

THE BIG BEAT

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I think my spells began again when I started talking to the gulls one morning while running on the beach. I often talk to animals, to myself, and even to trees and plants, but this time was different. I don't remember a lot of what was said, only that my dialog with the seagulls was nonsensical.

"Hi!" screeched a gull, suspended directly overhead, its wings spread.

"Hello!" I shouted back, laughing as I slowed down to a walk.

"Don't you wish that you could fly?" said another, landing a few feet up the beach. "Seagulls don't talk," I protested.

"Great philosophers and poets have conversed with us," said the first gull, still in flight.

"Like who?" My inner voice wouldn't shut up.

"I have it from the highest authority," said the grounded gull. "You don't know?"

"I wouldn't know anything about philosophers and poets talking to seagulls."

I began running again, only to approach an assemblage of gulls mulling around where the ocean had broken through to form a small wet inlet strewn with driftwood. A chorus of them chided me from atop a large log.

"He doesn't know!" they screeched.

"It's true. I know nothing," I said, philosophically, remembering reading somewhere that such an admission was the beginning of true knowledge. I sensed that I was falling deeper into their trap.

"A regular blank slate," they all chimed as they took flight.

Not long after that I really began to lose it. I started hearing voices that took on many personalities. They were pitiless and scornful, calling me names, playing tricks on me, telling me what someone was thinking, or telling me to meet them somewhere.

I'd find myself answering a guy in an aisle in at the grocery store, only to realize that he hadn't said anything. A lady, who was sublime in a frumpy sort of way, bulging out of a black dress, hissed "sauerkraut" at me. I was certain that she did, even if her lips didn't move.

In the theater of my mind, a myriad of faces and voices persecuted me, and sometimes inflicted severe physical pain. Tormented, tortured and abused, I saw people spit at me and worse, calling me names, accusing me of things that I would never do. When I couldn't take it anymore, I shouted back, lashing out angrily, often embarrassing myself. I usually didn't get to sleep until four or five in the morning. Sometimes I couldn't sleep at all. I was always half-awake, in a sort of limbo land.

This was all back in the '80s, when I was the late night DJ at the KOVE 101.2 oldies station. I was in my early forties and well established as a local DJ. At that time Ada and the boys needed me most.

The KOVE was a small station with a big voice located near Oceano on the edge of the Nipomo Dunes. I had it made there until my breakdown. I guess that's what you'd call it.

Randy "So Rare" King, who spun an eccentric blend of obscure '50s easy listening, doo-wop and jazz, caught me at Snookey's in Grover one night.

I'd been looking for a guy named Mitch who had played backup for Fats Domino in Las Vegas. No one showed, of course, and I got on people's nerves asking around about Fats and Mitch. It turned out that it had all been in my mind.

"Ada asked me to have you give her a call," said Randy, finding me at the bar.

"It's not like I hang out here." Country rock blared from the jukebox and billiards clicked and clacked.

"I'm only the messenger, Larry." He stared back at me over his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Thanks, then. How about a brewskie?"

"Sure, after you call. I promised your wife."

At the time I was in a freaked out state, hitting emotional highs and lows. On one show I might be lucid and filled with an energy that I had thought long gone, and the next night I would stumble through, becoming incoherent.

Strangely, on one of my better nights, it hit the fan. I was boppin' along to Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, about ready to jump to some bluesy stuff by Jimmy Reed and Slimp Harpo, when I clammed up.

I couldn't feel anything. I had sensations and all, but there were no feelings inside of me. I tried my nightly coffee and chocolate bar to lift my spirits, but they were tasteless and metallic. I stepped outside for a minute to enjoy the moon, but just sat there gazing out over the dunes, totally detached from the beauty of the evening.

I then broke all of my own rules, casting aside the plans that I had for my audience that night. I put on Fats' "Valley of Tears" and then Buddy Holly's "It Doesn't Matter

Any more.” I thought about Hank Williams, but ended with the country & western tear jerker, “Makin’ Believe” by Kitty Wells.

When Kitty’s song ended, I broke down crying and sobbing on the air. Then a huge silence, or at least it seemed so at the time. Then came the calls. After that, the voices again.

