

Forever People: Second Chance

– by Nathaniel H. Botwinik

CHAPTER 1: The Story of My Life

"Love enables us to perceive what others cannot"

Hi. My name is David – David Green – and I have a question for you:

– Did you ever get that feeling that you're invisible and no one pays any attention to you? Well, with me, it's for real !!!

In order to understand what this means, I need to tell you about my life, about what's happened to me as far back as I can remember.

So, how did it all start?

About 23 years ago, my mum, Elena, was studying in the History department of St. Peter's College, Oxford, in England. She was a student of Professor Steven Monroe, who taught courses on tribal cultures around the world, and particularly that of the North American Indians – the Amerindians. She was his top student in those days, and no one came close to her level of knowledge and skills – due, possibly, to her stubbornness, or to her nerve. In any case, she was the best student in her field in England, and probably all of Europe.

Thanks to that, Professor Monroe helped her get a scholarship to travel to America to do some research on the Indian tribes there. For about three months, she worked hard, spending most of her time interviewing people, visiting museums, travelling to various sites – from the eastern Atlantic coast all the way across America to the Pacific coast. After spending so many months of intensive work, she felt the need to wind down (who wouldn't ...) and what better place than in Las Vegas?

As Mum tells it, after unpacking her travel bags at the hotel, she went downstairs to the bar for a drink. A guy came up to her and introduced himself as an American football player from California. He invited her to join him for a drink, and the following morning, when they woke up, they discovered that they were married!

So, contrary to the well-known saying, not everything that happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Only after their marriage, did she start to get to know him better and to see if Fate had really hooked her up with the man of her dreams. At first, she refused to live with him, since she didn't really know him. After about two months of acquaintanceship that included their first real date and then more (picnic in the park, a movie, and so forth), and after meeting his family and introducing him to hers, she decided to stay wedded to him.

She always used to say that he was different from other boys she'd dated. Maybe because he was American, or maybe because he **was** different, He wasn't what we English would call a gentleman.

He couldn't stand tea, and hated "soccer" that he equated to an inferior form of American Football. It was no surprise that Grandpa couldn't tolerate him.

Of course staying in the US, far from her family and everything she knew, was not an option. I must underscore, that Mum could be a very persuasive person. She convinced her newly acquired husband, Ben, to leave the US and to join her in London. Thus, about a year and a half before I was born, Ben and my mum were living there, and already had two kids.

My mother's father, Grandpa, was a respected socialite involved in the field of history; in archaeology, to be precise. The various artifacts he'd discovered can be found in museums across Europe (the next time you visit an ancient archaeology exhibit at a museum, look for the name plate "*Discovered by Professor Jacob Brown*").

One day, Grandpa invited her to join him and Grandma at the annual costume ball that they held at one of their estates. This time, after many years of Italian-themed events, the fancy affair was held at their villa in the city of Bath.

When she arrived, Grandpa was already waiting for her at the entrance, and when they entered the main hall, he began introducing her to his various acquaintances, as well as to potential mates, hoping against hope, that she might leave her current husband for someone "more worthy" (as I mentioned, Grandpa didn't particularly like this son-in-law that came from overseas, from the "Colonies", and was just an American Football player – had he at least been a Rugby player...). And so it went, throughout the evening, that Grandpa sought out every opportunity to try and set Mum up with some son of a friend of his. However, the more he tried to set her up with "someone from the respectable circle" – as he referred to them – the more she tried to distance herself from him.

As the evening progressed, Mum realized that regardless of her father's behaviour, he nevertheless did her a favor in trying to match her up with one of the sons of his friends.

Mum decided to dance by herself on the dance floor, but she was soon accosted by Baron Mikhael Zhukermann. He was very coarse in his attempts to dance with her, and made such crude remarks, that she preferred returning to Grandpa, and practically begged him to reintroduce her to his friends' sons, if only to shake off this person who was bothering her.

Everything seemed to be going well as long as she was in the company of her father's friends or their sons, when towards the end of the evening, she sensed that she was being observed and even followed around.

Her feeling was justified, when she noticed that there was a man dressed up as a pirate who was paying her particular attention while she danced with one of her father's potential "marriage mates". Out of curiosity, she excused herself from her current dancing partner and decided to confront the man, to find out who he was, and what his intentions were. When she neared him, it was he who spoke up first.

