

Dream Maker and the Money Tree

by Walt Sutton

“Just follow your dreams! Don’t trip on your own stuff, don’t pretend you have forever, don’t let anybody or anything get in the way, just follow your dreams!”

She stood alone, motionless, in the round bright spot, the lighted center of the dark universe, buzz-cut red hair glistening. She looked at us from way up there on the stage; she looked at me.

She whispered into the microphone she held like a sensuous Popsicle. Glossy ruby lips moving slowly, syncopated, exaggerated ... “just... follow... your dreams... and money ... and life... will take care of ...itself.”

She bowed deeply and the audience erupted, standing, cheering, us in the dark, her in the light. Small scenes momentarily in white, lit hands coming together, smiles, men and women standing, a couple giving each other a high five, white teeth everywhere and hoots of appreciation.

Then the lights in the hall came up, dissolving the magic. A vast enclosed space, over a hundred round tables, six to eight chairs per table, endless beige. We are not in a magic cave; we are in the Grand Fleur de le Excalibur Ballroom at the fabulous Hollywood Florida Sheridan Grand.

As one chap put it to me later; “Oh yes, this is where we are; I was hoping it was somewhere else. But when the lights came up it was the Hollywood Florida Sheridan – and what the hell is a Fleur de le Excalibur anyway?” It was the moment of group sobering. A young woman, a mid-twenty’s trim blond stranger crossed her hands over her chest, rolled her eyes upward and gushed, “Wasn’t she just wonderful?”

“Yes.” I was still stunned by the transformation of the room.

“I mean her presence, the way she grabbed all of us. God, did you see how she used that black wig as a prop? Who would have thought, at first it looked so real – and chemotherapy, what a line. And the way she pulls the wig off and throws it behind her, out of the light!

“Yes, that was something,” I agreed.

“I wish I could speak like that, I wish I had her contacts, I’d really love to be up there some day, just like her!”

“Uh huh.”

“Don’t you wish you could do that? All you have to do is follow your dream. I know it’s true, and she just proved it! I mean look at her, eight years ago she was just a housewife, now she’s a famous speaker! Four years ago she was given a death sentence, now she’s rich and famous!”

“How do you know she’s rich?” I asked.

“Well of course she is, just look at her, she was chosen to give this session, she’s one of the best in the world, she must be rich. Do you know what top-level speakers get for a session? Just do the math. Of course she’s rich. Well, I have to get to my next session, great to meet you!”



And she was gone, caught up in the milling crowd of professional presenters at the Eighteenth Annual Professional Presenters International Convention in beautiful Hollywood Florida. It may have been 76 degrees, sunny light breeze and beautiful outside, but no one in this throng would have known it. We were totally inward focused, a hive of self-absorbed bees, all looking for pollen.

Later that night, the scene in the bar was more real. There were four of us, two men and two women, ages twenty to sixty, strangers to one another, popping peanuts and talking about our first convention experiences. Being in the bar set us apart, for many professional presenters are insufferable when it comes to virtue and vices (or at least the more public ones) and even those who do drink err on the side of moderation. We found each other with the lanyard name plates, tribal markings, and somehow we connected, migrated to a table and began, a little nervously, to critique day one. Laverne's speech about her life, having cancer and following your dream was deemed the best of the twenty or so sessions big and small. There were programs about making money as a speaker (something which most presenters do inadequately), about stage skills, about writing or preparing a speech, about selling speeches, about everything you could imagine relating to speaking or speech making.

Angela from Chicago was hung up on the idea that speaking was a real career. "You know most of these people do something else and speaking just helps with their other job. They're either consultants, or trainers, or writers promoting." She smiled challengingly at the three of us: "Any of you just speak, you know, that's all you do is speak?" Heads shook all around and her smile held, and yellow flecks in her brown eyes seemed to flash. "See? So follow your dreams and be a speaker as long as you know how to do something else. Why didn't Laverne tell us that?"

