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The Guru

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The Guru

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It was crazy. Absolutely crazy. On Monday, I read in the paper of a mystic named Namaste, who lived alone atop Mt. Shasta in Northern California. On Tuesday, I told my boss that I needed an emergency leave of absence. On Wednesday, I was sitting in a tiny hotel room in Weed, California - five miles west of Mt. Shasta - wondering, most seriously, if I had lost my mind."

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The Guru

By Frank Interlichia

It was crazy. Absolutely crazy. On Monday, I read in the paper of a mystic named Namaste, who lived alone atop Mt. Shasta in Northern California. On Tuesday, I told my boss that I needed an emergency leave of absence. On Wednesday, I was sitting in a tiny hotel room in Weed, California — five miles west of Mt. Shasta — wondering, most seriously, if I had lost my mind.

Until then I had considered myself a responsible, level-headed adult. I was a 25-year-old, engaged accountant. I made a comfortable living, was in good health, and was reasonably happy. “Then why,” I thought, “Why the hell did I fly 3,000 miles to see some mountain-dwelling nut, who I know nothing about? What am I doing?”

Outside, the snow was swirling in the cold, November air, wrapping the town in a veil of silence. But, inside my mind, a tribe of restless thoughts were on the roam.

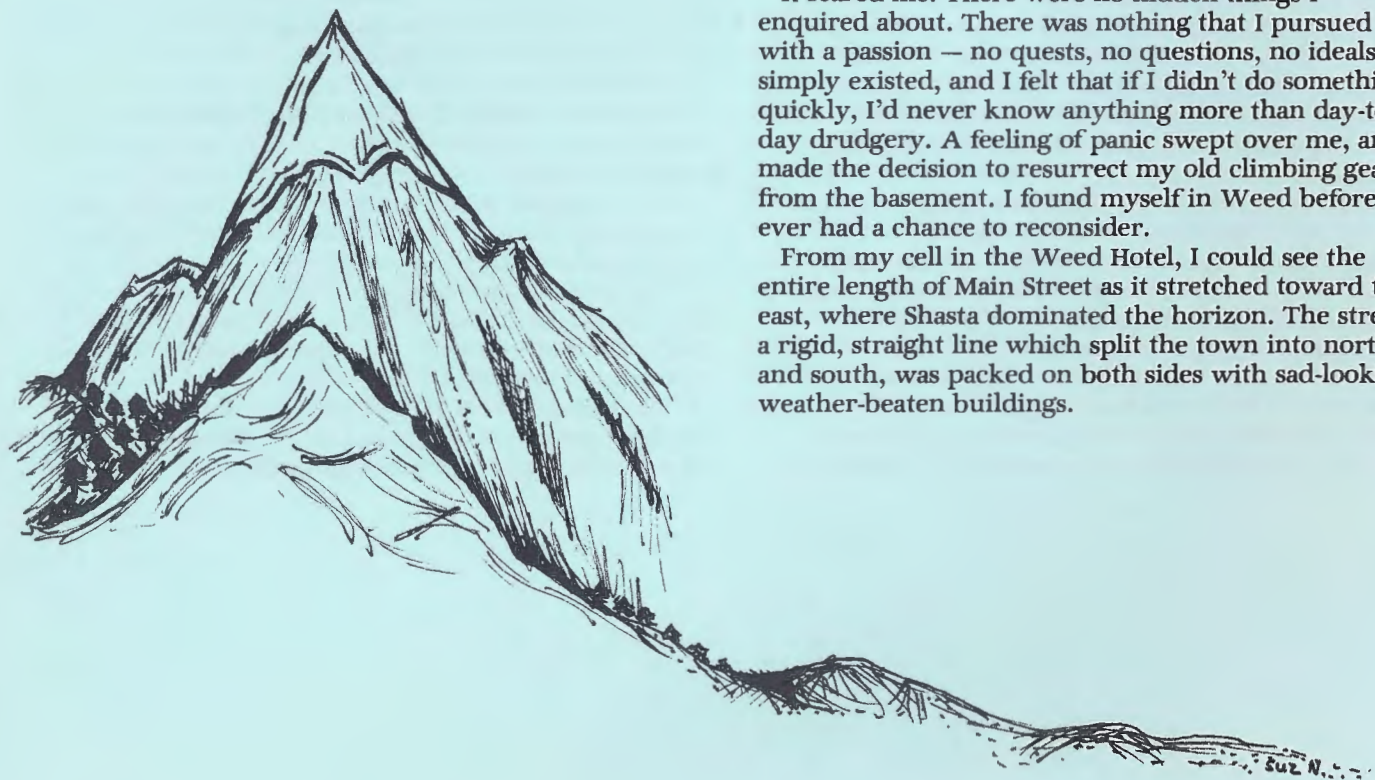
My life had been wretchedly mediocre. I had been a good student, I had a good job, and I lived a good life. Everything was good. Yet, I couldn't escape the feeling that there was something that I had missed. Some question that remained unasked and unanswered; something I hadn't lived, or seen, or understood.

