



## INTRODUCTION

### GEORGE WHAT?

**I**t was August in winter and I, upside down in the land of the numbat and black swan, yanked about in the third year of this millennium. May the rest of it be this engaging.

I went on a whim to visit a dear chum, meet her family, friends, and homeland, curious to explore, anticipating only the warmth of new acquaintance, the excitement of unknown flora and fauna, the joy of walking about. There was that, but then there was the unexpected as events propelled me with brazen mates into a bizarre treasure hunt for another lass, one in danger of the grave.

My mother created treasure hunts for my sister and me on Valentine's and birthdays. At the time they seemed enormously challenging. They faded from memory until I was reminded by an eccentric Australian named Bobby. His game was plotted in no maternal spirit.

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Life can be seen as a treasure hunt—the path, the way, the Tao, the road up the mountain—all imply we seek some fortune, which is of course ours to begin with—true nature, enlightenment, god, emptiness, the all-in-all, what-not. Or we could be seeking something external—mythic goals, mammon, idols, pleasure, fame, winning ticket. I just went to Australia to visit a pal and poke around.

I wouldn't have gone if it hadn't been for almost suffering a heart attack near the end of 2002. I'd had angina, chest pains, for four years. This condition seemed to be pretty much under control. I was used to it. I remember when it first came on—before I knew what it was—I'd be working up a sweat at the gym and get this unique feeling in my chest like there was a piece of rusty iron embedded there. Later, I was walking my son Clay up the driveway to his elementary school and felt a slight pain where my heart should be. It kept happening.

I made an appointment and walked over to see my family doctor. I lived in a nice little town where I could get anywhere on foot. He said it was either my heart or my esophagus and forwarded me post haste to a cardiologist next door, Dr. Garfield. Garfield thought the problem was my heart not getting enough oxygen because of a partially blocked artery. He hooked me to an EKG reader and later shot me up with thallium and had me trot on a treadmill. He looked at the x-rays and couldn't see anything suspicious. But still he thought it was dammed blood and not the esophageal path. He put me on a beta blocker, an aspirin a day, and a tablet to keep the cholesterol down even though it wasn't all that high. My blood pressure wasn't off the meter either. I started wearing a round nitroglycerin patch twelve hours a day. That gave me slight headaches for a couple of weeks.

One day not long after the first visit, I took my seven year old son Clay to our family doctor's office for a checkup.

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Hadn't seen him since he'd sent me to the cardiologist. He looked at me and said pleasantly, "Oh, you're still alive."

Because occasional attacks of angina continued, the family doc gave me a prescription for nitroglycerin pills to augment the patch. It's the most effective medicine I've ever used. Nitro! Boom! When you see people in the movies go, "My pills! My pills!" while desperately searching their pockets, fumbling with a bottle, downing some pellets that take effect immediately—that's nitroglycerin. I would go long periods without needing it at all but when I got angina, nitro took it away like a stiff breeze grabbing a discarded candy wrapper.

I discovered I could also make angina subside and disappear by being active, something that would make friends terribly concerned. I would walk slowly, accelerating the pace until I could feel increasing pressure in my chest, would back off and again slowly push ahead and soon could go even faster. In this way I could keep pushing the angina threshold higher. I'm not a runner but I knew I could run if I wanted to. All I'd have to do is work up to it. A doctor neighbor called it "walking angina."

After that first visit to the cardiologist, I'd dropped by a bar and had a beer and bummed a cigarette. Then I didn't do any more of that—or caffeine—for some time. I walked a lot and I was careful what I ate. But I didn't sleep enough and was obsessively working on a book. I remember once when I saw Garfield I told him I'd been up all night and he opened his eyes wide and said with sincere alarm, "Don't do that!" And then he relaxed and said, "You're the healthiest patient I've got—but the youngest."

If I'd taken all this more seriously and been disciplined and pure, it might never have gotten worse. But after awhile I started drinking a glass of wine now and then, caffeinated tea, a latte, and then bumming a cigarette here and there. Then I'd do more than a little—especially if I was working late I might drink strong coffee and get crazed and go buy some rolling tobacco and smoke a few and throw it away and sometimes more than a few and then maybe drink a bottle of

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wine or maybe two. And I'd smoke pot some too. A Swiss neurologist buddy cautioned that studies in Europe, which he said American medicine never pays any attention to, indicate that when you smoke pot you're ten times more likely to have a heart attack—like tobacco—just at the time you inhale it and it stimulates you. But then I looked into that further and found the same was true of making love, taking walks, and doing a lot of things.