"Oh, come on, don't be so cynical," piped in the sixty-year-old, Josh from Mecum Georgia. "She was very engaging. I thought she was honest and sincere, and so what if we're speaking and we do something else? That doesn't take away from the joy of speaking, you know, speaking and helping folks along the road. It's sort of a calling." He spoke his bit with the even paced tones of the very religious or those with raging ulcers. "You know doing good," he drawled on, "is at the heart of it for most of us and even though most of us are doing some promoting, it's almost always promoting something good, and that's good, don't' you think?" Angela just smiled, looking at him as if she were humoring a newly landed alien. Finally, without losing eye contact or changing her smile, she took a sip of her wine and said, "Josh, is it?" He nodded. "Josh I think some of this is okay, the cancer story for instance was interesting, but most of what she said was just bullshit, that's all. Nothing bad, just bullshit, but it's okay."

Josh's lips tightened just a little each time she said bullshit. "Well," he said. I thought he was about to get up and leave when Tina from Iowa City said, "Wow, Angela, way to castigate! What's up with you, girl? Why don't you chill out a little? We're all here, trying to relax, have a little juice and share our feelings about the conference and you're run'in this deal all over Josh just because he liked what the speaker had to say. You know we're in this together. We need to share. We need be tolerant and I think I could use another one of these." Tina raised her almost empty wineglass to the passing server and like Pavlov's best we all made the same motion - even Josh.



Angela turned to Josh. “Josh, I’m not picking on you, only I really do think Laverne’s full of it – don’t get upset, she’s good, but still full of it.”

“Full of it because?” I couldn’t resist wading in. She re-targeted the smile on me.

“Because we all have lives and they are often hard and the way through is to just get over it.”

Josh leaned back and snorted. “How old are you, Angela?”

“Thirty-one” she smiled.

“I don’t think you’ve lived enough life to be able to say, “ ‘Just get over it’ is the answer to life’s setbacks.”

“Okay, just for fun, how many kids have you had, Josh?”

“Two.”

“No, I asked how many have you had, not how many have the women in your life had.”

“Jeeze Louise, Angela, are you a prosecuting attorney or something,” asked Tina, looking harder at Angela.

Angela laughed, shaking her head and said, “No, only I’ve had plenty of experiences and can smell bullshit a mile away. I’m not saying Josh is a bad person or that Laverne doesn’t do a good job delivering her spiel. She’s a pro. I sure as hell don’t pretend to understand what it’s like to have cancer and be told you are going to die soon. But following your dreams isn’t the way through those things. Doing your best and getting over them is. I know it, she knows it, and I think our man-for-the-ages Josh here knows it, too. “

Finally man-for-the-ages lost his composure. His smooth, clean-shaven face turned to wrinkles and squinting eyes. He sputtered; “She gives us a message of hope. She encourages us. That’s what motivational speakers do: they inspire. And I was inspired. Whether I’ve had children or not, I can feel inspiration!”

Angela looked at Tina, winked, and said, “Well there you go; Josh is hooked. So let’s do an unscientific pole. How about you two? Will you be joining Josh at the Laverne’s concession booth to purchase the \$99.99 set of CD’s with workbook? Come on, we’re pals here, tell the truth.

I said no, and Tina said, “Well if you put it that way, hell no.”

Angela turned back to Josh, “Okay Josh, six hundred people at today’s session. One out of four buy the CD’s and the book and what, Laverne’s doubled her take and who knows, one out of three of you might convince others to buy a set even though they didn’t get to hear her. Get the picture? Cash register’s a goin’ ‘ca-ching’, Josh! Mission accomplished!”

Josh apparently didn’t know he was over his head and straightened in his chair. “You’re confusing money with quality. You think because she does it for money there’s something immoral, that she’s compromised herself. What kind of silliness is that, young lady, or do you work for free?”

“No, I don’t, and I am not confusing money with anything. In fact, if anyone has it confused, it’s Laverne. To listen to her all you have to do is follow your dreams and everything including money will take care of itself. Now I know that’s bullshit. I mean look at her, look how carefully she takes care of the money part – she’s fully prepared to sell the message twice, once in person and again with the merchandise. But, look Josh, I don’t begrudge her the money. In fact I’m glad for her making good money. I just don’t



like her advice, and being a woman I'm certain it isn't just bad advice, it's a corrupt message."