He first doffed his hat and bowed before her. Although with similar gestures as Baron Mikhael, the manner in which he performed it was so charming that her curiosity was piqued, and this also stopped her from accosting him. Seeing that she was not put off by him, and seemed to be willing to

be cooperative – a not so simple feat, considering that her face was mostly covered by an elaborate Venetian mask – he asked her if she was Elena Brown.

– "Yes," she answered, "it is I, only I'm married now, and go by the name of Green... Why?"

– "I have a message for you from Professor Monroe," he continued.

– "Oh, ... Professor Monroe! I haven't heard from him in almost five years. How is he? Where did he disappear to for such a long ti..."

– "Shhh... Not so loud. Be quiet, they'll hear you." He said, looking around, as he took her aside, handed her an envelope, and whispered to her, "Don't open it until you get home, and make sure no one sees that you've got this."

Mum stuck it immediately into her handbag. The messenger surreptitiously left the gathering, and Mum decided to enjoy the evening, rather than to begin asking herself questions, knowing that the letter came from Professor Monroe.

Her mind was begging to know what the contents of the letter were, but she showed restraint for the rest of the evening, since someone might be after the letter. When she got back home, the first thing she did was to go to the lavatory, take the letter out of her handbag and open it.

My Dearest Elena,

It has been a while since we've seen each other. I have been busy with my research.

I've recently come across some fascinating findings that may be of interest to you. I would like to invite you to a meeting where I can share this information with you.

Please be so kind as to come to flat 13, 237 Gloucester Road (3rd floor), on the 3rd of March, at 22:30.

So that you know that this message is authentic and comes from me, permit me to remind you of the following:

My grandmother's wine bottle.

Professor Steven Monroe

PS: Make sure you are not followed. This is important.

When she had finished reading the letter, she promptly placed it inside her jewelry box and went to sleep with a broad smile, fondly remembering Professor Monroe's grandmother's wine bottle.

Mum didn't tell Ben about the letter or about the meeting with the professor, until that very Tuesday evening, and only a few hours before the intended meeting time – and that he would have to watch the kids until she came back. Yes, she was always manipulative.

– "You surely remember my professor, Steven Monroe? You know – the one who sent me to America to do the research – and thanks to whom we met? Well, apparently, he's discovered something important, and I must go to see him at this meeting tonight, two hours from now – to be exact." she said before leaving.

She arrived at the flat about 10 minutes late, and before she could knock on the door, it opened. She peeked inside, saw Professor Monroe at the far end of the room, and so entered. He saw her, and waved Hello.

There were about 15 people in the room, and amongst them two that she recognized from the university. Professor Monroe approached her, and then introduced her in front of everyone. He then asked of one of those present to explain the reason everyone was gathered here tonight, and about the planned expedition.

The woman began:

– "My name is Michelle Zhukermann. I won't be participating in the expedition, but as head of the Cultural Development department in my family's company "Chance", I was invited to say a few words.

As you all know, you've been called here together, because each and every one of you has something to contribute to this expedition: from skilled archaeologists, to brilliant historians. Our company will be sponsoring this venture in order to research an ancient Indian tribe that was previously unknown to us.

The tribe is very different in its behaviour and characteristics, from all other tribes in the region.

The tribe is very small in number, highly nomadic, and shies away from all contact with other tribes – this is one of the reasons it had until recently remained undetected. We therefore have great need of your analytic and other skill sets to track down the remnants of this tribe.

We've asked you to join us tonight, so you could meet and get to know your colleagues, and to make the final arrangements for the expedition which – I must remind you – will be leaving this coming Monday, exactly 6 days from now.

It is my pleasure, at this time, to invite each of you to come up to the podium, and introduce yourself to the other members of the expedition. Thank you."

After all those attending completed their introductions, the woman returned to her place in front of everyone, and resumed talking:

– "As has been mentioned in previous face-to-face meetings with the organizers, the expedition to the US will be leaving this coming Monday, and is expected to last between one and two months. The remuneration that is offered by our company will be 12,500 pounds for the first month, and should any of us need to stay longer, you will be sponsored at a rate of 15,000 pounds per month. If there are no other questions, then you are free to go, and our staff will contact you for any last minute

issues concerning the flight arrangements and equipment requirements, and of course for any other problem."