I took ecstasy with a lovely lover. I hadn't planned on it, it's a little speedy, but a libertarian doctor friend said he didn't see ecstasy coronaries coming into the emergency room and told me not to worry. At a time that I had to minimize caffeine intake to avoid chest pains, I had none on this much maligned psychoactive. I ran around on it. Made love on it too. But I'm going astray here. The point is that my indulgences and rationalizations increased. There was more and more inhaling and imbibing, especially alcohol and tobacco—the truly dangerous drugs. Not incessant drunken chain-smoking, but too much for my heart condition at the age of fifty-four when Y2K arrived and didn't destroy civilization.

I don't think it was those bad habits though as much as the stress that made my condition worse or got me the angina to begin with. I was stressed out by writing about Zen, which people assume is supposed to reduce stress. Then I got a divorce, amicable but still a divorce, and had all these debts and a house I loved and my young son loved and our dog and cat loved and friends loved. But there were so many expenses.

I'd done three books and it was time to do a fourth, but nobody in publishing I knew was interested in what I was writing at the time. I kept spending and the payments didn't go away. I was juggling a bunch of credit cards, paying one off with another, taking out new loans. I really like to ride the edge—I'd get off on having to come up with a lot of money and not know where it was going to come from—but I'd taken it to such an extreme that keeping up was too tense.

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I started noticing my angina patterns were changing. It was coming on more often, getting unpredictable. I hadn't been to my cardiologist in over a year. I think I was embarrassed my habits weren't so smart. I made a list of important phone numbers and kept it on me. Elder son Kelly called. He'd had a bad premonition—he gets these. The last time it had happened, he'd called his boss two days before he died. I started to get things in order.

It was a stormy dark night. The angina was acting like a dangerous stranger. I decided to go to the local emergency room after getting a few more things in order. Then the phone rang.

On the other end was one of son Clay's chums, the darling daughter of a quite attractive woman, a dear friend and stimulating conversationalist whose curvaceous body comes to memory as well. We'd played around but were just good friends by then. We'd drink, and I noticed at times she didn't do well on booze. Indeed, that was the subject of the phone call on that evening of my advancing angina.

"Hi David. This is Denise. Mommy's drunk. I've taken the keys from her. Could you come get us?"

Denise was eleven and didn't know exactly how to tell me where she was but through a series of questions and answers we eventually came up with the coordinates. It was about ten miles away. When I arrived there the rain was coming down like the whole sky falling at once. Denise ran over, gave me the keys, and hopped in the back. I started to walk to her mom who was sitting in the driver's seat of her car ten feet away. My chest hurt so bad I could hardly move—and moving wasn't making the pain go away.

As rainfall clobbered me, her mom insisted she was fine and could drive, but she said it singsongy like a crazed drunk. I asked her to please get out and she said no need. We went back and forth on this until I informed her that my chest was hurting, I was surely close to having a heart attack, and that if she didn't get out of her car and into mine right away, I might die. That did it. I drove Denise and her

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mom (who later got into AA) home, and, as I handed over the keys, said I was on my way to the hospital and might not be able to help them get back to their car the next day.

Thunder pealed. I walked into the emergency room and told the two fine people there what was happening to me thorax-wise but said I was only coming by to see if there was anything I needed to bring with me later when I came for real—that I wasn't quite ready to check in yet as I needed to go home first and finish up a few things—and then I'd be back in a while.

These two hospital workers looked intently at me, smiled, and spoke to me slowly in the same tone of voice I think one might use to try to get a psycho to drop a gun.

"Now, why don't you just come in here and let us take a look at you?"

"Sure, I'll do that in a while. I just need to go home for a little bit."

"Well, maybe a nurse should check you out first and *then* you can go home for a little bit."

"No—I don't really feel any angina at all right now. Of course that's probably because I'm just standing here. If I don't move I don't feel it."

They kept coaxing me in until I entered their territory and then a nurse came and finally she got me to drop the gun—no, I mean finally she persuaded me to stay, listened to my heart, and asked a few questions. But they didn't rush me off to an operating room. I just lay there for a while on a gurney and then I sat up. As I'd said, as long as I wasn't moving, I felt fine. I ended up squatting there all night talking with them—it was a small hospital—not much happening. A doctor came to see me at one point and said later they were going to send me in an ambulance to a bigger hospital in the bigger town down the road. He said what I'd had for four years was stable angina but now it had become atypical angina. It was important I have it taken care of before it changed to unstable angina because that signals a higher

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likelihood of heart attack. He said I don't want that because even if it doesn't kill me, it still kills part of my heart and makes life harder. Still they let me sit there till sunrise.

