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Lennon Spex

Paul Di Filippo

I am walking down lower Broadway, not far from Canal Jeans, when I see the weirdest peddler dude.

Now, when you consider that the wide sidewalk is jammed with enterprising urban riffraff—Africans with their carved monkeywood animals; Farrakhanized Black Muslims with their oils and incense; young white punks with their hand-screened semi-obscene T-shirts; sleazy old white guys with their weasel-skin Gucci bags and smeary Hermes scarves; Vietnamese with their earrings and pantyhose and pirated tapes—and when you also realize that I, Zildjian, am totally inured to this spectacle through long habituation, then you realize that this guy must be incredibly weird.

Except he isn't. Weird, that is. Not bizarre. I guess it's more that he's incongruous, like.

He appears to be a Zen monk. Japanese or Chinese, Korean or Vietnamese, it's hard to figure. His head is shaven, he wears a golden robe and straw sandals, and he looks serener than a Park Avenue matron after her first Valium of the day. His age could be anywhere from a year short of a legal drink to a year over early retirement.

The monk is apparently selling secondhand prescription eyeglasses. He has a TV tray with a meager selection neatly arrayed thereon. I see no handy-dandy lens-grinding equipment, so I assume there is no customizing. This gives new meaning to the term "cut-rate ripoff."

I stop in front of the monk. He bows. I am forced to bow back. Uncomfortable, I fall to examining his stock.

Tucked away behind the assorted catseye, filigreed, tortoise-shell old lady spex lies one special pair of glasses, their stems neatly folded like ballerina legs, as incongruous among their companions as the monk among his.

I pick these glasses up and examine them.

They are a pair of simple gold wire-rims with transparent, perfectly circular lenses. The stems extend from the middle of the outer circumference on each lens; the bridge is higher, about two-thirds of the way up along the inside. The spectacles feature no adornments.

Suddenly, I realize that these are what we would have called, more years ago

than I care to ponder, "Lennon glasses." First popularized by Beatle John in the Sgt. Pepper album photos, later shown shattered on a posthumous jacket, they remain forever associated with his image, though he was to switch in later years to various aviator-style frames, undoubtedly seeking to harmonize his face with Yoko's in marital solidarity.

I do not suffer from near- nor far-sightedness; I have no intention of buying the frames and replacing the lenses with polarized ones, since I believe in the utility of unmediated sunlight. Yet something compels me to ask if I can try them on.

"Can I, uh, try these on?" I ask the monk.

He smiles. (A smile from one of his disciples was how the Buddha knew his message was getting through.) "You bet."

I unfold the stems. It is then that I notice a blot of what appears to be fresh blood on one stem. Maybe it's ketchup from some strolling patron's child. Never squeamish, I lick my thumb and attempt to wipe it off. The blot temporarily disappears under my rubbing, then rematerializes.

The monk has noticed my actions. "Not to worry," he says. "Just a small stain from the shooting. Will most definitely not affect utility of the glasses. Please, try."

So I slip them on.

The rowboat is painted in psychedelic day-glo swirls of color; the wide rippled water which cradles it is purple. I am sitting on the middle bench, drifting downstream without oars.

On either shore, tangerine trees are interspersed with cellophane flowers of yellow and green that grow so incredibly high. The sky—you guessed it—is marmalade. With actual flecks of orange peel and English muffin clouds. A complete nutritious breakfast.

"Holy Salvador Dali," I whimper. I dip my hands into the purple water, stirring a scent of grape juice, and frantically try to divert the boat to shore.

"Zildjian," calls someone above me. I answer quite slowly: "Yuh-yeah?"

"Stop paddling and look up."

The floating girl has kaliedoscope eyes and wears a lot of shiny gems, but not much else.

"You're being given a gift, Zildjian. There's no need to panic."

"Oh, man, I'm not sure—"

The boat is rocking. No, it's not. I'm sitting astride a centaur. Only instead of hooves, he's got bentwood rockers. He's propelling himself across a field, while eating a Scooter pie.