As the expedition members dispersed, and the last of those who helped clean up left, my mum approached Professor Monroe (who was still surrounded by some people), to clear up certain details of the planned expedition that until now she had no prior knowledge of.

– "I have a question, Steven." She said.

– "Yes?"

– "Why is everyone so secretive, and why was I informed only now? It seemed to me that nearly everyone has known of this expedition for some time."

– "Excuse me please," he said to the others and moved closer to Mum.

– "My dear Elena, the answer to the two questions is basically one and the same: There was another person who was supposed to be with us on this expedition... but can no longer join us. We believe someone has been trying to sabotage the venture. Therefore, as far as anyone knows (including the Foreign Office), the expedition that was due to leave in two months' time, and has been indefinitely postponed... is in fact leaving in less than a week's time," he whispered to her.

– "From what you are saying, Steven, you've been planning this for a while, so why am I finding out about this only at the last minute? Don't you trust me – after everything we've been through together? Were you maybe trying to recruit someone else? You know I'm the best at what I do... I even assisted you in acquiring the Wolfson History prize! Why without me you would be ..."

At this point, my mum was starting to get all heated up. It was a good thing that by this time, everyone had left. Professor Monroe held up his hand, looked around to see that indeed the room was clear of the others, and with his well known 'professor-knows-best' smile that Elena knew so well from her years of work and study together, he managed to calm her down.

– "My dearest, dearest Elena, of course I know you are the best – in all your skills. You must believe me, when I say that you were the first on my list. However, knowing your present family situation – you have two small children, as I understand – late congratulations, I suspect are still in order – and there was the delicate issue that the person who you are replacing was ... er... is a company employee – and I couldn't go against company policy, now could I? Well, the fact of the matter was that when the possibility of there being even the slightest inkling of any danger came up ..."

– "Since when has 'danger' been an issue?" my mum interrupted the good professor.

– "Hrmp.. Now don't interrupt... and no, I haven't forgotten that adventure we had in North Africa, years ago – but you are now the mother of two... in any case, ... the Company insisted I find a replacement as soon as possible, since the person you are replacing ... left us ... just two weeks' ago, and it took us a while to track you down, now that you go by your married name "Green", ... and we didn't want to contact my old colleague, your father Professor Brown... but look at you. You look well,... and here you are, aren't you? So, will you join us, Elena?"

Mum was both excited and angry at the same time. On the one hand, she was a loving mother. On the other hand – a mature university alumnaus highly credited for her work, and surely not to be called as a last resort. However, she swallowed her pride, quelled her anger, and said:

– "Professor, this is the most exciting news I've heard since I began my studies of Ancient Indian lore and tribes. Of course I'd jump at this chance, but I need a few days to get my things in order at the University – and of course, I need my husband's approval."

– "Don't you trouble yourself, my dear. I still have some influence at the University – and the Company has its means too. Just make sure to pamper your husband with a good meal before you speak to him. Please let me know tomorrow how it went. It was good seeing you today Elena, and I do so hope that you will be joining us..."

And with that, he led Mum to the door, and she walked down the three flights of stairs with her head in the clouds, thinking of the possibilities of the undiscovered secrets of this mysterious Indian tribe. By the time she reached the street level, however, her head had cleared, and she began planning how to convince Ben to allow her to go on this esoteric expedition for a month or two, – and leave him alone with two tiny children.

When Mum got back home, she acted like she was quite upset.

– "Ben, I'm home," she said, as she entered the bedroom. "I'm just going to make myself a cup of coffee, and I'm coming."

The following morning, Ben woke her up earlier than usual and tried to talk to her about what happened the previous evening; but she didn't want to discuss it, and asked him to leave her be until the afternoon, so she could get her thoughts organized, and then they would talk.

Mum left for work and Ben, who understood that something was wrong, came to visit her at the university.

– "Elena, I brought you something to eat. You forgot your lunch on the kitchen counter."

– "Thank you Ben, I just don't know how to tell you what I need to tell you."

– "Just spill it. You know I won't judge you."

– "Well, it's like this. Last night, Monroe asked me to join his expedition to the US. Something like what I did during the period when I first met you, but much bigger – with a team of experts and a large investment of money."

