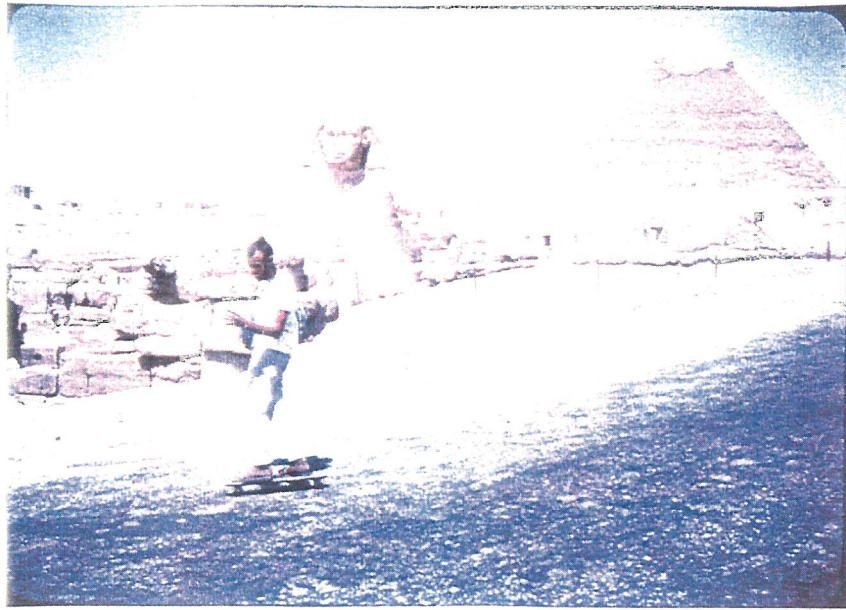


THE ROAD TO ATARAKIA



A TALE OF THE SIXTIES BY
KERRY WATSON



THE ROAD TO ATARAXIA

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Dedicated to the war babies...

We ate the pill, grew up with the bomb,
lived in the now, and died in Vietnam.



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NOTES FROM ASYLUM

Moths swirled in a floodlamp as a mechanical eye watched me practice Jack Nicholson's grin. With a click and whir, the sterile building gobbled me up. Cameras on little goosenecks followed my progress like noseey myopic worms, and some innate fear of confinement swooned over me as the walls warped, like in a house of mirrors.

Orders from nowhere stopped me between two red lines, and gates slid out to create a cage with a showerhead above. Here, initial contact was made, as a huge Samoan used his diaphragm to emit positives and negatives. It was brief, and I was left stark naked as the shower gurgled and cameras glowered. A digital voice crackled, "Use the soap!"

Approaching cautiously, a nurse with one rubber glove searched every orifice, whereupon we solemnly entered CISU, the Criminally Insane Security Unit. Gathered in an artificial gloom was a stranger crew than greeted MacMurphy in his Cuckoo's Nest. Draped in my damp sheet, like Caesar visiting the lepers, I noticed these hapless droids missed my coming entirely.

Prodded through their existentialist waiting room, I did a three-sixty and nearly fainted at the paint job. It was the opposite of Haight-Ashbury's smear. Everything was putrid green, while on the floor, colored lines of unknown import dictated one tangent or another.

I didn't notice the "big nurse" until she was yelling at me through a glass case. In the monitor behind her were all the moths I'd watched outside. No wonder it took them so long. You couldn't see much through their flutter as they streaked by the wide-angle lens. My neanderthal guide jerked me from a red line and stood me up straight. Uh oh, an infraction already. Remembering Mac's fate in the movie, I smiled politely.

Hurriedly scarfing a drab plate of cold glop on rice, I shuffled along a tier of cells. Not a word was spoken, but drugged eyes followed me. An eerie quality permeated the place. Its inhabitants seemed tiny bubbles, unconnected by any links, floating in seclusion. It was like arriving on an alien planet...

The first ten minutes were kinda curious, but when my escort slammed the door, pronouncing my exile, the impact shocked me to my core. Without clothes or even a word of preparation, I groped in a stillborn void to get my bearings.

