

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY  
CHAPTER TWO - GO FOR IT

For many weeks after the fire Leo's thoughts dwelt daily on the woman at the pool, and his binoculars nightly on the windows of the big glass mansion down the eastern shore.

He was careful now to shut off the lights before beginning his surveillance -- those in his father's study on the second floor, where for the rest of the summer he and his brother bunked while the roof was being repaired and their bedroom restored -- but even so, and despite a dedication bordering on the obsessive, he did not see the blonde woman again. Not during the week, when the DiPuma place was quiet, often deserted; and not at the Saturday-night parties that continued most every weekend throughout the summer.

Nor did they hear from her, as in the days after the fire he expected and dreaded they -- his parents -- surely would. Not a word, which was surprising since she knew exactly where he lived and given that she or someone at the DiPuma house was concerned enough by the pool invasion to have additional security lights installed on the patio in the wake of the incident.

The house's other residents revealed themselves readily enough to his probing glasses, as they had previously. They numbered just two, unless you counted the pair of tiny, frantic creatures that had the run of the place and which Leo supposed must be very small dogs rather than very big rodents. Otherwise there was only a tiny, dark-skinned woman dressed always in a white housekeeper's uniform who spent her free time (she seemed to have a lot) watching daytime television and chain-smoking in one

of the downstairs rooms; and, less often in view, a middle-aged man, short and dapper with a head of silver-grey hair, who spent much of his time on the telephone, even at the Saturday soirees, and who Leo took to be the Realtor King himself, Nick DiPuma.

And that was it, except for the mini-dogs and the party guests and, from time to time, a fair-haired girl in her teens who he thought might be staying over occasionally but wasn't sure about.

Never the blonde woman, though. Not once in forty nights stationed by the window with his binoculars trained down the beach did he catch sight of her. By mid-August he had concluded long since that she no longer lived there. Sometimes he wondered if she ever had. It seemed to him possible that for all her talk of a 'dear hubby' and unsatisfactory servants she was not Mrs. DiPuma after all, not the storied Girl of the West but just some alcohol-fuddled straggler from the party and as much a visitor that night as himself, albeit less of a trespasser.

But what about that other night, stripping down in the bedroom window? He was certain it was her. And if so, perhaps she was a trespasser after all, her transgression though being against the DiPuma marriage rather than the DiPuma property... if in fact there was a DiPuma marriage.

It was puzzling, but whatever the case and whatever her status, whether the royal realtor's queen or paramour, wife or girlfriend, she was gone. That much was clear.

Gradually, as the days grew shorter, Leo eased his surveillance, and eventually, with September approaching and ninth grade, he gave it up entirely, put away his binoculars and thereafter thought less often of the blonde woman and that calamitous night at the pool.

Indeed, by the time they finally crossed paths again, several years had passed and her grip on his imagination had relaxed to the point that he hadn't thought of her in weeks, though she still turned up in certain of his more feverish dreams...

This second encounter took place on a beautiful spring day in late March of 1970 a mile above sea level on the endless, snowy slopes of Whistler Mountain, the popular new ski resort north of the city. It was Easter weekend, the Saturday after Good Friday, a day that for all its sunny promise was fated to end nearly as badly as did that night at the pool.

This time the trouble was the direct, readily foreseeable consequence of Leo's allowing himself to be persuaded against his better judgment to participate in an ill-advised attempt at combining two recreational pastimes generally considered to be mutually exclusive, namely alpine skiing and the taking of psychedelic drugs.

Again the instigator was Russ, whose band was playing the lodge over the long weekend -- their best gig to date -- and into whose possession the previous evening had come a little lavender tablet. This by way of a skinny freak with Jesus Christ hair and Charlie Manson eyes who wandered over to the bandstand after the last set and pulled up short in front of Russ's tenor saxophone, which was parked on its stand at the edge of the stage, and which the interloper beheld with an expression of wonder, mesmerized by the shining instrument, it seemed, like a big stoned magpie; captivated by the polished brass surfaces that gleamed with reflected light from the parcans over the stage and the big glowing Wurlitzer in the corner.