– "Yes..."

– "I daren't miss out on an opportunity like this!"

– "OK. We'll set everything up for your trip. When are you leaving?"

– "In five days."

– "Kinda short notice... For how long, this time?"

– "A month, maybe two."

Ben bit his lower lip.

– "It's a lot of money. 12,500 Pounds Sterling, and another 15,000 for each additional month."

– "Elena, I's like to say YES, but I can't. John and Melanie need you here."

– "OK, Ben. We'll talk about it later. I have work to do."

Ben understood that something about this expedition was worrying her, and he tried to find out how important it was to her. When he got home, he went through the various electricity and other bills and expenses, and checked his bank balance. When he next spoke to her, he had made his decision.

– "OK, we'll join you. We'll stay with my parents in Los Angeles, so at least we won't be too far from you."

– "No, Ben. We don't have any money to waste, and John needs his kindergarten friends. Even then, I don't think I would be able to see you if you were in LA. I need to travel alone."

– "I hate it when you're right. And I hate it, that I need to agree with you to go, but I also know how important this is to you. I wouldn't dream of preventing you from going."

– "Thanks, Ben. I knew you would understand. Now we have to make arrangements for the children."

– "Maybe I can ask Shelly? The kids like her, and her rate's reasonable."

– "I don't know anymore. How can I abandon them? I barely see them as it is and usually end up reading John his bedtime story over the phone."

– "Elena, don't worry. I'm here. It's only for a month. Tops – two."

– "What can go wrong in a month?" he said, and continued with a smile. "Besides, if I have any problem, I can always ask your pop for help..."

– "Yeah! Right..." Mum said, and they had a good laugh, kissed and went to bed.

The following morning, Mum phoned Professor Monroe and told him the good news. For the next few days, Mum began preparing John and Melanie – my older siblings – for her leaving them for a while:

– "My little darlings! Mummy is going on a trip tomorrow and will be leaving you, but will return very soon. Mummy has some important work that is going to take her very far away, – but only for a

short time. Daddy and your favorite babysitter Shelly will be here for you the whole time I'm gone. I'll be back as soon as I can. And I'll try to call you on the telephone every chance I get."

Most likely, Melanie who had just turned two, didn't understand what Mum was talking about, but John who was already five, seemed to catch on quick enough, having already experienced long hours of his mother's absence, when she would sometimes leave very early and maybe come home very late, but talk to him on the phone. Even so, when Mum saw his reaction, she began to be less sure of her decision to travel.

Here again, Ben intervened. When he saw Mum begin to have second thoughts and doubts about leaving her small kids – even for the relatively short period – he again calmed her down and again encouraged her to go on the expedition.

– "Don't worry. Be happy," he said with a smile and a quick wink, and gave her another big hug. "I'll take care of everything." He repeated his promise.

When the day of the trip arrived, Mum was all packed and ready. The cab waited for her outside. Mum gave Ben some last minute instructions and hugged and kissed her little ones:

– "My little heroes!" she said. "Mummy is going now, but only for a month – and then I'll be right back."

Holding in her tears, she quickly dragged her bags to the waiting mini-cab, told the driver what to put in the boot, and what she wanted to keep at hand, and climbed into the back seat. She waved to the three of them good-bye as the automobile moved off.

– "Out of sight, out of mind," she felt. The sooner she would immerse herself in expedition matters, the sooner that would take her mind off of the guilt pangs for abandoning her husband and two small children... "No," she thought to herself, "Ben would know what to do. He'd take care of everything and there was nothing to worry about."

When she got to the airport, she found the others already waiting for her on board the company's private jet. She was the last one to board, and only then learnt the name of the company – from the name and logo painted just under the plane's cockpit. It said "Chance" in bright, bold, blue lettering within a gold frame, and on the plane's black fuselage.

The total flying time was close to 14 hours. They'd managed to buy some energy bar snacks that barely satisfied their hunger – the Company had neglected to inform them that there would be no meals during the flight.

The plane landed on a dusty sand-strewn airstrip in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in the Arizona desert. It was a miracle that the pilot found the landing strip that was mostly covered by the desert sand. When they disembarked, they were all bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, and partly blinded by the bright sun and the whiteness and bleakness of the drylands around. In the distance, they could just make out a line of hills.

