

## I DIED YOU KNOW

I was visiting the British herbalist David Hoffmann near Sebastopol, California, once upon a time, and while there, I happened to mention that I was writing a book on ancient fermentation and the uses of plants in fermentation.

David listens, then stops a minute, and pulls a book out of his bookcase and says, “Here, have you seen this?”

It’s by some guy named Dale Pendell, a book called *Pharmako/poeia*. People try to give me books all the time, I hate it. The cover is nice though.

“No, I haven’t,” I say. “Why?”

“Well, he’s got some great stuff in there on fermentation.”

“Really?” I say and take the book and David goes off to do something and I sit down and begin to read. Four hours later, when David returns and awakens me from the page, I stretch and put the book down on the table, tell him, “This is a great book, thanks.”

“Well,” David says, “I know him. Would you like to meet him?”

“Well, yeah. I would. Do you think he would mind?”

“No. Let me give him a call.”

David goes in the other room and I can hear him dialing, then talking on the phone. After awhile, he hangs up, returns. “We are on for tomorrow,” he says. “That okay?”

“Shit, yes.”

The next morning is particularly California. One of those days that Californians try to convince people they have every day. Warm but not too warm. Sunny but not too bright. The

breeze a gentle caress, a lovers careful embrace. It seems to promise that all the ills of humankind can be solved if only we liked each other more, were a little kinder, maybe had some sort of harmonic convergence.

David comes into the kitchen wearing, as usual, cream linen slacks and leather sandals with socks. His blue, shimmering silk shirt is half unbuttoned down his chest, the jade Green Man pendant gleaming softly against his skin. He has the kind of British accent that makes almost everything he says seem meaningful. His speech is musical, soft on the ear, without the nasal tones of the American approach.

“Ready to go?” he asks and I nod and get my stuff and we walk outside.

“Oh, by the way. My car is broken, can we take yours?”

“Sure,” I say, and an odd tingle ripples its way down my spine. I shake it off.

My car is sitting on gravel under a huge eucalyptus and we crunch our way over and get in.

“Oh, I’ve got a couple of errands to run. That okay?” I look at him and he is exceptionally cute and endearing.

“Er, mmm, okay,” I say, letting go of my picture of the day, and starting the car I begin following his directions. We drive for a few miles in the midst of farm fields and eucalyptus-lined roads, begin to experience the first tentacled extrusions of new suburbia—roads that go nowhere, for sale signs on vacant lots, cut trees lying abandoned in death, an occasional new house—some of Sartre’s bleaker thoughts made manifest. Sebastopol is pretty though.

“Pull in at the co-op,” David says and I do. “Just be a minute,” and he walks off toward the back of the store.

I linger just inside the front doors. Notice the espresso counter, two young women behind

it, talking. Walk over diffidently.

“Er, could I have a breve?” I ask. The younger one nods, keeps on talking, her hands moving automatically in coffee gestures ingrained by long practice.

“Well, I have had a lotta bodywork,” she is saying as she tamps the coffee grounds into the port. “But you were right. When that guy put his hands on me it was amazing. I’ve never felt anything like it and my neck and back don’t hurt anymore. Not at all.”

“I told you so. He’s great.”

The store is busy and a line is building up behind me and soon both of them are at work, churning out lattes.

“That’ll be \$4.50,” the younger one says sliding it toward me on the counter.

I take the cup, burn my hand, pick up an insulation sleeve and carefully slip it on. I stand demurely by the door, sipping it, notice David threading his way back toward me. The day is still nice outside.

We get in the car and I put the cup carefully in the holder on the dash and ease back into traffic, begin to follow his directions deeper into town.

The next stop is the record store. One of those independent stores where the interior is painted so white it has the faintest of bluish tinges. But, like most such stores, painted long ago. Black marks from what-the-hell-were-theys and dings from this-and-thats cover the lower halves of the walls, the marks and white paint blending together to produce a poststructuralist’s experience of life. Abstract jazz and existential despair as decor. The floor is the cheapest linoleum, the bins cobbled together from plywood and stained that terrible dark walnut brown color from the 70s. In them are the exact records you would expect and standing in front of the bins the exact people that have to be there, flipping slowly through record after record, glazed

expressions on their faces. Everyone looks like they belong in exactly that store. I stand by the door, sipping my breve. I keep breathing but it's a conscious decision.