“Larry,” said Joe Garcia, the station manager, after the episode, “I think you’ve been working too hard. You’ve got plenty of time on the books. Go fishing.”

I must have given him a horrified look.

“Take off for a while. It’ll be here.” Joe was a soft-spoken guy who knew how to make a point when the time came.

“Okay, Joe.” I always listened to Joe. He kept the syndicators from the door.

“We don’t want to lose you, Larry.”

My wife, Ada, who has never been big on counseling or psychiatry, immediately began calling around. I went along with it and made an appointment to see Dr. John Kazonakis in San Luis Obispo.

Teo Marks, a clinical psychologist in a white coat, called me from the waiting room. He led me to a room and motioned for me to sit down. With a clipboard in hand, he asked me a battery of medical and personal questions before getting around to asking me why I was there.

“I can’t concentrate well enough to work.” I described my symptoms and how I couldn’t sleep or eat.

“I understand.” He wrote something down.

I did my utmost to describe what I was dealing with in my mind, but he wasn’t interested. He only wanted direct answers to his questions.

Teo Marks more than once made a reference to drug and alcohol use. “Nothing personal,” he said, “but you do work late at night, and with the music and all it’s an occupational hazard, isn’t it.”

“Not in my case.”

When he was done with his checkmarks and notes, he escorted me to a plush office and introduced me to Dr. Kazonakis, who was short, thin and trim, and attired in an expensive green suit. He had a warm firm handshake. His office was a green, dimly lit room with a fine oaken desk, a large comfortable looking chair and a couch. There was no clutter whatsoever. Everything had its place.

He asked me a couple of questions and then escorted me back to Teo Marks, who conferred with him for a moment, scheduled my next appointment and handed me a prescription to have filled.

The medication helped with the voices, but it also slowed me down mentally, blocking and stifling all inspiration. I considered not taking the meds and not going back for my second appointment.

Ada was surprised when I suggested that we take the boys down to San Dimas to visit my parents and maybe catch a Dodger game. “Are you certain that you’re up to it?” she said, wrinkling her dark brow, looking up from the mystery that she was reading.

“Summer’s almost gone.” I rattled my pills in their container like a maraca.



Dinner was over and we were still gathered in my parents’ kitchen telling stories. Ada was sharing how we had first met. Ada is a pretty woman and she always has been, but back then she was stunning. At thirty-seven she was still letting her dark-brown hair grow long. Her face was full and vital, sunny and wide. She smiled at me, encouragingly.

“What could I do?” she exclaimed, finishing her little story. “My poor vulnerable unsuspecting heart had let down its defenses in the quiet safety of my apartment. In a lonely instant in time, I had fallen in love with the most unlikely of all people, the infamous Larry ‘The Lion’ Lyons, the late night DJ at the KOVE oldies station, with the largest transmitter in the Five Cities.”

When Ada hit the punch line with a yowl, I laughed with everyone else at the table. Ada had received a double degree in drama and speech, and taught both subjects at Arroyo Grande High School. She sometimes considered herself a failure because she hadn’t made it as an actress, but her true dementia came later when she married me, a wacky oldies DJ.

I shook my head like I did every time she told the story about how we’d first met. It wasn’t quite true, but my mother especially liked the part about Ada calling the station to request Bobby Darin’s “Dream Lover,” and getting “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” instead.

I wandered off into the living room to look through my mother’s old record albums. It was one of my favorite rooms with a sunny, sunken entrance lined with plants, and its large stone fireplace. The two-story house was built in the 1920s and possessed the Southern California charm of that era. There were five upstairs bedrooms, a balcony, fishpond, gardens, fruit trees, and even a mechanic’s pit in the garage.

I turned on the small light above the stereo. Seeing an old Fats Waller album brought back the arguments that my mother and I had had years before about who was the best recording artist, Fats Waller or Fats Domino.

I remember having conceded, in my teenage wise-ass way that Fats Waller was probably a better piano player, but that his voice wasn’t as good as Fats Domino’s. Mom had answered, not all that diplomatically, that Fats Waller was a true genius at the piano and a songwriter as well, and that he had a genuine sense of humor.

