A.K.A. Peter Coco

The Feast of Saint Rocco

Memoir in Recipe, Story & Poem

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PRELUDE

“Hey, that kid must be Autistic,” I hear her say.

A young man, up on a strip-mall bench, legs folded lotus-like, hands rolled together into crotch – rocking like a clock – back and forth quickly – with a most serious look on his face, chewing his tongue with each push forward – eyes locked in a trance of repetition and need...seeing him, I recognize myself every day until puberty and first recognize that I had been through something stark and stigmatic...and just never looked back.

Through the 1950’s, when the families convened on Sundays, sat around the living room perimeter in straight-back chairs, sofas and armchairs – seems like every other week or so – who would come, buck naked spinning on all fours, to the middle of the floor, greeting them? – Peter.

I heard the word ‘Autistic’ exactly once – at the start of a new decade that kept me too busy surviving and moving to even think that I was different, or to put my childhood into any kind of context...or to let go of the hurt.

this poor kid
on a bench
in a strip-mall
on my 50\textsuperscript{th} birthday
released me
to begin to begin
to understand
the exorcism of my experience
and the Person
of Forgiveness
The Box

“Eat Morbarik!”

I run to remember – to discover – along the mountain sunset, then up Chestnut Hill – finally from my place. I don’t eat or drink anything but water all day, doing this recovery from a decade of skeleton dances in cocaine mazed Big-Ass Town Without Pity. As I run I invoke the Muslim greeting used at the end of Ramadan, “Eid Morbarik,” that I have bastardized for my head as “Eat Morbarik” – “Eat Spirit.”

Eat Morbarik! I gasp like a boxer in training to the top of the hill and back down around to town – breathing tight into the center of Faith – thought swinging hemisphere to hemisphere...

Eat Morbarik! I am quiet alone hermit delivering myself Free – but this time it’s not so easy for the decay and shame...and I need to strip to see what clothes I wear and I don’t really know if it will work...

Eat Morbarik! The same five miles the same 3,000 strides pressed into the footprints of the last time around.

Eat Spirit! By grace at the tail of a scream, I am generating peace moving along this boundary and at least have that to contemplate, as I enter, finished running, passing through a farm gate at the head of a long evergreen/blue arcade road...at its end, completely hidden in tall trees, is my shelter – a way way away hunk of Tibet, fixed complete with sky. From here I will not sleep ‘til I awaken.

Leaving India for the West depressed me a little every day until I came to Woodstock. Here the trees are sisters to the forests above Dharamsala, teaching with the same nurture what must be a language lined up in great circles growing out of the earth. I breathe memories incubated, now complimented – shared with their wisdom.
One summer day just outside of K.B. Dharamsala, unannounced and uninvited, I strolled into the garden of a Tibetan monk a guy from Detroit said he lived in. Every flower, every leaf, every stone, every blade of grass rippled with hallucinogenic sensation, vibrating in exquisite gestation, titillating each step I took on the narrow lanes I quickly began to understand I did not belong on. I was intruding, like I had happened into a laboratory or a sanctuary where something else was going on, being cultivated or maybe preserved. The feeling of Mind encircled me, like I was being watched very closely. I started to feel uncomfortable and controlled. A small structure, camouflaged by its simplicity, appeared. Squatting into the low entrance, I could see that someone lived there. Up from a meditation mat behind a little altar scattered with holy objects – all that is necessary – food, water, utensil, pot, pan and burner, tea, incense, candle, book and clothing – all in arm’s reach from lotus position. In that instant, in that very Sutra of the material world set in front of me, I realized what the word rich meant.

Decades have bequeathed that day an agony, as I experience again, making a living in America’s carrot and stick culture – useless obsessions ever sprouting – dangled in grasping processions of enforced desire – every taker, billionaire to bum, consumed with real poverty. Maybe that’s why so many who have journeyed to the other side – to India – come to Woodstock...to keep things in arm’s reach.