The article in the paper about Namaste increased my feeling of emptiness. There was one quote, especially, that struck me like a slap in the face:

*Try to put into practice what you already know;
in doing so you will in good time, discover the
hidden things which you now inquire about...*

It scared me. There were no hidden things I enquired about. There was nothing that I pursued with a passion — no quests, no questions, no ideals. I simply existed, and I felt that if I didn't do something quickly, I'd never know anything more than day-to-day drudgery. A feeling of panic swept over me, and I made the decision to resurrect my old climbing gear from the basement. I found myself in Weed before I ever had a chance to reconsider.

From my cell in the Weed Hotel, I could see the entire length of Main Street as it stretched toward the east, where Shasta dominated the horizon. The street, a rigid, straight line which split the town into north and south, was packed on both sides with sad-looking, weather-beaten buildings.



"Weed" was a fitting name for the place. It was a bleak, emaciated remnant of a more prosperous past. The town of about 3,000 people was surrounded by hills whose timber had long since been ravished by the lumber companies. The desolate slopes, along with the deserted lumber mill and the seldom-used railroad line, marked Weed as a neglected, misfit of a place.

I felt at home.

Despite the glumness of the scene, the sight of Shasta rising majestically in the east rallied my heart. Perhaps my hopes of finding answers there shaded my perception, but it was one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever seen. There was something disturbing in this beauty, however. Something that was wrong, that was out of place in this gray nowhere.

It was just my imagination, I thought — a side-effect of all those unnamed boogie-men rambling about inside my head. Still slightly puzzled, I decided to go out for dinner. "Why do I always insist on thinking something's wrong," I said aloud as I walked out the door. "The last thing I need is another demon to haunt me." I walked down Main Street, watching Shasta in the distance, and dined under the fluorescent, golden-yellow arches of MacDonald's.

I returned to my room and went to bed early. Gradually, my troubled mind drifted and drifted, revolving around thoughts of Shasta . . . and searching . . . and the peak. Why the peak? Namaste, that's right. Namaste. I'd think of what to ask him during the climb. What's my life missing? I need an answer to . . . Maybe Namaste . . . maybe Namaste . . . maybe . . .

On the next morning, Friday, my quest began. I expected to wake to a choir of angels wishing me Godspeed. Instead, I just seemed to drift out of sleep even before my wrist-watch alarm sounded. That's odd, I thought, I never do that. But it was no use resisting, so I packed my rented car and drove toward the west and Mt. Shasta.

The mountain began like most mountains do, at a slightly pitched incline. People who have never climbed before expect mountains to start dramatically — a vertical wall of granite rising to the clouds. It's not that way at all. A considerable amount of mountain climbing is not climbing at all. It is simply uphill hiking. Expectations, I found, are always dramatic, but reality, being only reality, is usually quite boring.