Lucy is beside me on another rocking horse person. "Calm down, Zildjian. We don't invite many people here. You're the first in years and years. Trust me."

"What happened to the last guy who trusted you?"

Lucy pouts. "That was humanity's fault, not ours."

She opens the door of a taxi for me. It's made of old Washington Posts and New York Times with headlines about Vietnam. When I climb inside, my head goes through the newspaper roof and into the clouds. Lucy's too. As we cut through the moist vapor like wheeled giraffes, I find myself mesmerised by the sun reflected in Lucy's eyes.

She's leading me into the train station. "Just try them for a while. What have you got to lose? Here, see how good they look on you."

She summons over a porter made of modeling clay who resembles Gumby. His tie is formed of mirror shards pressed into his chest. I study my reflection in the looking-glass tie. The glasses don't look half-bad....

The turnstile bumps my crotch and squeaks, "Sorry!"

"Have fun," says Lucy, and pushes me through.

I am clutching a streetlight on Broadway. I recognize it because it is the one that still bears a tattered remnant of a poster protesting the most recent war, on which someone has scrawled a particularly clever slogan: "Real eyes realize real lies."

Looking up, I anticipate the worst.

But no. The world—seen through what surely must be non-prescription lenses—is normal.

Except for the people.

Every last person is crowned, like Medusa, with a nest of tendrils.

From the skull of each person exit innumerable organic- looking extrusions which terminate about eighteen inches away from their heads. The tendrils are all colors, thicknesses and textures. Their ends are sheared off flat, and they do not droop. It is as if they enter another dimension a foot-and-a-half away from the individual.

The people look rather like rainbow dandelions gone to seed.

A dog stops to pee on my pole. Its head too is studded with worms, but not as many as the humans'.

A nasty thought occurs to me. I release my grip on the pole and slowly raise my hands to my own head.

I too am wearing a snakey turban. I can feel the velvety/rubbery/slimy/scratchy hoses rooted to my cranium.

I rip off the Lennon glasses.

Everyone's head-snakes are gone. Mine too, by touch.

Trepidatiously, I put the glasses back on. The snakes come back.

I sense someone by my side. It's the peddler monk.

He alone of everyone in my sight has but one tendril coming from his head. It's

golden like his robe and, emerging from the exact center of his crown, rises vertically up.

The monk smiles again and lifts one hand to his golden carousel-horse pole.

"Goes straight to Buddha," he says, and laughs. "Use glasses wisely. Goodbye."

He vanishes into the mass of pedestrians.

Still wearing the glasses, I wearily sit myself down on a stoop.

Man, how can all these people be oblivious to the spaghetti coming out of their heads? Why don't they feel its weight? Come to think of it, why don't I feel the weight of mine? I reach up and find the offending objects still tangible. How can something be perceptible to the touch yet weigh nothing? Or is that we're just used to the weight...?

The mutt that nearly peed on my foot comes over to keep me company. I offer my hand and it starts to lick it. As it slobbers, I watch its doggy head in horror.

A new tendril is emerging from its skull! And it is questing like a cobra toward me!

Suddenly into my field of vision from above a matching tendril of my own pokes, heading toward the canine feeler!

I jerk my hand away. The dog snarls, and its tentative tendril changes color and texture, as does mine. But now they seem less eager to meet.

Nobody ever called me Carl Sagan. But I am a fairly quick study. And you would have to be as dumb as a Georgia Senator not to figure out what is going on with these worms.

These tendrils coming out of everyone's head represent emotional attachments, bonds, links of feeling and karma. All the connections we pick up in life. Strings of love and hate, just like some bad pop song.

The dog has stopped snarling and is licking itself. As an experiment I extend my hand again. It sniffs tentatively, then gently strops my fingers.

This time, I let our feelers connect and fuse.

I love this dog! Good dog! It's practically in my lap, giving my face a tongue-bath. It loves me too. Aw, poor street-critter. I'm really ashamed of what I'm going to do next.