David looks around, says: "Hey, I've got to talk to this guy but you might like to look at those while you wait." He points off toward the back of the store, gestures to some pictures high up on the wall. I nod, wander over, squeeze around the end of the bins and look at them. Pictures of the Beatles, together and separately. Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix. All from the 60s. The frames are cheap, black, and go perfectly with the walls. The pictures however are very good, taken by someone with a very good eye. All of them are black and white.

"Yeah," this guy at one of the bins behind me is saying. "I did go to that bodyworker and he was great. Never felt anything like it."

"Told you," another voice replies and that funny feeling tingles its way down my spine again. I'm never coming back to California, I think to myself.

A bit later David wanders over. He nods at the pictures. "Good aren't they?"

"Yes," I say, "they are."

"My dad took them. He was the Beatles official photographer. I grew up with those guys. That one," he says pointing, "gave me my first drugs."

"No shit," I say, peering more closely at the photograph. "Were they good?"

He laughs and we wander out of the store, get back in the car and begin to drive. I, pumping him for more stories. Him, not giving me much.

A couple of stops later we finally start up into the hills, heading for Dale's place. After a lot of this-ways and that-ways, we turn onto a tiny dirt road that meanders up a steep hill through a beautiful grove of California oaks. The road hasn't been graded in centuries; the deep ruts demonstrate how water found a way to deal with obstacles. The car jerks from one side of the

road to the other as first one set of tires is sucked into the ruts, then the other. The whole time we're getting slammed around inside the car as if we we're at a carnival ride. I can almost hear the tiny clicking sounds the roller coaster makes as it pulls you slowly to the top. You know, the moment when you begin to have those thoughts telling you a real, real bad decision has just been made.

We pass by a red, wooden house on stilts, set back in the trees on our left, a spidery staircase up one side. "Jack London's cook's house," says David. "That's where Dale lives. But we're going up to the main house. Keep going."

I glance at him sideways, he doesn't seem to notice, and I keep on, finally pulling into a fairly flat, gravel parking area. I stop the car, unclench my hands from the wheel, and pull on the brake. We both get out and stretch.

Just then a door in front of us opens and this guy walks out holding a very large glass beaker in his hands. It's filled with a vibrant green liquid. The guy is tall and thin, mid-50s, touches of gray in his hair, with remarkable upswept eyebrows. He walks over, looks at both of us. "Want some absinthe?" he asks, "It's almost ready."

David introduces us, then shakes his head. "You guys go ahead. I don't like alcohol, besides there's something I need to do. I'll see you later." And he walks off.

"I want some," I say, visions of Anais Nin and Paris and the 1920s in my mind. Dale looks at me, grins and says, "Let's go." And we begin to walk down the rutted road talking about this and that.

We get to Jack London's Cook's house, glomp our way up the stairs. There's a sign above the door: I stop and read it, "Demons welcome here," and look at Dale.

"Turns out they already had the address," he says, and laughs. Then we go in. I sit at the

table and he wanders into the back where I catch glimpses of him holding tiny tincture droppers over the beaker, putting a few drops of this and then that into it. He comes back, puts two glasses on the table, each with some of that beautiful green liquid in them. Then he gets these strange kind of real flat forks, though he calls them absinthe spoons, and balances them over the glasses. He puts a sugar cube on each one and begins to pour water very slowly over the cubes. He pours until each glass is filled, each sugar cube dissolved. "Drink up," he says, taking away the spoons.

I lift the glass cautiously to my lips, taste a tiny bit. My face brightens. "It's good," I say and we sit there companionably, talking and drinking.

"Want another?" he asks. I look at my glass, surprised to see it's empty.

"Yes. Yes I do," I say and Dale makes a couple more.

We are about half way into them when we start doing spontaneous readings. Dale recites one of his poems and it reminds me of something and I say it and that sets Dale off again. In the middle of this, we hear someone coming up the steps and David walks in. We keep right on going. David looks at Dale talking, looks at me responding. Looks at Dale again as he begins to speak, looks at our glasses of absinthe, then up at Dale again. "Gimme some?" he says. He still looks cute and endearing, Dale pours him a glass and he begins to try and catch up.