Garfield wasn't around so another cardiologist came to see me in my room at the big hospital. He was from India and exuded confidence. He said the problem might be my esophagus—heartburn instead of heart attack. I said no no no. I know heart and esophageal troubles can have similar symptoms and hospitals make lots of money because of this similarity, doing all these tests, but I knew it was my heart. I could barely make it to and from the toilet a few feet away.

I called family and friends from the phone list I'd made. Talked to mother, sister, and son Kelly in Spokane who didn't say "told you so," but couldn't get through to my ex-wife Elin and younger son Clay. Their phone was continually busy. Good friend Dennis drove over to tell them what was happening. Elin had the phone off the hook for some reason. She never does that. Weird.

The doctor had me wheeled to a room with a treadmill on which he wanted me to run. Is that a joke? That would surely kill me. He wasn't worried and I tried but I couldn't even begin to do it. So he gave me a drug that forced my heart to speed up and I really thought that was going to be the end. It was unbelievably extreme—like taking amyl nitrate if you've ever done that—it made my heart beat faster and faster and stronger and stronger till it seemed it would explode and there was this highly unpleasant, enormous pressure and then little by little it slowed down and went back to normal—no, to the abnormal of the moment I could lie down with and not feel like an over-ripe bomb.

The doc smiled. He wasn't worried. Not, that is, until he started to look at the readouts from the brutal test he'd just put me through. While I was rolled away in the gurney, I saw in the corner of my eye an alarmed look on his face and jerking head movements as he scanned the results of the near murder they'd just committed.

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Back to my room. Friends and family had arrived. Elin, Clay, Dennis, plus Andy, author of the excellent *Zen's Chinese Heritage*. A nurse told me I was going to have an angioplasty later in the day, maybe that night, maybe tomorrow. She came back in thirty seconds smiling as if everything was just fine and said I'd be next.

The doctor came in again and told me some things about the operation. Something about the LAD in the front of the heart being blocked. I remember saying to him, "People die in this operation, don't they?" and he answering forcefully, "None of *my* patients do." I liked that answer at the time and felt confident as well. In fact, I wasn't worried at all. The bliss of total denial I guess.

I was only mildly sedated. They punctured my thigh and ran a tube of some sort up the big artery there. It had a tiny video camera in it. I could see the play by play on a monitor.

The doctor was talking to me and being his confident self when all of a sudden he went, "Shit!"

"Shit what?" I asked with apprehensive interest.

"You've got a hundred percent blockage."

"Hmm. I guess that's bad?"

"Bad yeah....um." All of sudden he wasn't so confident. "You see—usually there's something to work with," he said. "But there's no light in the tunnel. If we miss and knock a hole in the artery wall—well, it's right next to that big old pump there." Now get this. He says to me, "What do you think?"

"Well gee, I'm not really experienced in this area."

"Ah, maybe we ought to just sew you up and put you on drugs."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Or we could go for it."

"Sure, go for it."

"Okay."

I closed my eyes because I couldn't make out much of what was happening on the screen. I didn't really feel like



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watching TV at the time anyway. I went deep inside and relaxed, trying to do my part to help the doctor. I still wasn't worried. I just lay there as if I were waiting for the score in a game on the radio, forgetting the game was being played inside me. After a couple of minutes I asked him, "Well, what's happening?"

"Oh," he said with a tone indicating he'd forgotten I was there. "It went great."

"What happened?"

"Just punched a hole in it with a little pin and then knocked it all out and put a stent in there and blew it up with a balloon and then pulled the balloon out and we're out now too."

I couldn't believe they brought along all those tools with the camera and could manipulate them at the end of a tube that went from my thigh up into my chest in an artery that, no matter how big it is, is still rather narrow. I could only see it in terms of there being tiny people in there operating a camera and mini-jackhammer, little tools on their little tool belts, their service vehicle parked nearby.

But wait. "What happened to the stuff you punched out?"

"Oh, it just became little chunks."

"And where did they go?"

"Your heart gobbled 'em up."

"What? I thought that would give you a heart attack!"