Smiling peculiarly, the guy had moved closer and reached out and held his trembling hands over the bell of the tenor, as if warming them over a fire; then, chuckling and

muttering under his breath, reached inside his ratty Peruvian poncho and brought forth a little drawstring bag and shook out some small object into his palm. Then dropped it down the bell and looked over at Russ with eyes that were all pupil -- tripping his brains out, obviously -- and beamed merrily, madly.

Alarmed -- the sax was brand new, a Selmer, his pride and joy -- Russ had been forced to cut short a promising flirtation with a pair of tipsy young women who said they were stewardesses (they seemed young for it) and rush over and grab a greasy alpaca fistful of the guy's poncho and make forceful inquiry as to what the fuck he thought he was doing messing with his horn.

Startled by this reception -- terrified, in fact -- the interloper, whose mental state was clearly fragile, broke free and stumbled back whence he came -- a boisterous table of disorderly-looking characters by the bar - and collapsed onto his chair, where he cowered pitifully, his hands clapped over his ears like Munch's screamer or the monkey who hears no evil, trembling and keeping a fearful eye on Russ and murmuring "Oh wow, man" over and over again in a shaken voice.

By this time everyone in the place was staring at the spectacle. It was embarrassing -- or would have been if Russ had had less to drink and if he were more susceptible to feelings of empathy and shame.

It was also getting a bit tense. The sax-molester's table-mates were longhairs mostly but not necessarily the peace-and-love-and-good-vibes variety; more the pirate-gypsy-biker type, some of them; older and bigger and rougher-looking than the guy himself, and at least a couple of them were muttering darkly and eyeballing Russ in a menacing if not murderous manner.

Things got straightened out though before it got ugly, with the help of Ritchie Watkins, the band's vocalist and lead guitarist, an acquaintance of the interloper thus able to calm him down a bit and serve as his interpreter and spokesman.

It turned out that Gnome -- this was his name (or, possibly, Noam) -- far from meaning to mess with or molest Russ's tenor, had wanted nothing more than to pay tribute. The small object -- when recovered from the horn it turned out to be a little lavender tablet -- was it seemed a gift betokening his deep esteem for the artistry of Russ's horn work over the course of the night, particularly on the encore number of the last set, a cover version of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's cover of the Adderley brothers' "Work Song", which he pronounced far out and rilly heavy and which in fact had blown him away, like totally. Or maybe it was the little lavender tablet he was talking about. It was hard to tell -- his speech was far from coherent, his meaning elusive. He was truly, as Ritchie observed, 'in a weird headspace'.

Anyway, the misunderstanding was cleared up eventually and things settled down and no harm done, though in the meantime the tipsy purported stewardesses, who Russ was convinced may well have proven to be the band's first-ever groupies, had moved off across the room and joined a table of darkly tanned, pearly toothed ski-instructor types.

Even so, Russ thanked his spaced-out admirer for the kind words, indistinct and elliptical though they may have been, and for the gift, and bid him goodnight and good luck -- without bothering though to correct his evident belief that "Work Song" was a Butterfield original and the horn work he so admired Russ's own, rather than that of Cannonball Adderley, transposed for tenor but otherwise note for note.

Fortunately -- at least it seemed fortunate at the time -- Gnome (Noam?) had made his deposit just moments after Russ twisted the gooseneck off the body of his horn and turned the instrument over and drained a considerable volume of saliva -- byproduct of his honking -- into a potted rubber plant by the stage before re-attaching the neck and setting the saxophone down on its stand. He was thus able to recover the little lavender tablet intact from the horn's bow -- any earlier and it would have dissolved in a pool of lukewarm spit -- and wrap it for safekeeping in a scrap of cigarette foil, which he tucked into the fob-pocket of his ripped-knee, raggedy-cuff, saggy-ass bluejeans and forgot about until the next morning at the Red Dog Grill. When, over blueberry pancakes and a second cup of coffee (he was running on five hours sleep, and pretty hung over) it occurred to him that Leo, with whom he was breakfasting prior to their hitting the slopes, had not yet experienced the incredible, adrenaline-charged, scarifying pleasure of skiing down a mountain whilst enjoying the state of expanded consciousness afforded by a tab of good mescaline -- which is what he had reason to believe the gift might be: Ritchie, having had a look at it and noting its distinctive lavender hue, was certain he recognized it as the same primo stuff he had occasion recently to sample himself, and declared it super-fine and ultra-mellow -- ideal for skiing behind.