I grab hold of the seamless cable connecting our heads and yank it out of the dog's skull. Better to experiment with his head than mine. There's a slight resistance, then the connection comes away with a subliminal pop!

The dog yelps, then apathetically climbs off me and goes to sleep.

The cable in my hand, now anchored only at my end, is squirming, trying to reattach itself to the dog. I don't let it, and within seconds it just sort of withers up and vanishes like a naked hard-on in a blizzard. I can feel a ghostly patch fading on

my skull. The cable, I realize, wasn't that strong to begin with, pink and thin as a pencil, and didn't put up much of a fight to survive.

Armed with this new insight into the nature of the head-spaghetti, I watch the people around me more closely.

Everyone, I now notice, is continually extruding new feelers every few seconds. In fact, if I focus my vision through the Lennon glasses in some nameless way, I see close to people's scalps a haze of movement rather like the waving of polyps and corals in some undersea forest.

The vast majority of these embryonic attachments are transient, dying as fast as they are born. For instance:

A woman pauses before the window of a clothing store. She casts a line out like a fly-fisherman toward an outfit on a mannequin. Passing right through the plate glass, it connects for a moment, and then she reels it back in and strides off.

Of course. You can have serious attachments to non-living things too.

And as if to repeat the lesson, a guy pulls his Jaguar up to a miraculously empty space, parks and gets out. The cable connecting him and the car is thick as your wrist. But that doesn't stop him from flicking out a feeler toward a passing Mercedes. Your cheatin' heart.... Or head, as the case may be.

A delivery guy sends out a probe aimed at a classy babe in furs, which, needless to say, is not reciprocated.

An old woman with a walker whips out a feeler toward a young doctor-type.

A girl whom I half know, an architecture student at NYU, shoots out an extension just like one of Spiderman's webs to an elaborately carved cornice that catches her eye.

A dude and his babe stop at a corner, kiss and part. The connection between them is thick and strong. As they get further apart, beyond the combined three-foot extension of their bond, it hazes out at its midpoint, entering whatever extradimensional continuum allows individuals to remain connected to distant people and things.

I've seen enough.

It's time for me to go home and learn more.

Standing in front of my bathroom mirror, I begin to pull the cables out of my head, one at a time.

Out comes this gnarly grey vine. What resistance.... Whoops, suddenly I don't feel anything for my folks! Mom, Dad, what are parents good for anyhow? It's spooky. There's just a big blank spot where there used to be filial fondness. I don't like this. Better plug this one back in....

What this thin slick red-white-and-blue-striped one? Yank it. Patriotism? Whodda thought I had one of those? Wonder what it connects to on the other end? The White House? The Lincoln Memorial? Plymouth Rock? Different for everyone

maybe....

Here's a little slippery green eel of a thing. Tweak it out. Holy shit, that gameshow hostess! I never even knew on a conscious level that I had the hots for her! Mega-gross. Man, I'm killing this one. I hold it one side till it crumbles away. Can't be too careful about where you put your feelings.

Like a mad oldtime switchboard operator, I spend the next couple of hours pulling cables, memorizing which ones channel what feelings. (Once I yank too many simultaneously and get kind of spacey feeling, as if adrift in the cosmos, spinning aimlessly across the universe.) I soon learn how to tell the difference between one-way connections, such as those to inanimate objects or unresponsive fellow humans (Sherry Gottlieb, a high-school crush), and two-way ones, such as those to another person who feels for you too. There's a different kind of pulse in each, a unidirectional flow in the former, an alternating current in the latter.

Since I basically like myself as I am, I plug nearly all of my attachments back in, although I do eliminate the ones for Twinkies and cigarettes.

A sudden inspiration dawns on me like sunrise on Mercury. I could get rich from these glasses! All I have to do is open an aversion-therapy center. I'll practice some mumbo-jumbo, yank people's addictive connections— assuming, and I think it's a safe bet, that everyone's cables resemble mine—and presto, you're looking at the next pre-bankruptcy Donald Trump (only without the bad taste).