An immediate sensation of being in enemy territory overcame me. As I leaned against a cold wall feeling for vibrations, something moved in the corner! I reached behind for a handle but found nothing, not even a crack or seam, and crouched like a panther in a pure black vacuum.

The thought of what could be in here with me stifled all others. Hatcher's voice loomed, "Eat your enemy's heart to capture fear!" Distinct eyes glared and a toothless mouth, dripping blood, smiled in recognition. It was him again, the tax collector from the Mekong village of My Tho.

His teeth had come out easy with a twist of my knife. These greedy maggots usually had a face full of gold, and he'd been no exception, but this one wouldn't sink. The gash across his throat let his head bob in moonlit sludge to mock me. A shadow, like an inkblot lizard, slithered near, and the whites of Meer's eyes glittered through camouflaged streaks. Voices came from the dike as froth bubbled up my arms. Meers sliced some sinews, and a foul hiss escaped as the wraith sank in reddened rings.

They were close now. I rinsed the gold and swung my weapon back as blood pounded and breath surged in gulps. I looked at Meers. His power enthralled me. What was this control he held? With a sneer of cold command, he flipped a detonator. Muffled explosions and cries announced the patrol had departed our rice paddy for Buddha heaven. We walked a silver path barefoot, invisible, immaculate.

The vision passed, like all the manic demons, barely phasing me after years of reruns. On the contrary, it cleansed my view, dissolved fear, and loosed a latent hatred. Hideous growls rose from within me, and I stalked visionary prey only to find bits of my imagination. A tiny power indicator on an arcing camera created the grin, two screws its eyes. Roaring into the darkness as fearful a challenge to its lesser gods as had ever come from that place, I taunted them to bring on what they would! The beast within had come out on his own...

I worked my way around the clammy grotto, pacing, to find an iron bed, bare mattress with some pj's, and a small table fixed to the floor. Growling at the invasive eye, I wondered if they could see me as I'd done across the DMZ with a sniper scope. Slowly, recognition of being captured left me in as remote a mindscape as any bum trip on drugs had ever been. I might have cried. Truth took some time, but like a slow shot of heroin...it was coming on.

The beginning! I needed to remember. Like the sole survivor of a ship's sinking, I could recall the whole ordeal. Hearing the call from Camelot early, I'd set out to bring its elixir home. This might be it...a final chronicle before my generation, given the most magnificent opportunity in a thousand lifetimes, dies off like dinosaurs, leaving only tracks of apathy in our passing.

After I'd trekked 'round the world looking for God in every temple and every land, Billy'd written a poem about our parallel journeys. While I scoured the earth he found a shining yellow brick path with drugs. I think he covered a lot more ground than me, certainly in less time. The poem started like this: "On my journey to Elysium I first met

fair Ananda, with a sign upon his back I'm bound to reach Nirvana. While the paths were three, so chose he the Road to Ataraxia." Poor Ananda had a hell of a time getting there...and following his struggle with acute interest I'd decided then on a course of lesser resistance and set out with my magic pillbox to find an easier and quicker way.

The incredible drugs my generation inherited in the early sixties had taken us right "out of this world" for a while, I'll admit, but that was "Euphoria" which the Greeks had defined also. It seems three-thousand years ago the Oracle at Delphi had been dispensing both these states of mind. For the indolent wishing gratification there were her sorcerous potions, possibly ergot--the forerunner of our modern psychedelics--which for her fee would produce glimpses into paradise, wisdom, and self-awareness.

To the true seeker she'd offered Ataraxia--a natural state of inner calm and tranquility--the Nirvana I'd sensed our lot from the beginning. There was no charge for this one...it had to be earned, and I figured the percentages were not with our young voyager on that route. The Oracle would probably ask the riddle of the sphinx, a zen koan, or some other unanswerable ballbuster...whence like a dunce in a corner I'd be left scratching my head while the rest of the pilgrims to paradise lounged around in a euphoric daze.

So I took all the shortcuts offered...I ate the pill, saw God, and took a bunch more to make Him last. Ferreting my way through religions of the world, I clutched for vague and varied truths like a water rat at floating twigs in a whirlpool, 'til caught in its torrent was swept into the vortex with the rest of the debris in life.