When everyone had gotten off the plane, they were sure that they had landed in the wrong place. There was nothing but emptiness and sand, and more sand, all around. There were no cactuses,

sagebrush or even tumbleweeds to be seen – everything was barren. When they shielded their eyes from the blazing sunshine, they barely discerned a broken down old shack at the end of the landing strip. They walked over to explore it, but there was nothing to see. Professor Monroe looked like he was about to throttle the pilot for bringing them to this forsaken place, when they suddenly heard a voice from a distance:

– "Bozos ! ..."

They looked about, but they saw nothing. The voice, however, got louder, until they could make out the strange American accent.

– "Yeah, youse guys. Ah ain't squat'n 'round all day! Ah'm o'er 'ere...".

Everyone turned about, and the professor nearly jumped for joy when he saw the bus beyond and behind the airplane. No one had thought to look in that direction, or maybe the bus had just pulled up. In any case, everyone was relieved that their ride had arrived and they wouldn't have to wait any longer under the blazing sun. Within minutes they gathered their stuff and boarded what seemed like some bombed out bus from a WWII movie set.

No one complained the entire long bumpy ride. They were either already hardened from the plane trip, or just too tired to complain. The excitement of having arrived took their minds off the discomforts. They seemed oblivious to the fact that the air-conditioning was not functioning in the stifling Arizona heat (there weren't even any windows in the vehicle). The late afternoon's blistering heat, the sand and the dust all over everyone just added to the sensation, that this must have been how it was in the old horse-driven stages of those brave individuals pioneering the American West...

The group finally arrived at a sort of field-camp of about 10 large tents that the previous team that had arrived here three weeks earlier had set up. Some of them were still about, and they came over to greet the newcomers and assist in unloading the bus. Most of the others had left two days earlier in order to free up the space for the new team.

Although they were all exhausted, sweaty and dirty, and wanted nothing more than to clean up, grab a snack, and get some much needed sleep, Professor Monroe wasted no time and gathered everyone together. He introduced the two teams to each other, and briefly explained the schedule of the next few days. Only then did he free them to go off to find themselves a place to unpack and bed down.

The lineup for the showers meant nothing to Mum. Being the sole female in the lot, she pushed her way ahead of the queue, and everyone had to wait outside for her to finish cleaning up, even though there were maybe 10 empty shower stalls in all.

The next day, everyone was up at practically day-break. You could have felt the charge of excitement in the air. Professor Monroe directed their attention to the west. There, he said, the first team had already tracked down some signs of the ancient tribe known as the "Tribe of the Disappearing Indians" (or "Vanishing Indians"). According to the information that had been gathered so far, the tribe believed in an ancient legend about a Spirit-God called "Dalonigah" (apparently 'Shadow' in their language).

According to his understanding, the spirit would pass over all of the tribe members on a certain Day of Judgment. It would then mete out punishment to the unworthy and unjust., and restore the stolen or lost properties of any tribe member, and according to the stories and legends of other tribes – the spirit would also restore Truth and Justice to the world.

Professor Monroe told the gathering that in the early days of his own career, when he had began his studies of ancient cultures, he himself had once interviewed a very old Indian who claimed to have once been of the tribe, but had abandoned it for the pleasure-traps of the modern world. This man, he said, told many fantastic and unbelievable stories that could not at the time be verified.

He had repeated the legend of the "Dalongah", but with many more fantastic details. He had recounted the various customs of the tribe, and told of how all the tribe members wore a turquoise talisman. The more superior or perfect the quality of the stone was, the greater the knowledge and intelligence of the wearer. These were the tribe members of note – the ones to seek out, he had said. These were the ones with the ancient knowledge – with the answers.

It was unclear, at the time, the professor noted, to what the so-called answers would lead. With the passing of the years, and with more concrete research in Egyptology and other cultures, the professor had categorized these stories as those of an eccentric or demented old man, and had all but forgotten about him and his tall tales. Recent findings, however, seemed to reinforce the claims of the old Indian who had long since passed away. Here was a golden opportunity to follow a fresh trail, and restudy the fantastic tales in a new light.

When the Professor finished his lecture about these old legends, one of the team asked a very important question about an issue that seemed to have slipped by unnoticed.

– "Professor? A question, if I may be so bold?" he began.