"Oh come on!" Josh barked, startling himself and the group at the next table. Angela reached out a hand and placed it briefly on Josh's arm. "Josh, it's okay. Tina's right, time to chill out and I've got to meet a friend for dinner. Why don't we resume this conversation tomorrow night." She stood up and touched Josh on the shoulder. "Sweet dreams about Laverne, big fella." She blew a kiss in our general direction and left.

These extravaganzas with thousands attending are conducted in hotels specially outfitted with cavernous "convention facilities." There's a kind of pathetic urgency between sessions as attendees explode from one meeting and rush to the next in a riot of anxiety, gaiety and need. But the event I'm describing here is not just any convention; it's the mother of all conventions, the convention of people who want to speak at conventions, the "perfect storm" of conventions.

With the exception of the special few, a collection of distant glitterati, the mob is entirely wannabes. The class structure is more like Mexico than the United States - a few of the fabulously wealthy and many, many peasants. In the upper strata of stars are a few, mostly motivational or selling or dare-to-be-great speakers who earn in the millions. These are the Zig Zigler types. And make no mistake, he is the still living patron saint at this confab and his is an oft dropped name: "Yea, you know Zig once told me how to stop picking my nose on stage - what a guy. You do know Zig don't you?"

The stars are rarely seen in the hallways or the smallish workshops. Apparently (as I am not one of them) they are treated to upper echelon meetings, a sort of heavenly track of special millionaire breakfasts and wine tastings. The Gods of Speaking only appear to the lower world when gathering on stage for awards or starring in a Special Big Session - such as Laverne's. Laverne is a star. But the perfect storm of conventions doesn't pay its bills entertaining the stars. The event is built on a rabble of folks who ooze from the slums of speaking, freshly washed and all dressed up for success. They come looking like a hoard of realtors, descending on Hollywood Florida with the burning resolve to "be like Zig."

The route to the bar was through the crowded hall, redolent with strong perfumes and cologne and an amazing plentitude of polyester in blinding colors, designer knock-offs, and badly applied make-up. I wondered about the real underclass of speakers, the people who couldn't afford to come to Hollywood Florida this year. As our association has already told us at least twenty times in the last two days, there are eight struggling speakers for every attendee. What do they look like? And do you think any of them of them might try to come next year? Would I want to come if they did?

Lost in this purgatory I reached the bar, anxious for relief.

To my surprise, I was the last to arrive. Last night's comrades already occupied the same corner table. I guessed this made it "our table."

Already, Angela was smiling. She was drinking something dark over ice cubes and smoking, too. Tina, who has chosen a very British tweed suit to amplify her brown eyes and skin, has a pint of Guinness to complete her "look." Brown hands, dark brown beer highlighted by flashing pink fingernails.

No surprise that Josh, whose face was still smooth but a little slack jawed, was dressed



exactly as he was yesterday, down to the gold old time microphone tie clip attached to his brown silkish tie, over a plain white shirt under his shiny brown suit. With some relief I notice that his outfit was wrinkle free, which defied my unkind thought that he might have slept in it.

Josh was just ordering another drink, also something over ice. I greeted with handshakes and air kisses, and ordered a draft for a beer, just to show my liberal working writer persona to the girls.

“I was afraid it was going to be two against one, glad you found us, buddy. They’ve already started to gang up on me, so I decided maybe I could just, you know, out-drink them, soften up the beach a little before we get to fighting.”

Tina and Angela laughed. Angela informed me that Josh was in the bar first and she suspected he’d been there all day.

“Not true” Josh grunted, “Why, I almost never drink before noon, when I do drink that is, and if I remember properly, today was no exception.” He smiled an exaggerated naughty boy smile.

“Angela and I’ve decided to let him stay up with us as long as he behaves. How was your day? I’m thinking of changing careers and becoming a social worker, or maybe a rehab shrink.” She giggled, rolling her eyes toward Josh, “You know, something real.”

Angela held up one finger as if counting, her perfectly silvered nail pointing straight to the ceiling. “First thing you need to do if you want to get real is to get out of here, and I don’t mean the bar; I mean this convention!”