But then I remember the parting words of the monk who gave me the glasses: "Use them wisely." And how about that single connection he had? "Straight up to Buddha...?"

I take off the glasses and look at the ineradicable spot of blood on the frames. I think about John Lennon.

What did he do with these glasses? I imagine a little devil popping into being on my left shoulder. He's leaning on a pitchfork, wearing a derby and smoking a cigar. He blows smoke into my ear and say, "He got rich, you schmuck!" An angel appears on my right shoulder. Wings emerging from his black leather jacket, he's holding an electric guitar in place of a harp. "But that's not all he did, Zildjian. He made a lot of people happy. He contributed to progress. He improved the culture."

"He laid a lot of dames," says the devil.

"Yes, but always sought to express a philosophy of life, to illuminate people."

"Nothing gets a babe illuminated hotter than a dose of philosophy."

The angel flies over my head and lands next to the devil. "You cynical philistine!"

"Hey, back off!" The devil brandishes his pitchfork, puffing on his cigar till the coal glows. The angel hefts his guitar like a club and takes a swipe at his opponent. They both tumble off my shoulder, locked in that eternal pro-wrestling match of the spirit.

Their arguments have helped me make up my mind. I will use the glasses to feather my personal nest a little. But I will also do something very good for humanity with them.

But while the personal options are quite clear to me, the larger ones persist in staying somewhat hazy.

I let them remain so. The first thing I want to do is head over to Cynthia's apartment.

Cynthia and I broke up for what we both correctly surmised was the last time just a week ago. The cause was my telling her that this hunky actor she admired reminded me of an ambulatory roast beef, and probably had as much brains. From the nature of this tiff, you can probably gather that our relationship was not all that deep.

But I am still attached to her. I know, because I found the tendril. But it turns out to be strictly a one-way hookup, all the emotion flowing out of me and hitting a barrier on her end like a sperm hitting a diaphragm.

Now I am going to change that.

Cynthia is home. She is getting ready for her waitress job. I find her very attractive in the cowgirl boots and short skirt with tail feathers featured on the help at Drumsticks 'n' Hot Licks, the fried-chicken country-western club, and I tell her so.

"Yeah, great," Cynthia replies rather coldly. She keeps her back to me, adjusting her strawberry-blonde coiffure in the mirror. I am amazed that she can get her brush through all the karma-cords, which apparently offer no resistance.

Cynthia eyes me in the looking-glass, and I am briefly reminded of the plasticine porter's tie. It's hard to believe that she cannot see all my tendrils, including the one leading to her, but it is true. Then she notices my spectacles.

"Since when did you start wearing glasses?"

"Since I met a Buddhist street vendor who sent me on a trip to another dimension."

"Yeah, right. You'll never change, Zil. What do you want? I assume you didn't come over here just to compliment me. Come on, out with it. No mind games, either. And make it fast, 'cause I've got to get to work."

"Cynthia, we need to talk," I begin, laying down some sensitive-type patter just to distract her. She has turned away from the mirror and is bent forward, rummaging thorough her purse. Meanwhile, I am inching closer, within reach of her personal emotional attachments.

I zero in on one which is a livid purple and resembles in some strange indefinable way my own connection to the gameshow hostess. I deftly grab it and unplug it from Cynthia's head.

She twitches and says, "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Just admiring the scent of your hair."

"Well, quit it. You're creeping me out."

I push the connection into my own head. Just as I thought! It goes straight to that hambone actor who was the cause of our breakup. I am suddenly overwhelmed with impure thoughts about his bod. Yuck! This is not for me. I pop the tendrils out and jack it into Cynthia again.

Then I do something I haven't attempted before.

I pull on the cable in the other direction, trying to yank it out of the actor, where I doubt it's heavily anchored. My physical effort is apparently transmitted successfully along the cable through the extraspatial dimension it traverses, for it suddenly comes loose.