By 3:00 in the afternoon, I reached a summertime camping lodge, and my body was screaming for rest.

My sedentary job had taken its toll on my physical condition: my lungs were gasping desperately; my legs were leaden with fatigue; and sweat drenched my inner layers of clothing.

I was tired; I longed for the comfort of a fire, a hot meal and a soft bed. That's what I thought as I sheared the padlock off the door with the butt end of my ice-ax. My failing body won all the arguments over the legality of my actions. Within a half hour, I had a blazing fire, dry clothes and a dinner of beef stew and noodles.

Before I could touch my long-awaited meal, there was a muffled knock at the door. A pang of fear bolted across my stomach, but gradually the fear melted into curiosity. I'd looked back often during the climb to check my progress, and had seen nothing but my footprints being slowly erased by the blowing snow. No one could have been following me without my seeing them.

The knock came again.

I rose, and with a glance of longing at my steaming dinner, went to the door and opened it. Standing there, in ankle-deep snow, was a short, fat, red-faced man dressed in a white suit with a white shirt and tie. This pleasant-looking fellow thrust his rounded hand toward me. He looked up, stared me in the eye and said cheerfully: "How do you do. I'm Death."

A chill went through me, not so much because of his odd introduction, but because of the cutting wind blowing in through the open door. Whoever this man was, I let him in before we both froze to death. I quickly shut the door behind him.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"No thanks, that stuff will kill you," he replied.

My curiosity overwhelmed my civility and questions poured out of me.

"Now seriously, who are you?" I said. How did you get up here? Why are you dressed like that? And how come you didn't even look cold?"

"Young man," he said curtly, "I have already introduced myself. Now if you don't mind, I need your spirit. Come along now; I'm a busy man, and I have much more work to do today."

"I don't know what kind of sick joke this is, but if you don't get out of here real fast, you're going to be the one who has to worry about death," I said.

Death smiled condescendingly. "Mr. Finnegan, there's no way to avoid it. Now, if you'll please come this way." He motioned toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed. "My name isn't Finnegan, it's Michaels, Gabriel Michaels." I presented him with my driver's license and social security card. And I realized, to my surprise, that if I was providing my identity to this man, I believed that he was who he claimed to be.

Death unearthed a crumpled piece of paper from his inside jacket pocket. "Oh no," he mumbled to himself, "This is terrible, just terrible." He raised his voice and addressed me.

"Mr. Michaels, I'm afraid I've made a terrible mistake. It seems that I'm on the wrong mountain. If there's anything I can do to make amends . . ."

"Maybe there is," I replied cautiously. "Not that I believe that you're really Death, but just in case, you have been around a bit and should know . . ."

Death nodded, understanding my confusion.

"Why did I leave a comfortable, secure life to climb this mountain? What am I searching for?"

Death paused for a moment and then spoke slowly, with his eyes downcast. "Are you searching Mr. Michaels, or are you running? Men are afraid of dying and never breaking out of their stagnant routines. Searching, Mr Michaels, or just fleeing frantically from a 60-year, nine-to-five burial?"

I didn't know what to say, but there was something in his words that stirred a chord inside me. "Have you ever heard of Namaste?"

"Ah, Namaste," Death replied. "A very wise man. I've done business with him many times." He turned and opened the door. As he disappeared into the twilight, I could hear his final words echoing in the wind: "Ask Namaste how a man can be dead without dying."

My head was pounding as I fell into bed, seeking refuge. "It's too crazy, too bizzare," I thought. "Maybe I just imagined it. That's it, I just imagined it." As I tried to reason with myself, oblivion began to close over me. I relaxed for the comforting world of dreams, but then someone spoke from above my bed.

"I knocked, but no one answered; so I came in," it said.

The voice was so incredibly peaceful and gentle, I wasn't frightened. I think I opened my eyes, and above me — veiled in a mist from my sleep — stood

the figure of a man I'd seen portrayed so often in Bible classes. He had long, dark hair, a beard and was clad in white robe tied at the waist. "Peace be with you, Gabriel," he said.