It's about then that I begin to hear the odd thumping. *Ba bump, ba bump, ba bump.* It's coming from the outside stairs. I turn my head slightly so I can see out the window. A man is slowly rising into view, walking up the stairs, but the sound of his footsteps is odd. The head rises, then the chest, then the arms, flailing oddly. He looks, I finally realize, like a marionette, as if strings were hooked to his wrists, his shoulders, his knees, the strings being operated by someone not too good at it. *Ba bump, ba bump, ba bump.*

The door opens and he comes in, marionettes his way to the table, sits down next to me. I

am pretty high by now and the light has tremendous luminosity, the colors of everything are very vivid. It's as if I am seeing through some kind of lens that makes whatever I look at more vivid and clear. The grain in the wood of the table is exceptionally vibrant. It's almost as if I can see deep inside the wood itself. I find myself getting caught up in its flow, sensing movements of meaning within it. I run my hand along the top of the table, the texture is marvelous. I notice then that language and sound are particularly luminous and as a matter of fact they sound almost the way the wood feels and looks. Time has slowed and I am finding it really enjoyable to immerse myself in language; just hearing it is orgasmic. I can feel the tiny movements of meaning as I shape them into the words I drop shimmering into the room. I see how they penetrate the listeners, see their physiology shift in response. Why, I wonder, did they ever make this illegal?

I turn my head as the man sits down beside me. He leans close, looking deep in my eyes. His are startling, a brilliant, shimmering, and liquid blue. He is totally present, like a newborn infant. He looks very much like, I think to myself, he has had a left brain stroke, shutting down the linear hemisphere of his brain, and can now only use his right hemisphere, the holistic part. And here I am, caught up in the moment with him, myself in a similar state of mind. Time slows more and I continue to look at him. He moistens his lips and leans a bit closer.

“I died you know,” he says, looking at me meaningfully.

“Oh god,” I think. “Not now.” I have no desire to engage in word salad with someone from northern California—yet I can't pull myself away.

“And then the angel came,” he continues.

I seem to be stuck in some kind of horrible time warp where space is not quite right and I can't seem to get my body to do anything but sit there. The whole time this is going on I am face to face with the guy, eye to eye, both of us in this just-like-a-newborn-infant reality and I can't do

anything but be there and take it in.

He takes a breath, clearly gathering energy for another run at me. I try to gather my resources, can't seem to find anything useful.

“The car went out of control down the hill and I broke my neck. In just the same place Christopher Reeve did. I died on the operating table. That's when the angel came and told me what to do to be able to walk again, to use my arms again. And I did it and I think I am getting around pretty good, don't you?”

He looks at me intently and I find myself nodding yes, because given all that, he certainly is getting around pretty good.

“Yes,” he continues. “I have been an osteopath for over 30 years but now when I put my hands on their bodies something comes through me and goes into them—they just change. Their whole body shifts and I can see them letting go of things that have troubled them, often for years. It's like a darkness inside them. I see it there and something goes through me, then through my hands, then into them and they just. . . change.” He looks at me earnestly, wanting me to understand.

The fabric of the day comes over me and I remember the women at the espresso stand and the people in the record store and I look again at the man in front of me and for a minute things shift and suddenly plain are the invisible currents that carry us this way then that way when all the while we think we are living ordinary lives.

He is watching me closely the whole time and he sees the slight shifting in my face. He waits a minute, feeling the shift, tasting it, savoring the flavor then comparing it to something inside him. Then he says again, “I died you know,” and here he pauses, “but this is a new life, everything is different. Do you understand what I mean?”



And I, caught up in the moment, nod and say “yes, yes I do.” And suddenly I hear the voice of the poet Juan Ramon Jiminez reverberating inside me.

*I have a feeling that my boat  
has struck, down there in the depths,  
against a great thing.*

*And nothing  
happens! Nothing . . . Silence . . . Waves . . .*

*–Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,  
and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?*

And then I turned back to the conversation and continued to drink my absinthe and the world moved on and some place in the deeps of me that moment in time came to rest on some ground of being inside. And there it worked with who I was and who I am and who I will be. And from time-to-time over the years it has risen up like the shadowed back of some great thing from out of those depths and lets me see once again into a world that is a great deal more than any of us suspect it to be.

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