And when I had held my ground about how there was no way that Fats Waller could sing better than Fats Domino and how he had co-written hit after hit with David Bartholomew, she had thrown up her arms in disbelief. These arguments took place in the late ‘50s, before I understood anything about boogie-woogie, stride, left hand jazz

piano techniques, or triplet piano style.

“What are you smiling about?” my mother asked, in her soft voice, entering the room.”

“Remember how we argued about Fats Domino and Fats Waller?”

“Not really, but I remember taking you to every record store in Pomona looking for “Blueberry Hill” when you were eleven or so.”

“I remember.”

“It’s strange getting older,” she said, seeing that I was caught up in memories, “I don’t feel any different. I’m still the same as I always was, only I’m falling apart.” I nodded over and over and over.

I tucked the boys in early. They were exhausted from the Dodger game. Alan and Lyle’s faces beamed back at me as I did my best to explain to them that I had grown up in that very room, but Lyle, then twelve, and nine-year-old Alan would have nothing to do with it. “Relax, Dad,” they said, almost in unison, and then we laughed and said goodnight.

I walked out side to the front yard to sit at the picnic table beneath the big pine tree. It hadn’t cooled off much, and I was still whirling and tumbling inside, supercharged by a rich mixture of sunlight and smog, baseball and traffic. A chaotic longing for something I couldn’t understand kept me up.

I was usually doing my show at this time on a Sunday night, and I knew that I had let a lot of people down. I was Larry “The Lion” Lyons, the “memory man” down at the KOVE! I had even missed the picnic. Not making it to the annual picnic was unheard of, but I hadn’t been up to it. Besides, I’d lost my appetite.

I had stopped taking my meds that morning, intent on enjoying a cold beer and getting my old self back. Seeing Lyle and Alan drifting off to sleep in my old bedroom touched me. In that room I had made my decision to become a DJ. I had originally wanted to play the piano, but after struggling through piano lessons in the seventh and eighth grades, I told myself that I wasn’t meant to perform music, taking up piano as a sort of hobby. I remembered the reel-to-reel tape recorder that I had gotten for my fourteenth birthday. After that I thought I was Art Laboe or “Handsome” Jim Balcom on KPOP. I still dreamed of being a one-hit wonder DJ like the Big Bopper.

I made my way to the guest bedroom, undressed, and slid into bed next to Ada. I was later awakened by her elbow, signaling me that I was snoring and to roll over. An inner music soothed me back to sleep.

I flew in the night sky, with Brackett Field and the Pomona Fairgrounds beyond the hills over my left shoulder. I faced the hazy lights of L.A. far to the west, as distant and unreal as the stars above. I was again in one of the flying dreams I had as a kid.

“Listen to this,” said a deep voice. A soft, soothing wind came up. I could hear music, more beautiful than anything I had ever heard, faint and soft, barely audible, becoming louder. Nothing on this earth compared to it, not even the most lifting classical pieces.

The music flowed naturally and free without stops. I couldn't make out the instruments or a real melody, and yet it was finely orchestrated. Beats like raindrops tapped on a leaf. A celestial orchestra freely wandered through a long cyclic succession of pulses and silences. The music ebbed and flowed and slowly drifted away, much as it had come. I recognized the very soft ping of a triangle as a finale.

After a few seconds of floating, I saw something like flashing lights. I then sped high toward the stars. I passed by Mars and was looking for Jupiter, when I was abruptly yanked back down into myself.

I awakened in a sweat, my heart loud and painful against my chest.

"Are you all right?" said Ada, sitting up. "You're soaking wet."

"I was dreaming, that's all."

"More like a nightmare. About what?"

"I'm not sure."



In the morning, the Santa Ana winds had come in off the desert to blow the smog away, and we could actually see Mt. Baldy rising austere across the valley to the north.

I could smell the valley heating up. I knew that it was going to be another scorcher. I breathed in the dry heated grass and chaparral, smelling a hint of mint and mustard.

I went into the living room to listen to some of my mother's old vinyl. Thinking that my old 45s had disappeared long before, I was surprised to find one of my old 45s, "The Big Beat" by Fats Domino, so I put it on. I preferred the tactile, old vinyl. I watched the Imperial label spin in all of its glory as the song blasted with swaying horns. "The Big Beat" had been the title song of the 1958 movie, *The Big Beat*, and Alan Freed had a T.V. show of the same name. One day I would do a show about it, I told myself.