It wasn't hard to remember how it started...but there were sure a lotta blank spots at the end. I tried to concentrate on my present condition. Sole comfort came from looking down at the ocean through my screened metal portal. Sleep and the refuge of dreams eluded me that first night, as I ranged from its curious sport to a severe possibility this might be home forever. Although I'd seen the beast emerge to confront fear, his part in my alcohol amnesia was still a mystery. I'd wake from a binge to find out what he'd done. Substance abuse had reached a level where there was no one left to relate to, not even myself...and he wasn't gonna cooperate at all.

Belief in a better way of life through chemistry was probably my greatest failing, aside from the most unimaginable string of mentors assigned anyone in the whole period. There simply was no more me...just a closet full of characters I'd become after losing my ego, the bane of our age, a wardrobe of personae from retrograde incarnations rubbed on darkly and indelibly. They made me into this chameleon...I surely didn't make them up.

Current thinking had me possessed and scheduled for an exorcism, but I couldn't buy such crap at all, still thinking

I had control and could confront the beast myself. Obviously losing the battle at the end, I had to believe friends, cops, and lawyers that these blackout exploits were actually true. Like the time I shot a guy in the foot 'cause he wouldn't dance, I guess I just ran outta options.

Coerced into "saving me from myself," I had to do this Sanity Study in the only drug-free environment they'd accept. Attorneys planned to prove my destructive elements were chemically induced and PTSD-oriented, while the rest hoped a "time out" might give me a chance to reconstruct. Regardless of viewpoints, mandatory Federal time for possessing explosives seemed quite final. Many more my age had come to this by now.

No matter the outcome...what we started with was a beauty beyond anything experienced before! The sun surely smiled on those halcyon days, as we frolicked in our meadow, munching tiny mushrooms which bloomed on cowpies in the still-damp grass...before watchful eyes of DEA Agents began spying on us. The moon winked upon our faerie dance without shadows, until their sinister coming.

Yeah, I'm absolutely sure of its authenticity. It had all been real...the most intense bit of truth we'd ever known! Our excess could've spoiled its initial perfection, but the blame's not just there. In the bigger picture, an inborn mandate flowed from a pure source...some evangelical wellspring to nourish and revive our crippled planet. I know it's so!

We started out on the right foot, and if there'd been the slightest encouragement instead of harassment, we might've changed the course of history! It seemed our place, messianic messengers chosen to save the world from Godless oblivion, what with Time Magazine announcing God was dead and all. Our initial cure was simply love, and it was gonna cleanse everything from racial hatred to international mistrust, the cold war, and their wunderkind's plan, Mutual Assured Destruction, born of the atomic age. We believed it was more than just destiny...it was our duty!

The "now generation" was banned by decree of Congress instead, all our medicinal tools grouped as one in an absurd drive to criminalize everything we believed in. Did they think we were blind and ignorant, their favored sons and daughters? Were alcohol and cigarettes things we should embrace because they were legal, while smoking a joint or ingesting a Godgiven plant would land you in jail? Rejected entirely, we chose from necessity to live on the edge of life, to feel it keenly, and there was no stopping us once we left. The bus to our new world departed from society on a one-way trip, and we didn't even know where we were going...just so long as it wasn't another lie. We went all the way because we were ordered not to go one step further, or should I speak only for myself?

A terrifying shriek brought me suddenly to the

bewildering present. Never had I heard such an emotion, not even from the living dead. There were distant scuffles and a door clanged, then nothing but silence. I peered through wire mesh at the cliffs looming like sentinels over this depository of doom. Thoughts recoiled in adventures of my youth, and I tried to regain the strength I'd used to overcome storms, and sharks, and things beyond me then. This link alone kept me from the ranks with whom I now shared so sorrowful a fate.

Was I really any different than I'd been when sailing into boyhood on waves known so well? This seemed a proper setting for such introspection, so I pondered insanity, anarchy and "anti-social behavior bizarre by any community standards," echoing the prosecutor's statement to the jury. It just didn't fly with me. Everytime this stuff came up, I was too far gone to get it! The beast was to blame...