She shifted forward in her chair, leaning across into the three of us. Her nose was freckled and powdered, and in a grey dress suit with white blouse she was trim and pretty, brown hair curling down to her shoulders, impressive gold hoop earrings. She wore a gold signet ring on her left ring finger and three gold bands and a small gold watch on her right wrist.

“I went to four workshops today. I wanted to learn more about stagecraft, how to carry myself, to move more naturally when I speak. What I learned is how to direct people to your books and tapes without upsetting the organizers of the event who don’t want you flogging your tapes and shit at their convention. Next I went to hear about developing material, starting out with an idea and turning it into a presentation. Well, what I learned in that session was how to lie, really how to make up stuff up, call it true and flog it. Next I watched that guy in the grand ballroom talk about what he called leadership using General George Patton as his model. Here’s this 50- or 60-year old white guy dressed up like George Patton with pictures of tanks, war, dead enemy, talking about search and destroy and ‘beating the bastards no matter what.’ Not for a single minute thinking that over half of the people in the audience are women, most of whom don’t exactly warm to that bullshit, let alone call it leadership. Finally I went to ‘The Laws of Speaking Success’ which turned out to be a practical joke because what we learned was if we were really motivated and really wanted to learn the six immutable laws of speaking success – we had to buy their book! I’m not kidding, speakers screwing speakers at a speakers’ convention, what a place.”

“Did you go to ‘Hopes and Dreams?’” Josh mumbled.

“No,” said Angela, “I’ve had enough of that crap.”

“I went,” admitted Tina in a soft voice.



“Well, I want to announce that ‘Hopes and Dreams’ changed me into a veritable Angela groupie. Right there on the spot, I said to myself, Josh, listen to Angela, she’s the smart one, bullshit squared and the taste of a cow pie, yup that ole Angela, I should have listened to her in the first place. Would have saved myself a lot of pain and embarrassment.” He raised his glass, mimicked a toast, slurring, “Here’s to Angela, the great teller of truth.”

“Here, here, Angela,” we echoed.

He sucked the brown liquid from around the ice in his glass, grimacing less than I would have with a giant mouthful of whatever he was drinking, audibly swallowed, then dramatically pointed at his glass held high so the our well trained bar tender could see his silent order.

“It was ‘Hopes and Dreams’ that made me the man I am tonight, and will regrettably be tomorrow. I’m beginning to believe that Angela is the only real person at this convention. It crossed my mind, earlier this afternoon, here in this lovely sanctuary, that I should skip the rest of the sessions and just follow Angela around and listen to what she has to say.”

Angela’s face reddened. She smiled and shook her head.

Josh seemed to have fallen dumb so Tina said, “ ‘Hopes and Dreams’ was a guy with no legs.”

“No!” Josh awoke. “No, he had legs. It’s just that they weren’t his; he had fake legs, a double peg leg if you can believe it! No, Tina, don’t ever forget, he did have legs.”

“Landmine, Vietnam,” Tina half whispered, eyes looking down. “He had legs once, but lost them in Vietnam.”

“Where do hopes and dreams fit in?” I asked.

Josh smiled on one side of his face, a sneer. “Oh, that was the ding dong ringer, my boy! We didn’t know he had wooden legs until near the end of the sermon. Then all of a sudden he’s taking off his pants and we’re treated to a sort of partial striptease that just happened to include his legs. We got the stumps, and shock and group guilt! Now you tell me you can’t fulfill your hopes and dreams.”

Josh laughed, an out-of-control loud laugh, eyes blazing, red and moist. After several breaths of laughter he wiped his eyes and looked at Angela.

“You know my dear, if you won’t let me follow you around, I think the second best thing would be to just stay here in the bar until this gull darn thing is over. This is the only safe place in town.”

“It was way over the top,” said Tina. “What’s funny is, he was a good speaker and as he’s cranking along, telling us these stories, I really liked what he was saying. Then he’s sitting on a chair, bright red polka dotted boxer shorts, detaching his legs and putting them on the floor, all the while talking to the audience. He points at his stumps and a young girl next to me is about to pass out. I’m watching him, thinking, I get it! Could you please put your damn legs back on and get dressed!”