"And with you," I answered dreamily, "I felt that you were confused, so I came to visit you."

"Thank you," I said, the semi-stupor of sleep crawling over me. "May I ask you a question?"

"I lead a good life and do my job well. Why, then, am I so dissatisfied? Why do I feel such a restlessness inside me?"

"It is a common problem, Gabriel, but a perplexing one nonetheless. Men get so caught up in day-to-day surviving that they forget they have spirits. Surviving just doesn't keep the spirit satisfied. But do not fear, for by your very striving to fill emptiness, you are solving the problem."

I wanted to ask him to explain more, but realizing that I'd only requested one question, I closed my eyes to rest. One doesn't want to try the Lord's patience, I thought. Throughout the night, I kept having the same dream. I saw Christ leaving a flower in the cabin to prove he'd really been there, and I heard him say: "Sometimes the journey can become the journey's end."

Leaving the next morning, I found two flowers on the floor, a white rose and a white violet. "Two visitors, two flowers," I mumbled, not believing the evidence I saw before me. I kicked the flowers into the snow as I left and continued my climb.

Every moment my mind debated the sanity of its owner. "Is all this real or not?" As usual, I had no answers.

I could have only been a few thousand feet from the peak when I pitched my tent and settled in for the night. I'd just nestled into my sleeping bag when I heard footsteps outside. "If this is only a dream," I said to myself, "what does it matter?" I shouted for whomever or whatever it was to come in.

"You ordered a dozen potato knishes?" asked a voice with a slight Yiddish accent.

I turned up my lantern and there, puffing on a cigar and wearing white Bermuda shorts and a flowered shirt, stood Mel Brooks.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, "You're . . ."

"Yeah, I know mistuh. You ordered the knishes?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"What in God's name is a knish?"

He explained that knishes are light, delicious dumplings made from an old Jewish recipe, and stuffed with — in this case — grated potatoes. He was mumbling something about coming all the way from the Lower East Side and not finding the right house when I interrupted.

"Look, I've already had two visits on this climb. If you're another one, let's get down to business."

"Now wait one minute, bub," he admonished. "Is that the way your mother raised you to greet guests? You don't even offer a person a seat or something hot to drink? That's the problem with you seekers of the meaning of life: you take things too seriously."

Humbled, I dispensed with the necessary civilities, apologized for my rudeness and allowed my guest to speak.

"You know, a lot of times people, they fool themselves," he said. "They think they can find the one big answer to every question life has. It ain't there, Gabe. There is no one big answer to why men suffer or die or just fade away without ever making a mark. There's no quick, dramatic solution, but people always think there is. If you ask me, it's because they watch too much television."

"Are you saying that I'm making this journey for nothing?"

"Gabe, Gabe, Gabe. Not at all. Give yourself a break today: try to lighten up. I'm just saying, try not to take yourself too seriously. People who take themselves and their duties too seriously will never learn anything about eternity. Maybe if you stopped asking why, you'd see better."

I was about to ask what I should say to Namaste, when my guest rose, taking his bag with him. "Look," he said. "I got to go before these get cold, but do me a favor, will ya? When you see Namaste ask him if he ordered any potatoe knishes? O.K.?"

With that and a zip-zip of the tent flap, he was gone.

I was baffled. At least the other illusions were more mystic, more serious. But Mel Brooks? This was too crazy.

As my mind tumbled toward darkness, the words of the little Jewish man echoed in my mind: "People who take themselves and their duties too seriously will never learn anything about eternity." The thought lingered with me like the clinging smell of cigar smoke and potato knishes.

When I woke in the morning, I wasn't really surprised to find a bunch of dandelions on top of my sleeping bag. A fitting calling card, I laughed.

On noon of the third day, the mountain stopped rising before me. I had reached the summit. A barren, windswept plain stretched before me and, through the swirling snow, I could make out the silhouette of a small house. I strode forward quickly, exalted by my success and spurred on by the biting cold.