These were obviously symptoms of an anger far past any particular circumstances, a brooding dissatisfaction in my core, and I weighed this learned dis-ease against the wonder of growing up. I must've begun with gratitude, having not yet found the great flaws in creation. Johnny Piss Off had come of age, though, born of a distinct possibility that life wasn't going to work out like my mom had promised.

Well, if the forces of law and order had their way, I was gonna have a lotta spare time to sort this out. I would have to carefully keep my wits, and so began to concentrate on the prospect of being a lunatic by joining them, and utilizing my natural bent for disrupting such hierarchies.

The asylum was all that Kesey colored his, and more. There were acutes and chronics, wheelers and walkers, drug and shock therapy, Nurse Ratshit, and her obsequious guards right out of the movie. In short order, I formed a conclusion about their process. The game was simple--try to get you to crack. Endless routines were orchestrated into mini-life stages of crisis, from which they determined if you were ready for the real thing or not.

Stuffed with Thorazine and prodded like cattle, the group went to shower and grooming, meal time and dayroom, rehab and lock-up over and over, until original thought no longer came. It got depressing right away. There was no privacy, as communication was deemed therapeutic. So we clumped together with the TV and stereo going full-blast, ping-pong balls clicking, and pool balls clacking, while Nurse Ratshit gazed from her secure outpost. In this cluttered chaos, we prepared for reentry into society. Well, Stephanie had been getting her shit together for twenty-three years, Tomaso for thirteen, Bodeglia for six, and as far as I could gather, Ricardo was born and would die here.

They were all classics--the place had everything! Even the guards were gonzo and it became difficult to guess who was what. We had catatonics staring in one corner, a guy beating off in another, and several who never stopped

shaking, while on the psycho patio shriekers and howlers kept a steady beat. As expected, there were lots of murderers in our midst, like sweet Virginia, who'd put her parents out of their misery. There was Bodeglia, who'd killed those helping get the eggs out of his belly. He was covered with tattoos and shadowed by a knuckle-dragging primate named Zacharias. Together they roamed the ward, as guards looked purposefully away. I cautiously cultivated their respect in order to form a paternal bond and instigate some brinksmanship.

It seemed the priests who'd performed the exorcism on Bodeglia's snake had missed something, so daily we sat by the water cooler to console his imaginary stash of eggs, while our scraggly witch doctor chanted, "All over da world, hear my voice!" We came to be recognized as a formidable triad as we roamed the wasteland. At poignant moments, we'd upset its boredom with primordial rituals, punctuated by Zac's harmonizing staccato. When visitors came, we'd climb the catwalk fencing and howl like monkeys, filled with camaraderie and a modicum of confidence.

Rest assured, I did not allow myself to be recognized as a threat like the "Bull goose Looney" had errantly done. Not a chance! My activities were curtailed by restraint and humor while I kept a close eye on my chart, trying to maintain balance with as many actors in the dismal drama as possible. Still, the system began to win, and in several displays of manipulation, the head nurse brought me near reaction. She'd been at this for some time, honing her talents for cases like mine. Changing roommates, restricting phone privileges, and taking my pen were three of her favorite tortures. At times, crossing her painted or imaginary limits were crucial tests of patience and control. Playing the game became a deep profundity in itself, and graduating from her class a basic text for survival.

Days wore on, while nights were broken by sounds of true insanity. "Chicken man" clucked and scratched, then crowed like a rooster before first light. A Hawaiian yelled, "Let my people go!" as an answering voice echoed, "Fuck you!" in synchopated rhythm, and the "baby" cried 'til dawn, whimpering in some concrete manger below. It nearly fractured what little hope I had left, until I invented earplugs from wet toilet paper wrapped around a piece of thread for extraction. Lost in a new world of sensory deprivation, I played with sleep like a toy. I became a hovering witness to my memories, tasting, watching their endless parade:

Hadean doors swept the unknown aside. Miraged in the velour softness of a midsummer night, my little tugboat lay at anchor, the Mekong coiled 'round as it slithered past tangled banks to the waiting sea. Like hair on a serpent's neck, mangroves swayed in its current, as myriad forms swirled by me and my captain. Patterns of Siddartha's river

beckoned as Tom and I sat in the bliss of an LSD trip, balanced on the wheelhouse a few "klicks" from Cambodia in the black heart of that miserable war.