Rising to his tip-toes to see who it was in the team, he finally noticed a smallish man also on his tip-toes, standing in the back.

– "Yes, please, Mr. Wallace. Go ahead. That is, in fact, why we are gathered here: To question, to explore, to discover..." answered the professor, just as his strength in standing tip-toe gave out, and so he gestured with his hand for him to continue.

– "The tales do indeed seem quite fantastic. But the tribe's name: "The Disappearing Indians" – what is its significance? Why were they named so? What does it purport?"

– "Ah yes. Quite! Good that you should ask. This may be one of the great mysteries of all time – and we are at the edge of fathoming its import... The tribe is named so, because of a special and unique trait. They seem to have a strange way of setting up their homes. They would arrive somewhere, build habitats of stable and long-standing construction – solid constructs, cabins, huts, etc. Once completed – in about one year's time, they would pack up and vanish overnight – abandoning everything but their most personal belongings... as if marking their passage."

The professor paused, partly for effect, but most likely because the mystery excited him too, and then continued:

– "In a short time, they are discovered to be somewhere else on the continent, rebuilding, resettling, and then again disappearing within the year – or so the legend goes. Surely something to look into, since this phenomenal and strange mannerism is unheard of amongst nomadic tribes who would normally set up temporary camps and then gather just about everything up and transport it with them – generally leaving no sign of their passing. This is completely unheard of, outstanding, and a mystery in and of itself!"

After listening to the strange tales of Professor Monroe, Mum was sure that the man had fallen off his horse. However, her doubts aside, she was willing to stay the course and seek out answers to these strangest of mysteries that the expedition had been organized to solve – or at least to gather more data.

After several days of travelling about and studying the surrounding areas and settlements (this was an area where various newer and older Indian tribes had settled, and some were still around, dispersed in a wide but concentrated area of about 20 square miles), some prospective leads were picked up by members of the team. The professor then hand-picked several smaller core-teams and sent each to go out and see if they had indeed rediscovered the hidden trail, and my mum was in one of them together with three others.

After about three hours of back-breaking riding on their pack-horses (they were following trails into low hills that were virtually impassable for motorized vehicles), Mum's team finally came upon a tiny and isolated Indian village whose contours, setting, and folk seemed to have jumped out of mum's textbooks. They all seemed to be traditionally dressed (according to the descriptions provided by Professor Monroe's mysterious Indian who had long since passed away). And although, the clothing and styles were evidently different from those of other tribes in the area – they were not significantly different enough to make them stand out as 'special'. None of them, for example, seemed to be wearing a tell-tale turquoise brooch, pendant, or necklace.

At first, Mum thought that maybe only the males – or females – were thus bejeweled, and so she first walked among the men, and then among the women to try and discover if they were so adorned. Nothing. In fact, the strange thing was that the members of the tribe practically ignored her. Ironically, Mum suddenly felt invisible among them...

When she mentioned this to the other three members of her core group, they all laughed at her. However, like her, after several hours of walking about, even trying to communicate with the tribespeople – nothing was achieved. Was it possible, then, that they only wore the adornments during certain hours, or special occasions or ceremonies? Then they may never discover if this was the right tribe. Who knew when such an occasion might arrive...? Such being the case, the probability of discovering the tribe were practically nil.

Everything seemed to be for naught. No Indian spoke to them. However, upon further study – and totally by chance, my mum finally discovered where the turquoise stones were being hidden – or not. The singular stones were not pendants, necklaces, hairpins or hair combs, nor brooches or foot or hand bracelets, nor rings... Upon lengthy study, Mum discovered that young and old, male and female – even the tiniest tot, was belted with either a simple sash or a flat leather belt, and the clasp was a bronze metal band set with a turquoise stone!

The stones were not being hidden on purpose. The Indians were either bent over in their tasks, or sitting, or their shirts may have been covering the belts – no one had really looked around their waists to discover this until now! Had they not stayed around long enough to search for the illusive stone, the team would never have known that this was in fact the tribe they were seeking.