I have been downtown here, inside for years, alone and dry, blocked and locked on feelings and places turned in spirals to fit neat in closed drawers of time. Next to my desk sits a case I have taken out of storage. It is filled with trinkets and scraps from around the world...old passports, address books, letters, a few photos, drawings and a hundred poems. I haven’t looked at this stuff for years. Maybe I was just too busy...or maybe I was afraid I’d be haunted by the adventure, here reduced to a fading pile, dusty with the smell of old paper. At the top of the case is a shoebox I took from my mother’s closet the day after she was buried. In it I found a few of my old report cards, a penmanship award from Grammar School, my Confirmation certificate and every letter and postcard I had written to her in ten years or so from San Francisco to Ceylon and back. It is the only thing I have left of her – pieces of me.
I pull an envelope from the middle of the box. I recognize it immediately from the last time I had seen it – while rifling through her bottom drawer when I was a seven year old, alone with my fear, paralyzing visions and constant precognitions – separated from her by the distance of abuse – separated from everyone else by my different thoughts and very different behavior – spinning on all fours – rocking in place every time I sat down anywhere and not speaking much - it is a plain white envelope, bubbled with years, marked, ‘Peter’s Veil.’ In it is an old piece of skin. Thirty-eight years before, it was the diameter of a baseball and still had a good deal of white on its face. Now, its dark brown center has taken over half of the skin which has shrunk to the size of a silver dollar.

Pressing the edge of my Veil, moving it around the desk blotter like a Ouija. I feel a sense of affirmation, the same as when I found that piece of skin the first time – affirmation of something I have always known – the Veil was wrapped around my head to protect me before birth, guarding me then...guarding me still.

I pluck a blue aerogram from the box. It is from Puri. It must have arrived in America before I did and gotten filed there unopened. Scrawling tiny enough to fit volumes on each side, front and back of the fold up thin paper tablet, Puri greets me as always, “Fisherman,” blesses, praises, then complains about the price of an egg, a liter of kerosene and a kilo of ghee, before updating on Samuel the tailor, Gustav in Japan, Ken and Barbara in Scotland, forwarding Martin, Leslie and Sachiko’s new address in Tuscany and news of Mother feeling better, his son Cheecu back in grade school, as is daughter Neelam who sends love to her “Ja Jo” she now calls me...all before he blasts science as the source of modern misery as well as keeping me dialing the parchment in swirls following poetry inlaid on its perimeters:

   with naked body/soul
   playing with sand
   shaping thoughts
   oblivious to the world around
   absorbed in himself
Knowing not of Void
of God
The World below
The World above
Living with his own thoughts.

2) I know of an ancient bearded beggar
with his paper bowl begging of all
begging of me
me myself
begging of “Him”

are we not beggars both?

3) I sought my love in the lonely jungle,
but the thorns turned me away

in the dark waters of the pond
the fish were the only ones
on top of the mountain
the clouds stared me down
and yet I found my love
within this hollow body

I was drunk with joy
My quest is fulfilled,
after all.

... ... ...

I remember him that first day, breezing across the room of his Post House Haven – ‘Neelam’s Café Espresso Bar’ – Zorba sprung in Urdu – arms wide open, spinning his web. Vittorio De Sica, sprinkled with a generous hit of Ramakrishna acting out an ‘Almost Grown’ Ken Kesey – retracing his precocious chameleon for each comer – each sojourner – each wanderer to his audience. Neelam returns from school with a lame rabbit she has found grazing in the fields of wild ganja behind the shop. Cheecu shimmies up a 50 foot tree and fetches some special fruit his father has promised the beautiful blonde from Colorado who always stops to see him on her way back.
up to McCloud Ganj, where she studies Tibetan. Could Cheecu run
down to the pharmacy now for some tape to poultice the rabbit’s
leg? Neelam, please walk his personal note on behalf of the young
Portuguese couple whose visas expired to the Magistrate’s office and
on the way back, pick up a packet of Ganesh beedies across the
street. A British rocker with an acoustic guitar has just broken into
Puri’s favorite song, ‘Wild World.’ When Puri hears me in a corner
meekly singing along, he steps directly in my face with a mission,
challenging me to sing it loud – breaking into my ‘Life’ honed
solitary – like I should and can lighten up now and sing along, no
matter where I am coming from...and I do.

... ... ...

I see the same hologram of Puri’s shadow on the black screen of my
porch whenever the moon passes the trees behind. The tilt of his
head and the hat that he wears can only mean one thing...and I
read him clear, “Hell’s Bells, Fisherman! Now is the time for Lovers
to Love, Singers to Sing and Poets to Remember!”

I empty the shoebox onto my desk and turn up the light.

downtown
Woodstock
1994