him. He was silent and unmoving, blending into the mysterious space with its many artifacts

and images. But his stillness was kinetic. It seemed to me that his muscles were flowing, moving through smooth limbs connected like pipes to a very thin torso. His lengthy back was absolutely straight; shot out of the base of his spine to a long neck, and a soft chin and rounded cheeks. A thick mustache was drawn, as if by dab of gauche, below a thin nose, hedging thin, placid lips. The edges of his short brow and full cheeks were further extenuated by black, thick hair that poured from a full scalp, sweeping over barely visible ears, racing down the long neck to coalesce on thin, chiseled shoulders. In the midst of this latent movement, it was his dark brown eyes that caught me in their gaze, centering me from within the roundness of wire framed glasses, from within the roundness of his face, from within the roundness of the fanned chair that formed a halo surrounding him.

"Hello Ariel," burst Charlie, the tenor voice sounding like an alarm. The man seated against the wall was at first immobile at the shrill chime, but then slowly breathed a "hello." He answered almost inaudibly, with intentional reserve, so that the response fell in front of us, reverently bringing back the silence in room. Ariel continued to look at me.

"Oh," continued Charlie, unabated, "I would like you meet Dave." At this introduction the stately man rose slowly out of the straw throne, rising to his full, 6 foot 2 inch height without hesitation, undaunted by the Loft's 7 foot ceiling. He moved forward onto the gleaming whiteness where we stood, stepping down from the alcove. Now Ariel extended a handshake, firm and resolute, while keeping his eyes focused on mine for several seconds, without speaking. He seemed to be expecting someone else to speak.

"Oh," said Charlie, picking up the non-verbal cue, "Ariel this is Dave, Dave Ariel." Ariel spoke just a little less softly, in a baritone voice.

"Ah, another talent."

"He's a painter, and a damned good one I might add."

"Oh well," Ariel intoned, matching pitch, exposing a clearly southern accent, "you'll have to stay and meet..." My school friend interrupted again, "Yes, that's one of the reasons I brought him."

"Ah yes....a good reason..." smiled Ariel.

An ingrained engine of hospitality suddenly engaged, as this time it was Ariel who changed the mood. "So would you like some iced tea?" He sang the word tea, gesturing back down the steps to the half-kitchen, half bath.

I hesitated for a moment; Charles shrugged. Ariel decided for us, "Well of course you would." Now Ariel's flamboyancy completely replaced his previous reserve. Stepping as a dancer, he turned with sudden and certain grace for the stairs, with legs in white Levis cascaded down the

white steps.

Just then a sound came from one of the tents. A form emerged of almost the same, ochre color as the tent walls, rising into the warm air and catching the hue of fire under the Loft's skylight. The blond unraveled, elongating into flames of very long hair. From within the locks discretely emerged a young woman's face, softer than her youth of 17 years, and far softer than her life experience thus far. She rose to her full 5' 4", thin height in a series of staggering moves, and rubbed her fawn-like eyes to adjust to both the afternoon's light and our presence. "Hi Charlie," she yawned, stretching thin arms outward toward the mysterious boundaries of the room. She continued after a space, "So... I see you've brought a friend." She was still shaking off sleepiness to respond to the new face.

"Yes, this is my friend Dave." Like Ariel before, she gazed at me for a long quiet time, catching me in the blue pearls of her sight. "Dave, this is Shishonee.."

"Sounds, like, like Native American." Her smiled opened up now, "You're right. Shishonee's Indian...it means peace." She said "peace" in a definite way, with a certain reverence, as if the cadence of her speech could communicate the peace of which she spoke.

As she was telling us about herself, abstract slices of Ariel's profile appeared through the slats in the stairway's railing, until his full head popped above the banister, followed by skinny shoulders beneath a Nehru shirt. His slender hands were stretched under a white linen cloth, bearing the promised tray of teas -- and freshly made bread. A sourdough scent rose from the loaves and permeated the room, merging senses with the gold and sienna colors of its open brick walls.

Ariel brought the basket and its wafting scent across the white floorboards, and finally sat the tea down in the alcove, in front of the chair where he was earlier enthroned. He then stood back up, and with a very smooth articulation he curved his torso and long arm into an arch pointing to floor, gestured for us to sit down on the beaded mats on the raised floor. Ariel and Shishonee sat on these tatami mats, folding into a half-lotus position, calves completely folded under with one foot tucked beneath a thigh.

As soon as we all sat, the one the others had spoken of, the other man who built the Loft, appeared at the top of the steps. He was a short, slim man who now, and would always, seem taller than he actually was. He moved toward us quietly and resolutely and without requiring anyone to move, he sat down beside us, leaning his back into the smooth, plaster wall, his thin legs stretched straight out. The earlier tension dissolved into relaxation. But he did not lose the gaze that had previously traveled across the floor, now refocused on me, as if to not only see but also to understand. He did not wait for anyone's introduction.