I swiftly fuse the end of Cynthia's one-way cable for the actor with my one-way cable for her, which I have just unplugged at her end.

She straightens up as if goosed by Godzilla and wheels around to face me.

"Zildjian, you're—you're different somehow...."

Even knowing what's going on, I am overwhelmed by the synergy of the new connection, which is full and taut as a firehose under pressure. "Cynthia, I—you—"

"Oh, come play in my strawberry field!"

After that, it's our own private Beatlemania.

The next few days proceed swimmingly.

I get a new car and a line of credit without even putting on a necktie. It's only a small matter of establishing the proper connections. At the car dealer's up near the Plaza Hotel, I borrow the owner's hookup to his elderly grandmother.

"No money down, no payments till next year, and no finance charges? Why not? I'm sure you're good for it."

At the bank, I utilize the loan officer's feelings toward his mistress to secure a large sum of cash, a Gold Card and no-charge checking with fifty-thousand-dollar overdraft protection. The only complication is his hand on my knee.

I maintain both these links for a few days to insure that the dupes do not come to their senses and renege on the deals before they are solid. (I am a little troubled about the cold shoulders which are no doubt being received by Granny and Lolita, but reassure myself that things will soon be back to normal for them.) Finally, I gratefully sever the adopted links, watching them retract through their transdimensional wormholes. Hopefully, they will re-establish themselves with their natural objects.

What a relief, I can tell you. It has always been my philosophy that you've gotta go through this world as free as you can, and these extra bonds drag me down.

I think from time to time of the monk, and his single golden cord....

Cynthia and I spend the next couple of weeks having some major fun, she having

turned in her tail-feathers. We eat at the best tables in the best restaurants, gain immediate entrance into the smartest clubs, receive front-row concert tickets for the hottest acts gratis, and in general carve a path through the city like Henry Moore through a block of granite.

One day Cynthia asks me to accompany her to the hospital, where her sister has just had a baby.

At the maternity-ward window, I stare in disbelief at all the squalling or sleeping infants.

Each one has a single golden cord, just like the monk's. A few of the older ones have tentative parental connections, but basically it's just that one heavenly stalk going straight up to who-knows-where.

After that, I start examining kids everywhere more intently.

Most of them seem to maintain their heavenly birthright pretty much intact up till about age three. After that, it starts to dwindle and dim, getting thinner and paler until it finally vanishes around age ten, tops.

In all of New York, I fail to find an adult other than the missing monk who still has what he or she was born with. And that includes, natch, me.

Of course, I am not exactly hanging in the places where such a person might necessarily be found.

And although several times I almost take the opportunity to unplug a kid's golden cord and sample the current flowing down it, I never quite dare.

I realize I'm afraid it might reveal how shallow what I'm doing is....

One day about a month after getting the Lennon spectacles, just when I am starting to get bored with how easy life is, I am driving alone down First Avenue when I encounter an enormous flock of cars being herded by a squad of sheepdog cops. Poking my head out the window, I politely inquire of a policeman as to what's going on.

"It's the President," replies the cop. "He's speaking to the U.N. before the war starts."

"The war? I thought the war was over...."

"That was the last one. This is a new one."

"Well, who are we against this time?"

"Whatsamatta, doncha watch TV? The enemy is South Arabiraniopistan. Their leader's here too. He'll be lucky if he don't get lynched."

I am not sure I have gotten the name of the country right; I never was one for following politics much. But this war-thing is definitely bad news of at least the magnitude of the incarceration of James Brown.

Suddenly I recall my vow to do something good for all humanity.

I get out of the car and hand my keys to the cop.

"Here, park this, willya."

He starts to open his mouth to utter some typical cop thing, but I deftly make use of his obedience cable to his superiors (a slimy thing I always hate to touch), and secure his complete cooperation.

The U.N. is crawling with security. I watch for a few minutes until I ascertain who the head honcho is. Then I approach him.