Suddenly, fifty feet from the cottage, the slashing winds stopped. It was like being in the eye of a hurricane. The only sound that interrupted the eerie silence was the creaking of my boots as they crushed the powdered snow.

I raised my snow-crusting goggles and saw what had to be the guru. Quite different from the emaciated old man I had imagined, I beheld a huge, muscular man, sitting naked in the snow, his legs tucked effortlessly under him in a lotus position. He was a giant of a man, who looked more like a professional wrestler than a master who was at one with the universe. Even in his sitting position, he looked six and a half feet tall and easily over 250 pounds. He had long, wavy, dark-brown hair and a burly beard which extended midway down his barrel-like chest.

Perhaps the climb had taken its toll on my mind, but he seemed to be floating above the snow. Not one part of his body sank into the freezing, white blanket. And to each side of him, was a rose bush in full bloom. White roses to his right, red to his left.

His face was devoid of expression, as his clear, blue eyes gazed intently into a wooden crate that rested on its side three feet in front of him.

Before I could speak, his huge, hairy hand shot forward into the box, and I heard a sharp click as he flicked off the portable television set there. "Damn Giants!" he exclaimed. "They can never win an important game."

I was disappointed. "Namaste?" I asked meekly. "Namaste," he answered, as if he were saying hello. then he came out of his trance and spoke.

"You must excuse me. The name 'Namaste' means 'I salute the light within you.' It's my way of getting people to greet my inside as well as my appearance. Yes, I'm Namaste."

"My name is Gabriel Michaels. I've come for help." "I didn't think it was a pleasure trip," he said smiling. "Not in this weather."

As soon as he spoke, the surrounding snowstorm abruptly stopped. The sun slipped out from behind a billowy cloud and bathed us in brilliant sunlight.

"Always trying to make a monkey out of me, aren't you!" Namaste shouted, looking up and shaking his fist at the now-blue sky. Then his smile returned and he looked at me, squinting. "Can I buy you a cup of tea or something?" he asked.

I nodded, too intimidated to speak and I followed him toward the cottage, taking two steps to each of his. I could hear him muttering something about the Giants being a bunch of stone-headed bunglers.

Everything went blank before my eyes; there was a rushing in my ears. It had all happened so quickly. Death, Christ and Mel Brooks. And now a naked guru whom the heavens play tricks on . . . Maybe it's a dream. Maybe I never left my bed in Weed. Maybe . . .

"Come in," Namaste beckoned. His cottage was beautifully furnished in an early American fashion and was adorned with gold wall-to-wall carpeting, walnut paneling, and Rembrandt paintings. It was also wonderfully warm, and as I fumbled out of my snow gear, Namaste put on a knee-length purple robe.

"How did you get all this up here?" I asked.

"It was airlifted in by helicopter, just like all my supplies. Don't look so suprised, Mr. Michaels. I know 'us guys' are supposed to materialize things out of thin air, but where there is the technical skill to move mountains, there is no need for the faith that moves them."

When the tea had brewed, the mystic and I sat in the living room and talked. No magic signs, no thunderbolts from heaven, just easy, flowing conversation with this eloquent hulk of a man.

"Something you said in the papers disturbed me," I said. "That by putting into practice what you already know, you will in good time discover the things you inquire about."

"They are very true words," Namaste replied. "You already have the answers to everything you wonder about."

"That's what bothers me. I may know the answers, but I don't know the questions. My life is an aimless drifting. Nothing more."

"Are you sure, Gabriel?" he asked wryly. "Look where you are. You are on top of the mountain now. If there was nothing you inquired about, you

wouldn't even be here. Don't you see, Gabriel? You inquire about yourself."

We sat talking for hours. Then it happened; he asked the question I hoped he would forget about. "Is there anything you wish to ask me?"