It seemed for a moment humanity was one soul sharing the stream coursing beneath us. The clock chimed in the cabin to break the stillness, and our eyes met in chemical awe. Dread gripped me as it often did in such states of near-psychosis. As thoughts started up like piranhas snapping at shreds of meat, Tom sighed with an acceptance flowing in saffron from the temple of his mind.

The earth began to shake and the river trembled in fear. The moonlight refracted in nervous ripples, as artificial thunder crashed from ten miles above. High in a nightmare all their own, giant "stratofortress" B-52s rained death upon our dream. The "Iron Triangle" was aglow now. Mangroves, mud, and warm flesh mingled as the cacaphony increased to a level of sound and fury unheard before on earth.

Around us, it seemed God was fingerpainting with crimson, while the river jostled our boat, as if it, too, sensed an agony to escape. Tom gazed at the spectrum before us and nodded imperceptably...this was the way of our kind. We watched in mute silence as what seemed the end of the world came. Phantom jets tore through pink rays of dawn at tree-top level to unload dreaded cargo, and great plumes of napalm roiled from what remained of the village, adding a sweet smell of burning flesh to the choreography. "Puff the magic dragon" sprayed a million bullets, waving heated air in waxen rainbows, while Cobra gunships flitted about like mosquitos, sucking blood. Against this surreal backdrop, Tom and I played a funereal dirge with our wooden flutes. There, on the River Styx, we piped the Apocalypse, while tears slipped from disbelieving eyes.

Its sound transmuted to squeaky iron casters, as another bed was pushed into my dungeon. With a malevolent smirk, Ratshit dropped off her latest fruitcake, a bird-like dude clutching his Bible like a penitent priest in some moribund processional. I quickly covered my face to dispel evil, and prayed for the flashback from 'Nam to return and vaporize his incursion.

It was not to be. After interminable muttering about "meaning no harm, an accident," and something about a frying pan, he began pacing and leaping at the window in vain attempts to fly away. This progressed, each of his takeoffs disturbing me more, until I lost it and slammed him on his bed, where he remained, curled like a fetal chick. Sometimes, with a bit of urging, I found life could settle into tiny formats of order.

The circus of sorrow continued unabated with "strangest billing of the week"--a transvestite whore brought from Waikiki for beating a sailor to death. It didn't know which toilet to use from day to day, and while the nurses spent time consoling the whore's pouting feminine side that

flaunted perfect tits, I kept a continual eye peeled for its savage "he side" chasing kung fu shadows down the halls with an infantile penis at half-mast.

Maybe it was summer's heat that produced this influx of mental midgets, but on and on they came, from drugged killers so retarded they had no control over their bowels, to a rash of sex offenders in straitjackets. Even the chronics were acting up, with Sean calling the French Embassy to request political "asylum," and Manuel, chanting "Fuck da Komeanies!" volunteering with the local Army recruiter. These organizations took the calls like bomb threats. Discreet investigators arrived, looked somberly about, shook their heads in dismay, and went back to their ordered worlds.

I continued my testing, ferried in chains and bullet-proof vans to other facilities for CAT-Scans and shaved electroencephalograms. I also held interviews with nearly every shrink in the Hawaiian Islands. During these, I would sincerely describe my research with altered personalities, progressing blackouts, and a fading hope I'd done no damage to my mind. Invariably they nodded and doodled in their notepads. Nobody gave a fuck. I began to sympathize more with the kept than the keepers, as the headaches increased.

At night I didn't sleep. I reeled chapters of our voyage and the awesome adventures I'd survived. I lived it firsthand, but when I tried to describe lurching from the commonality of the fifties into the mindstorm of the sixties, I fell far short. How could anyone document full ascendance of "children of the future" who "blew their minds" in a time when "thinking was the best way to travel," and testing our limits at a price of psychosis was an everyday gamble?