“Hello, I’m Shipen,” he said. I was stunned by the intensity of the man, and did not answer at first. “...David,” I replied at last, trying to keep eye contact with the blueness that sailed in his sights, with the spirit that had voyaged here. “Welcome,” he continued, conveying that the enchanting Loft was, more than in small part, his place, without actually claiming so.

The first evening at the Loft enraptured me so that I completely lost track of the time. As it turned out, it did not matter. In a few days I became a permanent resident of the Loft. I was already living apart from my parents for the most part anyway, a reality not lost on Shipen, Ariel or Shishonee. My naturally concerned mother, who was working in Iraq as an archeologist at the time, sent a cult deprogrammer/psychologist to straighten me out. But Kevin ended up trying to join the group, rather than getting me to leave."

## Silver Flutes and Mushrooms



David Lynch and his Artley Flute

Next on the scene was David Lynch, who joined us in late summer after leaving a theater company called Mushroom. David was a roguish, handsome actor with a delightful British accent and carefree sense of humor. Quick witted and articulate, he was a true free-spirit, easy going, a Rastafarian type with a wry sense of humor who enjoyed a good toke as well as a quick turn of phrase. With his long hair pulled back in a ponytail, he would regale us with songs plucked on his nylon-strung guitar.



David Lynch playing his guitar

David tells of his entry into the Loft:

"I first met Shipen in the very early spring of 1970. He was a friend of John Amen who was one of the movers and shakers in the Broadway musical Hair. I met Ship at John's place on 47th Street just west of Ninth Avenue, when I was living on 44th Street in the same block. John would have soiree/musical parties at his place with fantastic sing-alongs of every conceivable Broadway show and tune.

When I was introduced to Shipen he was just about to embark on a journey of survival on the British Island of St. Lucia, staying in the wild away from the tourist areas and hotels and such. I recall that part of his quest was to quit tobacco too. Anyway, Shipen came over to my apartment one afternoon before he left and we had a great get together, drinking bancha tea, and exchanging musical, philosophical, and social ideas.

Over the spring months, John and I became good friends and we wrote some tunes together and talked for hours about community ideals. Around May or so an "Employment as Butler and Housekeeper" scheme in White Plains that my girlfriend and I were hoping to net went belly-up and fell through. I had already given the word to my roommates that I was leaving town so my roommate thing evaporated and I "emigrated" from the West Side across the Hudson to East



Orange, New Jersey for my period of exile from New York. The move did get me in closer contact to the other guys in a potentially-happening rock band affair I was having called Sweet Ginger. The rest of the band were all from some place called Livingston, way out west in Jersey, and I wasn't quite ready to abandon that possibility of fame, and do the roots thing and return to England.

In early June, Broadway John managed to get a message to me and invited me to be a part of his experimental musical theater/commune near New Paltz. Thrilled to be freed from suburban New Jersey, I jumped at the idea! So that summer we created the Mushroom Commune in High Falls in upstate New York. One weekend in August, on one of those glorious sparkling, full summer kinda days that feels like it could last for a lifetime, Shipen came to visit the commune. He had recently returned from his sojourn in St. Lucia. He easily assimilated the lifestyle of the commune and set up a lovely blue canvas tent in the field by the river in the midst of the Mushroom village of tents. His was a big 9-foot ceiling teepee-like home, adorned with colourful carpets, iconic images and sounds, incense, flutes, pictures of Avatars and saints. We shared some quiet times together and although he said he would not be staying more than a week, I should be sure to come and visit him if I was ever back in the City.

As the summer progressed, the commune had evolved into a fairly cohesive committed group varying from 25 or so folks who had live-in tents to weekend-visiting groups of 40 or 50 friends, friends of friends, and other would-be fungi. After the initial rave successes of our Hair-inspired shows in the large barn/"theatre" at the top of the road on the property, the Musical Mushroom Company also made theatrical presentations in New Paltz, Kingston, and in the other nearby towns of Upstate New York, transporting our "show" on a flatbed truck from town to town and returning to the Mushroom fields exhausted but exhilarated, eagerly planning wilder and more exotic musical conquests.

Thus we continued on week after week. This idyllic "Second Summer of Love" culminated in "sold out" performances in glorious weather on a big field right by Woodstock town over Labor Day weekend and the weekend following, which were the crowning Mushroom experiences. Our gigantic Spaceship-like performance tent was filled to capacity with singers, musicians, dancers, fans and revelers of all sorts. The Mushroom was a grand success.