What's more -- here Russ shook off his hangover, sat up straight and grew animated -- what's more, conditions this morning were well-nigh ideal for filling this regrettable gap in his little brother's experience and showing him what he had been missing. The more he considered it the more convinced he grew, and the more insistent. What better opportunity? A beautiful spring morning; the start of Leo's Easter vacation; their uncle's

cabin all to themselves for the next three days -- talk about your set and setting! It was perfect!

Leo was doubtful. Already this morning he had made his way up from the city -- a two-hour, white-knuckle drive along twisting, treacherous, single-lane highway -- and it seemed like adventure enough for one day; certainly the most challenging test to date -- despite the good weather and dry road -- of his recently acquired driving skills, such as they were; and in fact he was amazed that his father had with only token resistance surrendered the Volvo for the weekend and let him attempt it -- especially to go meet Russ, whose access to the same vehicle had been suspended just recently for an indefinite term after he incurred a third speeding ticket in as many months.

Besides, unlike his brother, who before injuring his knee two years ago had been one of the better up-and-coming downhill racers in the province, Leo was not an exceptional skier and he preferred to negotiate the slopes of the mountain, as those of Life itself, with a degree of caution and in full command of his faculties.

What's more, his familiarity with mind drugs and states of expanded or contracted or otherwise altered consciousness was limited; didn't in fact extend much beyond the buzz produced by a few bottles of beer, though he had been known to accept the occasional toke at parties when the joint came round, and had fooled around too a couple times with more potent psychedelics, including a failed experiment last year with a tab similar to the one at hand that was said to be acid but which produced few appreciable effects and for which there was subsequent cause to suspect may in fact have been a doctored multiple-vitamin tablet.

A heated discussion followed Russ's proposal, the debate proceeding along well-established and indeed predictable lines that dated back to those first days in Berkeley when they found themselves suddenly some kind of brothers. Days when Russ still believed in Santa Claus and Leo was having regular dealings with the tooth fairy; when Alan, their father (Leo's, at least – Russ had never fully bought into the concept) was, on the evidence of surviving monochrome Brownie shots, a weedy sessional instructor in tweed and flannels and horn-rims; and Julie, Russ's mom, a fresh-faced, late-Fifties ringer for Donna Reed.

As it was then, so it was now. First, the elder brother's bold call to action and adventure, met with concern and prudent objections from the younger; these dismissed scornfully by the elder and restated, defensively, by the younger -- at which point Russ's line of argument would turn viciously ad hominem -- insults, aspersions, character assassination; slurs against his brother's guts and heart and manhood -- resulting in Leo's withdrawal into fuming silence, which in turn would prompt Russ to back off a little, to moderate his tactics, maybe even offer an apology of sorts (insincere and heavily qualified) together with reassurances and cajolery -- followed more often than not by Leo's weary capitulation and assent to whatever it was that was being proposed.

Today, though, in fairness, his knuckling under could not be attributed solely to his brother's browbeating, but may also have been explained simply by the size of the lavender tablet. Lack of size, that is: It wasn't much bigger than a saccharin pellet, and the idea that such a speck of a thing could have a significant impact on his state of consciousness -- such a mere mote -- seemed far-fetched, especially after Russ

brought out his trusty Swiss army knife and unfolded a blade and, with the concentration of a man cutting diamonds, divided the tablet in half.

So, Leo opted for once to do what folk round the mountain were always urging one another to do, namely to 'GO FOR IT!'. Following Russ's lead, he set the pale purple crumb on his tongue and drew it into his mouth and washed it down with the pulpy dregs of his fresh-squeezed orange juice.

This done -- irrevocably -- they paid their waitress and agreed to Have A Nice Day and encouraged her to do likewise, then got up and made their way to the exit -- passing on their way out a couple of the guys his freaked-out fan had been sitting with last night (they were mid-conversation and their accents were American, Leo noted) -- and clumped forth in their heavy ski boots into a cool and lovely morning, fresh as a foot of February powder and smelling agreeably of evergreen forest and ski wax and the thin blue haze of wood-smoke that was drifting their way from the tubular tin chimney of a chalet a little ways up the hill.

Their destination: the gondola barn at Creekside and thence the top of the mountain.

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