We were mad scientists, explorers, and committed disciples in the Creed of Chemical Godhead, deducing by ourselves that in any such birthing there'd be a percentage of mutants to fall by the wayside or lose their footing. Far from dumbfucks glued to TV sets with beer in hand, we sensed some grave payment would be extracted for its coming. After all, these weren't drugs...they were the sacraments of our religion! Comparing the experience to a universal keyhole, I described the phantasmagoria we saw. Conscripts were all lined up, breathing in ecstasy, as we circled to catch another peek at something more real and beautiful than anything we'd ever known...for we were wont to believe its deliverance was as momentous an event as the second coming of Christ! It never occurred to us our children would inherit the bill...

I remember when the war began and we were made felons by the stroke of a pen. Lumping all mind-expanding substances into one outlawed category not only made psychedelics frightening, it encouraged easier "trips" for escape and effect. A prompt shift in supply was the obvious outcome. Those who heard of our phenomenal glimpse through

once-veiled doors of perception found stolen pharmaceuticals more comfortable, and guess what they did? Intense eight-hour voyages into Godspace were all too soon replaced by quick "highs," while cocaine and heroin waited in the wings, offering cheap thrills without the difficulties of introspection and reentry. Godsmack was born.

I don't feel like opening this sensitive wound here. It'll emerge in due course. The prognosis is final...my friends are all dead on those short cuts to feeling good. Our heroes were especially prone, eager to follow, pumping up their starry egos with the wrong stuff, like someone hit them in the heel with a football pump. Jones, Hendrix, Morrison, Joplin and the rest got in the other line, banging on the pearly gates, chemical crusaders storming Heaven to get in sooner than everyone else.

Our drama stretched from the discovery of LSD to the birth control pill and onset of AIDS. It seems only seconds now, but a time frame's irrelevant. What matters is what we became! Nothing like our queer debut had fallen on the stage of history before...and may never again. This can only be truly appreciated by those who acted it out, and in the fullness of time.

When it rose on our horizons, the psychedelic prophecy presented was so real, so profound and overwhelming, it altered an entire epoch. Remember? If I recall correctly, we thought we were gonna change the course of life. Maybe some have forgotten in the thirty-six years since we first set out, but not me. With that transformation or rebirth came an unwelcomed metamorphosis of values in our nation yet to be assimilated...a wound scarred over but not healed. Many called it the generation gap.

I just wish it hadn't come in rights and wrongs. If only our elders had participated rather than condemned, things might've worked out better. One can call this hindsight, but the billions we've spent to legislate morality via drug wars could've been used in some subtle stewardship with us. Instead, they alienated America's youth, creating a basic disrespect for the law, infusing a distrust we and our offspring would never recover from...the karmic blame for what's happening now, as we enter a new millenium more split apart than ever...our young gone from us forever.

The distortion is permanent...their new-age plastic view will not reformat to the virtue and vision we first embraced. Linked by the DNA of history's havoc, our progeny spawn a new brand of violence bred from designer drugs and a lurid indifference we can't even reach. Life rolls in repetition, like waves, but always comes around in time. From originally flawed blueprints murder has always flowed in man's veins, even if kids killing kids at school is something new.

It isn't their fault. Survivors excommunicated to lifeboats after our vessel of hope was torpedoed, they're

vaccinated by hypodermic-filled futureshock. Through a lexicon of internet Natospeak, TV, and movies soaked in gore, they pour out their rage at anyone within range. We've been no help. Half of us never even registered to vote. Anyway, war's too good for business. Mesmerized by Monica's bodyparts, we missed the ones splattered in Kosovo's mud, while sleazy rice-eaters nibbled at our nuclear cheese, and the comeback kid produced smartbomb footage with Social Security funds. Superpower that we are, thriving on violence and lies, who should take the blame? It's simple. Look in the mirror.

The inhuman shriek I'd heard on my first night didn't phase me as I was released. Then I was walking several miles in search of a payphone. The game beat me right to the end, for once outside, I'd lost such privileges. I strolled in the morning sun, thinking how every thirty days that Godforsaken scream would startle all the loons, as Stephanie found she was bleeding to death, and guards ran to her with a tampon.