I swore that I could hear Fats' sidemen on the record encouraging me to join them. When I was really getting into the chorus, my father looked in, cupping his hands around his mouth like a bullhorn, and shouted, "It's a bit loud isn't it?" His voice had an echoing effect, as if he was calling down a mountain pass.

"What?" I shouted back.

"Can you hear it?" he called out again, like from a great distance.

"I don't know." Caught up in the music, I couldn't understand what he was saying.

"That's because it's too loud!"

"Oh," I said. My father had startled me, his face and body a reflection of an older me, with the same brown hair, blue eyes and ruddy complexion. We were both tall and lanky Lyons. My hair was longer, more of a mane, and I was wiry by comparison. The resemblance frightened me.

"You should eat something," said Ada, coming into the living room a few minutes later. It was already time for lunch.

“Okay,” I said, turning off the stereo.

“There’s plenty of fixings for sandwiches,” said my father, looking up over his newspaper and then over at the news on the small T.V. in the kitchen.

“Thanks.”

“You haven’t been eating, Larry,” said Ada.

I grabbed a beer, avoiding the cold cuts.

“What about your medicine?” Ada, seeing the beer in my hand, looked at me with terror in her eyes.



When we returned home to Grover, I continued to live in my sound room, removed from Ada and the boys. I spent my time talking to myself and the voices, playing the stereo and watching TV. I couldn’t concentrate long enough to even read newspaper articles.

I had a couple more sessions with Dr. Kazonakis, who considered the celestial dream and everything else I told him irrelevant. He finally let me talk about the voices on my third visit, but by then I had lost patience. I then stopped taking my meds because they made me feel like an extra in *Night of the Living Dead*.

During the last session before I quit, Kazonakis took me back in time, suggesting that my problems were somewhere in the past. I squirmed uncomfortably through most of the session because I was forced to relive friendly fire coming in on top of our position in Vietnam—105s can be pretty intense. I wasn’t suffering from shellshock.

Because of Nam and the loud concerts I had gone to over the years, he suggested an ear specialist. He appeared when I admitted smoking pot and experimenting with psychedelics in the ‘60s and early ‘70s. His superior, all knowing attitude got to me and I never went back.

Sometime in October, I began working in the yard. As I weeded and dug up a large area for a winter garden, my memories began flowing with the work. If nothing else, I conceded, Kazonakis had been able to escort me back twenty years, and I realized that I heard the voices back in 1969, after I had gotten out of the Army.

The following week, when I was on my knees, finally ready to begin the planting, a packet of radish seeds in hand, it struck me how much Kazonakis knew about me. I had a sense that there was something, somewhere, that I had to remember and work myself through.

Once out of the Army, I had decided to catch a ship and work myself around the world. I had hitched up to Vancouver in the winter of 1970, hoping to sign aboard a tramp steamer, but those days were gone. I found myself stuck in a room in downtown Vancouver browsing travel magazines and world atlases.

I had wanted to see India and Nepal, then Europe, working as I went. I thought that I might settle in Buenos Aires one day. But after trudging about Vancouver for a month or so looking for a ship, I forgot my fantastic dreams.

While in my garden the following week planting chard, I remembered that every now and again my poor, neglected soul becomes lonely and seeks something higher. In my room in Vancouver, I set aside my maps along with any hope of finding a ship and began studying world religions and mysticism. I read the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita and the Koran. The book on Zen Buddhism made me feel like an initiate. I was turned onto the Indian avatar and mystic, Meher Baba, who said, “Don’t worry, be Happy,” and Dalai Lapsang Rampa was big in Vancouver at the time.

In my own way, I became somewhat of an ascetic. I read about fasting and so I began. I had no religious training. I read about fasting and proceeded to do it. I’m not quite certain why. By then I had seen my share of poverty and starvation in the world, and I had even been hungry myself a couple of times. The war had changed me, too.

I didn’t eat and I didn’t eat, and then I didn’t want to eat, and then I couldn’t eat. I only drank coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. My walks at sunrise kept me going. I came to appreciate the fog and rain. After about a month of fasting, I panicked and ate a bowl of stew. After eating, I fell asleep.

