



The Ego vs. the Eco

Each moment in life marks an invisible boundary between the past and the future. Any of those moments may become a pivotal one that changes your life, veering you off course — sending you into uncharted territory with no hope of ever returning. For me, it occurred on a spring morning in 1999, at my country home in Pennsylvania.

A BROWN DELIVERY TRUCK RATTLED DOWN THE LONG driveway, passing blooming pear trees and scattering ducks off my gravel lane. My barking dog alerted me to the truck's unexpected arrival, and soon the uniformed driver stepped out of the van, ignoring the dog as he had done so many times in the past. The parcel delivery guy always had a smile on his face when he arrived at our door — he knew the dog was friendly and wouldn't bite, and on this glorious morning with the sun streaming through billowy clouds, he was in a good mood.

I stepped out the front screen door to meet him. "You'll have to sign for this one, Mr. Jenkins," he said, pulling out a pen and handing me his clipboard.

"I don't remember ordering anything," I muttered as I scrawled my signature on the dotted line. The man ignored me as he entered data in his electronic notebook, then he handed me a manila envelope, waved goodbye and took off down the lane.

"What's this?" I asked myself out loud, stepping back

into the house. “Annie, did you order anything by mail?” I yelled to my wife, who was in the kitchen washing the breakfast dishes.

“No!”

Well, me neither, I thought to myself, looking closely at the return address on the envelope. This is not good, I thought, walking into the kitchen. “It’s from a damn law firm in Montana,” I said to Annie. “Ninety-nine percent of those guys give a bad name to the rest of them, you know.”

“I’ve heard that one. Several times.” Annie drained the sink.

“Well, it’s true.”

“What is it? What’s in the package?”

I grabbed a paring knife from the drawer, sliced through the top of the envelope, and pulled out an official looking legal document, along with a white, letter-sized envelope. My name and address were neatly written in ink on the front of the letter. I momentarily set it aside, and read the legal document out loud:

Dear Mr. Jenkins,

We regret to inform you of the death of your Great Aunt Lucille Boggs, who passed away suddenly on the 26th of April, 1999, in Missoula, Montana. As per the Statement of Wishes stipulated in her Final Will and Testament, we are forwarding to you the enclosed envelope. She left us with the instructions that you are to receive this envelope without delay in the event of her death. She indicated that this was a matter of utmost urgency, and instructed us to inform you that you should open the envelope immediately.

Very Truly Yours,

Stainbrook and Halforth, Attorneys at Law

“Great Aunt Lucille Boggs? I hardly knew my Aunt Lucy!”

“Just open the envelope!” Annie said in frustration.

“Wait a minute. Why would Aunt Lucy send *me* anything? I’ve only seen her once in my life, at my grandmother’s funeral back in ‘78. And I didn’t even talk to her then!”

Two decades had passed since I last saw my Aunt Lucy. At the time, I didn’t realize that it would be our first, and last, meeting. I remembered her as a salt-and-pepper haired lady in a long flowing dress. Her thick hair hung down to her waist, and a garland of fresh flowers crowned her head. She was different from the other family members — her hair shone, she was tanned, with rosy cheeks, and she had a beguiling smile on her face in great contrast to her bent, ashen, and grossly overweight siblings.

Aunt Harriet, with her thick layers of make-up and flaming red hair-do that resembled a plastic bicycle helmet, sat on a chair in the corner of the funeral home scowling at Lucy and muttering something about Lucy being a disgrace to the family, with her flowers and all. Uncle Lou, who sat beside her chomping on a cigar, nodded in agreement. I had just returned from a winter backpacking trip in Mexico and Central America, and I attended the funeral in cut-off jeans and sandals. They talked about me behind my back, too.

I remember standing alone at the side of my grandmother’s casket, staring at her shriveled face painted with make-up by the undertaker’s brush, her wispy white hair so thin you could see her scalp, her eyes looking like they had been sewn shut. I was thinking about all the years she had blessed my life, the cherry pies she baked, the smell of fresh bread that so often permeated her kitchen, when suddenly Lucy appeared beside me, hands clasped in front of her, head bowed. She casually glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, then suddenly stared at me intently, with a disconcerted look on her face. I looked back at her and started to smile until I noticed the bewilderment in her eyes. She was looking at me like she had just seen a ghost. Suddenly, she took one last look at grandma’s corpse,

turned on her heels, and whisked out the door of the funeral home. That was the one and only time I ever saw her. Nobody could explain her abrupt departure, and, to the best of my knowledge, none of my relatives ever mentioned her, or even saw her, again.

“Did I ever tell you about the one and only time I met Aunt Lucy?” I asked Annie.

“At the funeral? Yes, I’ve heard that story. Weird. Open the envelope! I want to see what it is. Maybe she left you some money or something.”

“Why would she do that? I was practically a stranger to her.” I ripped open the envelope. Two keys spilled out on the floor as I pulled out a hand-written letter. A personal check was stapled to it. The figure on the check practically jumped out at me. “Damn!! Ten thousand bucks! This is a check made out to *me* for ten grand!”

“WHAT? Are you kidding?” Annie asked incredulously, craning her neck to get a look at the check. “Thank you, Aunt Lucy!” she yelled, plucking the check from the letter to inspect it for herself. I grabbed the check back and threw it in the air. “*We’re in the money!*” I sang, taking Annie for a quick jig around the kitchen. Then I remembered the letter, which had fallen on the floor in the excitement. “We better see what our dear old generous and wonderful Aunt Lucy has to say,” I exclaimed, bending over to retrieve the note. Smiling, I read silently:

Dear Joseph,

A terrible battle is at hand. The forces of the Eco and the Ego have become locked in conflict. No less than the future of our species, in fact the future of the world, is at stake. I have been engaged in the struggle for years, and now the most critical time is at hand. Unfortunately, I fear the worst for myself — I sense impending doom. If I should die suddenly, I have left instructions with a law firm in Bozeman, Montana, to see that you get this letter. You must take my position as a key player in this ordeal. You are not

alone — there are many of us spanning the entire planet struggling to avert the upcoming critical time, which I call the Point of No Return. My role is very important, and I have pledged that if I die before my task is completed, I will choose a successor. You have been chosen. Please take this very seriously. I know I can count on you. It is your destiny.

Your instructions are as follows: Proceed to my home on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana (see map on other side of this paper). My cottage will hopefully be locked up and undisturbed, awaiting your arrival. In the study (the room with all the books, located in the southwest corner of the house), look under the desk ...

Lucy explained what she wanted me to do, and ended her instructions with the following warning:

Do not share this information with anyone other than the closest of confidants, perhaps your wife. Make sure someone knows you are coming here, in case you do not return (so they can come looking for you).

I have included a check in the amount of ten thousand dollars to cover your expenses. Use the money sparingly. You'll need it.

Make haste.

Lucy

The smile froze on my face. I didn't know what to say. It seemed my dear old Aunt Lucy had something up her sleeve. My destiny, no less.

"You better read this." I handed the letter to Annie, then looked around on the floor for the two keys. Annie read the letter out loud, quickly at first, then slowly, drawing out each word as she spoke, her voice finally becoming a whisper.

She sat down on a kitchen stool and put the letter on her lap. "Is this crazy or what?"

"I don't know. How should I know?" I had found one of

the keys and was crawling around the kitchen floor looking for the other.

“Are you going to do this? I mean, go to an Indian reservation in Montana? You’re not, are you? When would you have time to do *that*?”

I just shook my head. I had no intentions whatsoever of going on some wild goose chase. “Hell, no!” I replied, still on my hands and knees.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught the golden glint of a brass key lying just under the edge of the kitchen stove.