Angela laughed and shook her head, gold earrings flashing. “Yes, but how does that tie in with hopes and dreams?”

Tina’s almost yells, “You askin’ how it fits in, girl? It fits in ‘cause he’s rubbing his pink stumps saying, if I can follow my hopes and dreams why can’t you? That’s how it fits in, get it? No legs, blown off, pain and suffering, I’m a cripple and what the hell are you out there in the audience complaining about?”



Angela's lips silently formed the word "oh." She looked over at Josh, who had fallen asleep. He slumped in the oversized chair, head tilted backward, mouth half-open, snoring. She leaned over and tapped his hand and he shock himself, startled. We convinced him it was time for bed and he stumbled along an invisible irregular trail across the bar and out the double swinging doors.

Tina sighed, "I hope he'll be okay. Do you think one of us should make sure he gets to his room?"

"No," I said. "Josh looks like a big boy to me. I'll bet he's been through this plenty of times before."

"Maybe, but I don't think he's really a big drinker. We were talking about it last night and he didn't strike me like the drinking type," said Angela. Tina, looking a little lost, chimed in, "No, but he is a Vietnam vet. Josh is, I mean. That cripple guy really got to him. You know, I don't think he had to take his legs off to get his point across, he was really a good speaker. Damn! Anybody hungry?"

"Bar food" as a term of art describes a collection of menu choices, mostly precooked in Nebraska. Each item is designed to induce a strong desire to drink - more. This is no mean trick given that one must be pretty numb to order from a bar menu in the first place. In order to get the experience of eating to permeate the stupor of alcohol, this food - if it is food - needs to be really fatty, really rich, something to line the stomach for more drinking yet get the sensation of taste through the haze. Thus we supped on buffalo wings and Caesar salads, the latter being handfuls of finely chopped lettuce drenched in spiced mayonnaise and grated parmesan cheese and buried under an avalanche of oil-soaked croutons.

By 4:30 the following afternoon I was fully fried. Too much stimulation, too many people, and a growing ball of cynicism, right in the center of my chest. I'd chosen three sessions but it didn't matter. I could have chosen sixty and learned just as little. Each was a muted blur, voices, lights, some clapping. I was the antithesis of the Buddhist notion of being present; I couldn't wait to leave.

A last evening with my new friends, one final sleep in Hollywood Florida and I would be free. That I waited until 4:30 to go and let off some steam was itself a near miracle of self-control. The bar in red lit semidarkness was like an overgrown submarine cabin with a dance floor. I half expected the sound system to chirp out the theme song to Cheers - "Nobody know your name." Like Cheers, two of my bar buddies were already in place. The bartender was automatically pulling a draft as I slid into what was by now my own seat.

"One more day of this and I'd vote for having beer for breakfast with you guys," I said. Then I noticed Josh was transformed. He was dressed in a Tommy Bahamas lookalike short sleeve shirt, khaki Bermuda shorts and red flip-flops.

Angela looked like a Cheshire cat smiling from her seat.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Josh, a little maliciously.

"Well, I'm a little sunburned, but other than that, better than you," he smiled at me and held up his glass, again brown liquid and ice.



I leaned over and kissed Angela on the cheek. She smelled of face powder and cigarette. “Sorry for bailing out on you early last night,” said Josh, “I sorta fell over the edge yesterday. But that’s no excuse. I want you both to know I don’t normally drink like that and I’m a little embarrassed.”

Angela lit a cigarette with a yellow see-through lighter. Exhaling, she looked at me, blowing smoke and speaking at the same time, “I told him he was the smart one, he missed the bar food.” We all laughed. “And look at him now, he’s a regular beach bum.” “Yup,” he nodded proudly, “wish I’d figured this out earlier. Did you know there are beautiful beaches in this place, loaded with beautiful people some of them wearing next to nothing, pelicans, warm tropical breezes? I spent all day outside wondering what the heck I was doing at this ridiculous convention associating with that mob. Course if I hadn’t come, I wouldn’t have met you all, so there is something to say for it.”

“Aren’t you part of the mob?” Angela asked, poking his arm.