I panicked slightly. I still didn't have a question and, by now, the various counsel offered by my three visitors seemed absurd dreams. I didn't want to chance asking the master a question out of my hallucinations, and having him beat me to a bloody pulp. I decided to present my own case.

"Until now, my life had just been a series of unthinking daily rituals," I said. "Repetition and no growth, it wasn't even enough to be called life; it was more like death . . . a kind of death you just comfortably settle into without . . . actually . . . dying." That was odd, I thought. Death's words seemed to be coming from my mouth.

"Right now I feel more alive than I have in years. It's as though the journey itself did what I expected from the journey's end. There's a kind of fulfillment that comes just by striving for something, anything."

My feeling of panic grew. Even if I decided to use the thoughts of Death or Christ, I had already talked about them. All this way and nothing to ask. Luckily,



Namaste took over the conversation. He spoke slowly, summing up what I had said much more eloquently. He spoke softly, with great thought.

"Man's every action implies the choice between life and death, by fossilizing and falling into a repetitious existence. Before you came here, you hadn't made that choice and your life seemed without direction.

"But just by making this journey, you have answered the question of life and death. You have chosen life."

"You mean I did it by myself," I said, groping for understanding. "Without you?"

"Exactly," he replied. "Modern man is very object oriented. He needs something concrete to strive for — like me, your friendly neighborhood guru. But he must rediscover his spirit and he must choose life for himself, because no one else can breathe it into him.

"But Gabriel," he added, "you still haven't asked me anything." There was silence. Total and complete. It was as if the universe was waiting to make a judgement on my quest. And without thinking, the words tumbled out of my mouth before I could catch them.

"Did you order any potato knishes?"

Namaste gasped. His eyes bulged, his face flushed and the veins in his temples stuck out. He leaned forward staring at me as though there was a fury raging inside him. Oh God, I thought, this is it: the end of my life.

Then the guru's face broke into a brilliant, sunburst of a smile. "You did it!" he bellowed with a roar that must have shaken the mountaintop. He leapt from the couch, upsetting the coffee table. But he nimbly jumped over the obstacle and started to do a victory dance with arms upraised.

"You did it! You have learned that you must live first and philosophise later." He spoke quickly, as if trying to say all his words at once. "And that you should have some fun along the way."

"In order to live, men must go beyond what they are. It is the constant striving for growth and for feeling that makes men free. We know that, Gabriel, you and I. We know that."

Namaste invited me to stay for the evening, an offer which I gladly accepted. I slept a deep, black sleep that night, for there were no demons left to haunt my dream.

Early the next morning, I left the peak. As I walked away from the house, Namaste shouted his final blessing to me: "If you see that little hasterd with the cigar, tell him he had better not bring me cold knishes!"

My mind was reeling with such ecstasy that I remember nothing of my descent. It was like falling in slow motion through a cloud. And I remember hearing a dull buzzing. The buzzing grew clearer and clearer, until I opened my eyes and realized that it was my wrist watch alarm. I switched off the alarm and stared at the watch in disbelief. It was 8:00 Friday morning, the morning I was to begin my quest.

"I don't believe it," I said, realizing what had happened "It was only a . . ."

My thought was stopped by the ringing telephone. I rolled over toward the ringing nuisance, suprised to find that every muscle in my body was sore.

"Hello," I said groggy with sleep.