Communicating with the tribesmen was no small feat. In fact, it took quite a bit of effort. The Indians were generally gruff and non-responsive, – but eventually Mum's stubbornness was greater than theirs, and she managed to get some of them to begin communicating with her – if only with face and hand gestures. Some gifts and artifacts were exchanged. The Indians did not seem to know what money was, but the exchanging of trinkets and such (some of the trinkets were actually bought from other neighbouring tribes) seemed to do the trick. Mum thought it fascinating, and was having the time of her life. She felt that she was reliving the first interactions between the native Indians and the early British explorers who discovered North America and began communicating with the natives by exchanging gifts and wares.

Suddenly, one of the team members came running up to her. It was Taylor, a very tall, blond, gangly fellow she knew from the University. He was huffing and puffing – not used to physical strain. His specialty: ancient writings, alphabets, hieroglyphics; in short, just about anything dealing with living and dead languages.

– "There you are, Elena. I've been running myself ragged, looking all over for you!" He paused a long moment to catch his breath, and then continued. "The Professor said, that if I find anything of particular interest I should show you first – if he's not around. That you're the lead specialist."

– "What is it?" Mum asked.

– "Come on. You must see this. It's unbelievable – or a great hoax!"

He led her to the far side of the village, to what seemed a more prominent and better kept lodging, with a stone plate over the door, inscribed with two rows of strange markings.

– "Do you know what it says?" she asked.

– "Well at first, it was difficult to understand, since I was studying it from left to right, but then, it hit me I should try right to left like when I was a boy studying Hebrew for my Bar-Mitzvah."

– "Funny, you don't look Jewish..." Mum said.

– "I get that a lot... anyway, even right to left didn't seem correct, until it hit me – it was an amalgam of several different symbols used by various tribes across the continent – a little bit from everyone's alphabet, per se!"

– "Well, can you figure it out?"

– "I think so – but you won't believe me if I tell you... First, you have to understand that as tall as I am, I still can't quite get real close to the sign – but what I can make of it is, it seems quite ancient, – and the carving in the stone seems so too – from the way the characters have been etched, and the

otherwise sharp edges seem wind-worn – which could only occur over a rather long time." He paused and looked at Mum with a strange look, then continued.

– "Now, get ready for this: The top line says the equivalent of "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility" (believe it or not – I've only seen this in comic books... but the one below it – and I've only seen it in Jewish temples of worship (in synagogues). I've never come across anything like it anywhere else in all my research and studies ... it says the equivalent of "Know Before Whom You Stand". In the Jewish religion – that you stand before God Almighty! Sends chills up and down me, it does..."

– "OK..." Mum said, equally fascinated, "I think we're off to a great start! Let's go back to report, and we'll recommend the Professor to move our base camp closer to here tomorrow."

The first days, the expedition members spent many long hours studying every facet of life in the village, among the young, and among the old – particularly the clothing, tools, artifacts. They took extensive notes, writing in their notepads, photographed, and filmed and recorded the few mutterings they could get from the mostly impassive natives. The only thing that seemed to spark any manner of interest was the trading of the trinkets in exchange for the tribe's artifacts.

Mum's thoughts, however, concentrated on something else. As everyone's eyes were pointing downward, so to speak, her sights were aimed higher. There was a very tall totem pole in the center of the village that caught her eyes. After a cursory study and a few photo-takes by the others, everyone just about lost interest in it. Everyone but Mum.

The pole was apparently carved out of one single chunk of dark wood, and looked very ancient, didn't seem to belong with the other woodwork seen in the village. So much so, that Mum suspected that it was of a type of wood not native to the area. To be sure, she discussed this with one of the team – the short Wallace, whose expertise covered the area of tools and artifacts. After some closer study, he came to the same conclusion as my mother: that the Totem pole didn't seem to belong to the region.

The totem itself was carved up into seven distinct figures: At the very bottom, what looked like a human skull; above that, a human-looking face, but whose left cheek had a round sun symbol, and on whose right cheek there was a moon; this was followed by what looked like a dog's head; above this, and about half-way up, was a large owl's head, whose eye sockets were actually hollowed out, and you could see clear to the other side of the totem through them; on top of the owl was a quite terrifying figure of what looked like a wolf, but it was difficult to make out exactly, because it had been carved with its muzzle wide open with many sharp teeth; the very top of the totem was the figure of a bird – possibly an eagle, or a hawk – with widespread wings.