A few weeks before the Labor Day weekend extravaganzas, an amazingly inventive architect had come up to Mushroom from Philly and proposed, designed, and constructed an incredible GIANT tent that we could perform our shows inside. Blown up with a simple flat fan, it was made of clear polyethylene film and it rose up in the middle of the big field below the barn at the Mushroom commune. Once it was inflated, the simple pressure of the fan was enough to keep it up. Word quickly spread, and crowds flocked to the farm. At night, with our show

performing, and the lights and music flashing and booming into the surrounding hills, it really looked and sounded like a spaceship had landed! This was the tent we performed in at the final shows in Woodstock.

The weeks following those Labor Day happenings were by contrast characterized by rain, rain, and more rain with that kind of September drizzly cold that quickly signals the change of season in upstate New York and the seasonal exodus of the masses of vacationers back to the City. Our post-Labor Day weekend shows were disasters. Most everyone was gone! Nonattendance and mounting frustration produced an immediate financial drain and rapid defection of the cast and crew of the Mushroom. Inevitably, the vehement "I'LL Never-Go-Back-to-Gothem!" oaths of stoned, naked Midsummer Glee gave way to - "Hey are you going as far as the Lower East Side? Could I cop a ride?"

So I found myself once again back in the City - East Orange was yesterday's film clips and alas, the magic of Mushroom had become a dream unfulfilled. I remembered Shipen's invitation and soon found my way down to 108 Fourth Avenue, two blocks below the 14th Street Union Square stop off the #6 subway. It was just north of Grace Church, right next to the used book bazaars, three or four storefronts jammed to the rafters with books. I remember opening that big old Downtown Door and peering into the gloom within. With some trepidation I stood in the dank hallway and as I got used to the dimness, I could vaguely make out candlelight up on the first landing. I sprinted up the stairs to the landing and turned around. Everything was all closed up. I sped on to the next floor and the next, passing little luminaries at each turn. Finally the fourth staircase ended at a wool-curtained doorway at the top. Out of breath, I parted the curtain and was suddenly in a brightly lit hallway with a gigantic Industrial Gallery on one side and a very tiny kitchen crowded full of people on the other side.

I was warmly welcomed in. Cooking smells assailed me, signaling the evening feast I was told. There not being much room left in the kitchen I was shown up another staircase - "Mind your head." I emerged into an attic loft with a raftered sloping roof. Dimly lit, it gradually revealed a kind of dormitory setting with tentlike spaces staked out around the walls. Parachute material served as partitions, and mattresses and musical instruments of various kinds became apparent.

Shortly after my arrival a mealtime seemed to be announced as people and dishes ascended from the kitchen below. We all assembled cross-legged on cushions and mats around the central carpeted area; in the middle of which an immense feast was laid out. No one seemed in a hurry to eat. My friend Shipen himself emerged from one of the closed-off tented areas and greeted everyone and welcomed us to the loft gathering. And then a kind of cathedral-like silence enveloped us as we sat. Each was left to their own thoughts and a feeling of communal togetherness, which was pervasive and very appealing. The silence

grew. It became very deep and very peaceful. There seemed to be no hurry to leave it. And then Shipen read a passage from a leather-bound book that seemed to speak directly to each in the assembled multitude. And the silence talked to our spirits. Later there were other readings, soft voice sounds grew in volume and intensity, seeming to come from us all, singing round about us. This was a far cry from the Mushroom!

Eventually, Peace was there and, bathed in it, we ate and then talked softly. Through the course of the evening various musical instruments appeared and improvisations and songs were shared. Luckily I had one or two of my wooden flutes and felt able to contribute to the evening.

Many hours later I headed back uptown to the pad I was crashing at, but I'd felt a definite kinship to this quietly musical, peaceful place and the eclectic group of people meeting and living there. I had been made most welcome and Shipen invited me to come back any evening for the gatherings.

Life post-Mushroom in the tiny Upper Eastside apartment was a far cry from the freedom and expression of Mushroom. But instead of looking back to that I was drawn more and more to the Loft and its inhabitants. I made several other similar visits to this downtown oasis, feeling peacefully at home there, before I accepted the open invitation to actually "pitch my tent" in the as yet unclaimed, somewhat unexplored western arm of the loftspace.

In order to move in there several Lofties and I began to clear out large, odd machines, industrial relics, leftovers from some distant heyday of manufacturing or assembly. Amongst the clutter we found some giant springs, which immediately were incorporated into the growing collection of musical toys and instruments. Sometimes, at the nightly dinner gatherings, Shipen playing on his sitar and Ariel accompanying him on the four-stringed tamboura, would weave wonderful images of distant longing with mystical tones and vibrations and lyrics, the music so sweet, so reminiscent of one of my heroes, the great master Ravi Shankar. And we'd all be inwardly invited to join in, given our parts for a symphony of mystic sounds, like a family, a voice calling us to Love."

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