"No—your heart's really strong."

"Okay, but why didn't I have a heart attack because of the total blockage?"

"Because you're old enough to have grown collaterals around it. That's why younger men die more often when they have heart attacks. Haven't had time to build up the little helper tributaries."

Back to bed. My buddies were there waiting and happy that all went well—especially Clay who gave me a big relieved hug. After a while I said I was fine and tired and they could go.

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Elin and Clay were expected out of town and I told them don't worry, go on.

I had to be completely still for six hours because the thing to fear at that point is the incision into the thigh artery opening up and all the blood in me running out onto the floor. My nurse was a friendly yet strict, somewhat effeminate man who told me I absolutely couldn't move at all. After a couple of hours my back and legs were aching really badly and he said I'd just have to tough it out. Then he went off duty and a compassionate female nurse came on who added morphine to the drip. I never liked taking opiates for fun, but I sure liked 'em then.

The next morning a spirited, zaftig, red-headed friend in her mid-twenties picked me up and took me out to eat at a real down home place. I hardly ever eat hamburgers but I did then, a jumbo. That night, alone at home, I made myself a BLT with a dozen pieces of bacon—and I fried the bread in the bacon fat and added lots of mayonnaise. After that I went back to a fairly low fat diet, nothing obsessive. And I felt normal. I felt great.

I did have a scare a week later when I started to get chest pains again while eating evil potato chips and watching a 49ers play-off game. A cardiac nurse I know had commented that a high percentage of angioplasties have to be redone. I insisted on seeing the doc immediately. He calmly asked me some questions and said that this time for sure it was my esophagus. He gave me a scrip for some pills to take for acid reflux but I didn't fill it—just ate more carefully so it wouldn't happen. I'd always told Garfield I had two types of angina.

I wrote a song about this experience called *It Was a Stormy Dark Night*. It had a chorus with a stolen line I'd always wanted to use in a song.

*It was a stormy dark night  
My chest was painin' a might*

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*Turned left at the blown and blurry light  
To give my drunken friend a necessary ride*

—chorus

*It was a dark and stormy night  
It was a dark and stormy night  
It was a dark and stormy night  
It was a dark and stormy night*

*The nurses put me in a dress  
The doctor drilled away the stress  
Friends and family prayed and touched and blessed  
Edward George and Snoopy sent their best*

(repeat chorus)

I told my family doctor I was going to sell my house, pay debts, travel for a while, come back, and live a simple low stress life. He bowed and shook his head, looked up, sighed, extended his hand, and said he should do the same thing. I didn't tell him I never filled the scrips for the heart medicine prescribed after the angioplasty. And I didn't go back to either cardiologist.

My realtor was a buddy and said he'd make a lot of money on my house, but he begged me not to sell it with its spa, gazebo, voodoo rhythm fence, cushioned attic where people could smoke contraband while kids ran around downstairs uncorrupted, office above the shop garage, artistic mosaic patio which Dennis helped to make, antique stove, speakers in various rooms, fecund apple tree out back from which had come so much apple juice, sauce, and gallons of "Bad Apples Hard Cider" to enhance our wicked parties. But I was dead set on a dramatic change. Wenger at the Zen Center said I was shedding my skin again, something, he added, he'd seen me do periodically. The house sold for a goodly amount in one of the best markets in the country after an exciting few months of real estate drama and a host of improve-

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ments. Paid debts and went off traveling. Clay joined me for a month that stretched from ten days at our favorite Zen monastery through the blistering Southwest to Fort Worth, but then, after a touching parting, he flew back to the Bay Area and I was off to another side of the world.

On the first part of the journey I went to George What, better known as Western Australia. Everyone there calls it W.A. Dubya A. I like to write it without the periods—WA. WA was the first abbreviation I learned in WA. Abbreviate and recreate—that's what they do with names, with language. They don't say George What—I did. It was my first attempt to play with words as they do. Here's how it went:

Aussie: Where you been in Australia, mate?

Me: I been only in George What.

Aussie: Come again?

Me again: George What. George as in George Dubya, my prez, and what as in eh? George What—Dubya Eh? WA!

He thought I was off my crumpet, but I swear that's the sort of thing they do when they talk. A fun lot—at least my sampling of them. Party hard—with booze, with each other, with words. Good on ya!

And they were there on both sides of the fence to give the game what they got, to throw their bloody all into the WA treasure hunt to find the girl from Perth.