As mentioned, there were seven figures carved into the pole. The final figure was that of a snake that twisted around the entire pole – bottom to top. It began from the mouth of the skull at the bottom, up round and round until its teeth sank into one of the bird's wings, up on top.

After a good breakfast, and a short planning period of the day's activities with the other team members, Mum's first activity was to go back and study the totem. She spread some sun-block cream over herself, put on her wide brimmed sun hat, and walked about the pole under the hot sun, studying it from all angles. She did this day after day, again and again, round and round... and then suddenly,

one morning, she was surprised to spy a tiny face of a young man springing out at her from one of the owl's hollowed out eye sockets.

It took her a few seconds to gather her wits, and upon closer examination, she realized that it was someone standing on the other side, looking at her. When she went around the back, there was no one there. She looked back at the totem – and there it was again – that mysterious face, so she ran back around again to where she was before – again nothing. No one, and yet again – through the Owl's eye she saw the same young face looking at her. This time, however, she made no move to run around. Instead, she abruptly bent, and sat down on the ground, legs crossed in the same position as she saw many of the natives do when they sat on the ground.

After a moment, a young man sauntered around with a mischievous grin that was immediately wiped off his face when, surprised, he saw Mum sitting Indian-style with legs crossed, waiting for him to appear.

With triumph on her face, she got up and faced him, but not before noticing that he wore a beautiful feathered headdress whose headband had several small turquoise stones woven into it. A quick count said seven – whereupon Mum's eyebrow raised (or so I imagine it, because it would always happen when she discovered something particularly curious).

From the regular evening debriefings, Mum figured that this was a totally new person that no one from the team had yet encountered. She needed to communicate with him at any cost. She attempted various key words from several major Indian dialects she had picked up in her studies, but he quickly brushed it off. In the end, however, he astounded my mum with his vast knowledge of English.

– "Don't bother – We speak a totally different language. Nothing like that of those other Indians, but we all know English. You can call me Yoyetsaswey-Wahaya-Ey Laughing Wolf, and by the way it's actually been fun for us to observe you. You're funny people – from the United Kingdom, correct?"

– "You mean, that all this time all of you understood, and just sat there staring at us, quietly laughing at us, behind our backs?"

The fellow, Laughing Wolf, just nodded and said: "We were observing you, trying to understand what you wanted, studying your speech, your clothes, etc." and he continued staring at Mum, trying to see how she would react.

For her part, Mum was wonderful – one of a kind. Instead of blowing up with anger at the wasted days, she thought this so funny, that she doubled up in loud hysterical laughter ("... nearly peed in my pants..." – she would add, whenever she told me the story).

At that moment, some of the nearest members of the team came running when they heard the commotion. They found Mum writhing on the ground and clutching her sides having difficulty breathing. They thought: from pain – and that the young man had hurt her.

They were about to jump Laughing Wolf when Mum managed to stop laughing, caught her breath, and squeaked out a few words to stop them. She was so weak from laughing, that she barely managed to get up, but when she did so, she explained the absurd situation they found themselves in:

that it was they who were being studied and observed the entire period by the tribe members, and not the opposite.

After a few moments to fully catch her breath, they began asking each other questions, – Mum, and Laughing Wolf, – while other team members, as well as the tribe's people, crowded around. When it came to the issue of the trading of the trinkets, the young fellow innocently observed, that they were getting the better part of the deal, that when evening came on, one of their members would ride over to the native village where Professor Monroe's team was buying the stuff, sell it back to them, and then Munroe's people would buy it back again ...

When Mum heard that, she immediately understood the reason why the tribespeople were silent, and why they didn't jump them the moment they arrived. In other words, the answer to the question: "Why don't they expel us and reject our bothersome presence?" But the question as to what the Indians were observing about them and what they deduced accordingly, never received a response. Even this didn't bother her, however, because at that moment, she again had a fit of laughter, even more violent than before, and some of the people also burst out laughing. However, not all of the team members were so forgiving, or as tickled as my mum.

When she eventually stopped laughing, she excused herself, and went back to her tent to change.

From this moment on, the two parties – the tribe and the expedition members – began to exchange information and discuss things freely. As compensations for the distress, the Indians agreed to collaborate. Or so it seemed at first. Members of the expedition team thought that the study was leading to the expected results, and that they were advancing toward a better understanding of the tribe and its secrets.