This is not a time to cut corners, so I indulge in a little overkill. Not only do I quickly yank and plug into my skull his obedience connection to his distant boss, but I also take over his links with his wife, dog, son and what appears to be his riding lawnmower. (I always said these G-men were sickos.)

"Would you mind escorting me in?" I ask sweetly.

"Of course, sir. Right this way."

Issuing orders over his walkie-talkie, the Secret Service agent soon conducts me backstage in the Assembly chamber.

I now face a minor problem: how to get close enough to the President for what I need to do. My outfit is certainly not going to help, as I am wearing a Hawaiian shirt, green scrub pants a friend stole from Bellevue, and huaraches.

Improvise, improvise. "Loan me your suit coat."

"Certainly."

Thus somewhat more suitably accoutered, clutching a shopping list from my pocket as if it were a classified memo I must deliver, I step out onto the dais, my captive agent dutifully running interference for me.

The platform is full of seated dignitaries. The Secretary General is speaking at a podium. Television cameras are focused on us. I have always wanted to appear on television, but not in this fashion....

Using the narrow space behind the rank of chairs, I sidle up inch by inch to where the President and his counterpart are seated. The Prez's prep-school Puritan face is puckered into a mask of righteous indignation. The leader of our enemy wears a smug duplicitous puss like what you might see on a drug-dealer who just successfully tossed his stash out the car window and down a sewer before the narcs closed in.

No one is paying any attention to me.

Yet.

A thick orange scaly hawser of hate runs between the two leaders. I've never seen anything so malignant-looking. I truly believe for the first time in the reality of war.

I am now within reach of the emotional linkages of these geopolitical megalomaniacs. Unfortunately, people are starting to take notice of me, and not in a kindly way.

Before they decide to do something, I act.

Gripping the hate-cord with both hands, I attempt to yank its ends out of the leaders' heads. The resistance is immense. I strain— To the audience, both at home and in the Assembly, it must look, I am sure, as if I am gripping an imaginary barbell with the leaders' heads as weights and trying to press it for an Olympic record.

Finally, the hate-cord pops out. Both leaders jerk like gaffed barracudas.

I can't resist leaning forward and whispering in their ears.

"Imagine there's no countries, boys, it's easy if you try. And war is over, if you want it...."

In the next instant, I pop the Prez's patriotism link and plug it into the head of the South Arabiraniopistan guy. Then I swiftly jack the other guy's loyalty into the Prez.

All the hoodoo movements this involves over the heads of the two leaders is apparently too much for the unsexed security people, who now pile on me as if I were the football in a Super Bowl game.

My Lennon glasses shoot off my face and fly through the air. I think I hear them crack. But I could be wrong. Sounds are rather muffled through a layer of human flesh atop me.

I black out.

During this more-than-usually-unconscious state, Lucy appears to me, naked and resplendently begemmed.

"A fine job, Zildjian. You are welcome to visit us anytime." She starts to fade.

"Wait, hold on, how do I get back to where I once belonged...?"

But there is no answer.

I am in prison for only six months. The pants from Bellevue helped my insanity defense. I don't mind. Even if no one else realizes what I've done, I can relish being a working-class hero. Much to my amazement, Cynthia visits me three times a week. I had somehow thought that all the relationships I had rigged would vanish with the glasses.

During my imprisonment, I am proud to report, our President and the leader of South Arab-etc., after their stunning reconciliation in front of the entire world, are photographed playing miniature golf together at Disney World, and America agrees to purchase its new ally's entire output of camel-dung fertilizer, or some such similar commodity.

One day thereafter, I am walking down Broadway when I see the weirdest peddler dude.

I cautiously approach the monk. He smiles broadly and points to the top of my head.

"Nice looking lotus blossom you got there."

I don't let on that I am pleased. "Hunh. Whatcha got for sale today?"

The monk holds up a pair of clunky black retro plastic frames. They look vaguely familiar....

"The name 'Peggy Sue' mean anything to you?"