The following morning, the sun came into my room and I took a walk down to a small city park. While sitting on a bench, a transparent film, a veil, passed before my eyes, altering my vision somewhat. People passed by and buses rumbled, squeaked and spewed. I felt as if I had to stand up and move or pass out right there. I left.

I sat in my fall garden motionless, staring at nothing, remembering my trip to the northwest years before. Kazonakis had attempted, at my last session, to smooth things over by saying that not only had I forgotten the ‘60s, but that I had tuned them out altogether, and that was the only time I ever heard him laugh. I hadn’t joined in.

And I was still upset with Kazonakis because—looking back—I hadn’t been taking drugs while I was in Vancouver or on the road. I had been trying to purify myself, and besides, even pot made me paranoid.

While I was planting the kale and chicory, it came to me that Dr. Kazonakis had been right on track in most ways. I had begun hearing the voices back in the winter of ’70. When they first descended upon me, entered my consciousness, I was convinced that I was actually reading other people’s minds. It was that unbelievable! I thought that humanity had taken an evolutionary step and not told me about it.

To complicate things, while hitchhiking down to Albuquerque from British Columbia, I got called names like “trash,” “queer,” “hippie,” and even “traitor” because of my long hair and ragged clothing, I guess. Some would go out of their way to drive by the onramp to flip me off. It got so I didn’t know what was real and what was in my head. I was vulnerable. Everything was catching up with me. And it was winter, and I got stranded in below freezing cold a couple of times. Luckily, most people were cool, or at least tolerant, and I got rides, even if in some places I had to tuck my hair up into my hat.

I continued to care for my new garden. I planted beets and carrots and tried lettuce. The hard labor helped me a great deal. My faculties seemed to be returning full steam. I played piano and I found myself able to actually read books again. It became apparent, to me at least, that my malady was coming to an end.



Near Thanksgiving, Ada knocked on the door and craned her neck into the room. “Let’s go down to the beach for a run,” she said.

“I’m not sure I’m up to it.”

“When do you plan on returning to the world of the living? The boys miss you.”

“I’m working on it. I’m doing my best, actually.”

“I know that you are, Larry. C’mon, put on your running shoes.” The green speckles in her brown eyes flickered, brought out by the turquoise-green top that she was wearing. I thought of making love with her, but quickly pushed the thought away.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said.

It didn’t take long running on the beach before I became disoriented. I sat down on the sand. I told Ada to run on ahead. She protested, but finally took off, telling me that she’d return shortly.

The sea air was invigorating and the sun was warm on my skin. I felt heavy, slow and old. I found myself floating up and away from my body, and was soon situated high above my own self sitting below like a big piece of driftwood. I could see Ada down the beach dodging the surf. The ocean was a silvery green.

The music bounced from wave to wave, rising to my soul. When I saw Ada returning, I quickly snapped back down into my body.

“Hear the music?” I looked up at her with a rather sheepish grin. “It’s like the music of the spheres.” I had been reading about Pythagoras and his music of the spheres, and how the music on Earth was nothing compared to the heavenly music produced by the orbits of planets.

“Are you hearing that celestial music again?”

“No,” I said, emphatically, realizing that I had slipped. “You think that I’m crazy.”

“No, I don’t, Larry. Why do you always say that?”

“Did you know that there are documented studies about the correlation between OBEs, or out-of-body experiences, and hearing voices. Teo Marks, the psychologist in Dr. Kasonakis’ office, told me that. He told me that I wasn’t alone; that there have been studies. He’s studying paranormal psychology. He looks the part. He’s a pale and ghostly sort of guy.”

“Why did you stop going?”

“I suppose that Kasonakis is okay and I like Teo Marks. I make another appointment, if you must know. Joe Garcia said that I could come back to work part-time after Thanksgiving.”

“Larry, that’s wonderful. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And I have a new prescription.”

“You’ll be with us for Thanksgiving, then.”

“I would hope so. You know, I think that I’m finally okay this time.”

“So now you’re a musician,” said Ada, looking at me with an odd mixture of admiration and pity as we walked back to the car. I had been playing a lot of piano. I didn’t look at the gulls.”

“No, I’m a DJ. I’m the ‘memory man’ down at the KOVE.”^⑤