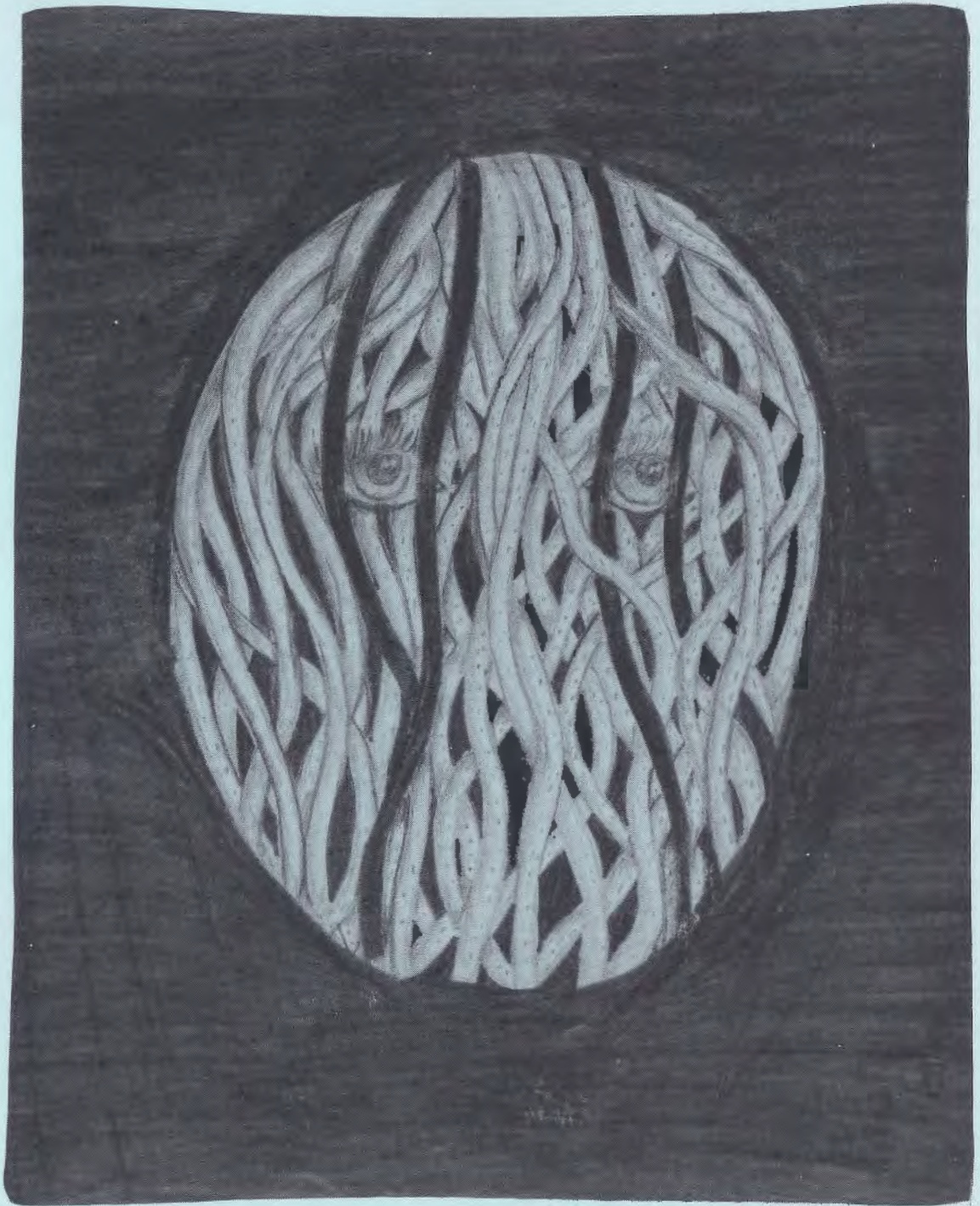
"Gabe! Gabe! I was so worried about you." It was Kate, my fiancee. "This is so unlike you, to run off like this. Are you all right?"

"Yes dear, I'm fine . . . I just had the strangest dream. Kate . . . Kate! listen to me. I'm going to stay here in Weed for another week. I'm going to write a story about a guru." I felt something cool beneath my left leg, and reached down to see what it was.

"Gabe are you crazy? You're not a writer. You're a level-headed accountant . . ." I cut her off.

"Listen Kate. I know what I'm doing. By the way," I said, twirling the half-wilted dandelion between my fingers, "You don't happen to have a recipe for potato knishes, do you?"





Pencil by Leigh Rader