“Yes, I was. That’s what made the whole thing so depressing. I was a big part of it. But Angela, like I’ve said drunk and now sober, well, almost sober, you are my heroine. I’m not part of the mob any more. Look at this sunburn. I’m free, young lady, and thanks to you.”

“You’re welcome,” she laughed.

“How did she free you?”

“She told the truth, over and over. In the face of what she so eloquently called the bullshit, she told the truth. Most of what goes on here is for money. That’s why they brought us here; that’s why most of us came. This is just one big money tree and we’re monkeys swinging from branch to branch, squawking and hooting, trying to get more of it. This place is about as sincere as a credit card company saying they care about you! Show me the money buddy; that’s what this is about. And you know what? They win, ‘cause I paid a bundle to come to this deal and they got my money up front – how’s that for a joke? Still, meeting you fellow monkeys has been pretty nice, I don’t want to down play that, no sir-ee.”

I recounted my day, or lack of a day really. My stories only confirmed Josh’s new perspective of the convention. As I spoke there was nodding. I asked, “Angela, if you are the bullshit sniffer you seem to be, how did you get roped into coming to this thing in the first place?”

Angela had one smile. It was pleasant, front teeth neatly aligned and white. She was either at full smile or she wasn’t; there were no intermediate smiles or partial smiles that I could detect after three evenings of watching her. She went to full smile and said, “I didn’t know.”

Josh and I must have looked incredulous because she repeated it, more emphatically, pausing between each word. “I - did - not - know, you guys! Who could have guessed it would be like this? I read the catalogue and thought, that looks good, put it on my calendar and on my Visa card and here I am... numb and disappointed. Oh good! Here comes... hello?”

I turned to look where Angela was looking. Tina was making her way through the little maze created by packed chairs and tables. Tina wore a yet another woven suit, brown, but not tweed, a brighter brown than yesterday and behind her followed a vaguely familiar woman. Tina was talking over her shoulder to the woman. I watched her



navigate behind Tina: very short red hair, perfect fitting trim jeans, a white t-shirt and blue blazer and black loafers. Tina waved and smiled at us as she reached the dance floor and headed across to our side of the room. The woman behind drew alongside Tina, who took her arm and guided her to us.

“Josh, Angela, hey Walt, I’d like you guys to meet Laverne. Laverne, these are my party friends.”

“Well how you do, party friends, I hope you don’t mind me joining you. Tina says this is your last night together?”

Josh sprung up and extended his hand to her. I followed suit, a little less enthusiastically. Angela stayed seated, smiled up at Laverne and said, “Hi.”

We shuffled to foreign positions at the table to make an extra space, ordered and refreshed drinks and then silence, smiles, the clinking of ice in Josh’s drink, the Bee Gee’s and hearts being broken. Finally Josh said, “Well ah Laverne, we ah sure were thrilled with your presentation the other day, it must have been quite a thrill to be the opening keynote at a conference of keynotes?”

“Yes, it was.”

“And, ah what type of response have you been getting here, you know from the attendees?” Josh spoke as if suddenly constipated, squeezing out the words behind a painful smile. Angela watched them both during the exchange. She seemed to be watching a television program with detached anticipation, smiling certainly but waiting for... something. Laverne and Josh were speaking their assigned parts but Angela was expecting something else, puzzled by what was happening.

“Well, Josh, the audience was wonderfully gracious, and I’ve received a super warm reception. What kind of speaking do you do, Josh?”

“I, ah, well I’m really a consultant.” He glanced for a moment at Angela, then back to Laverne. “I’m a human resource consultant, so I often speak about the types of problems companies can get into if they don’t pay attention to their, you know, human resource needs?”

“Why, how wonderful, Josh. And you are, Angie, Ann?”

“Angela,” Angela cooed.

“Angela, what kind of speaking do you do?” I winced a little, thinking we were in for it now. But Angela was calm and said, “I’m the newly anointed Queen of the Bullshit Brigade.”

“Angela!” Tina barked. “What would your mama say to that kind of rudeness, girl?”

“Tina, cool it, I haven’t said anything rude... yet. I mean only last night I was anointed as the truth teller of the group and now you’re having a cat ‘cause I might. Lighten up. Laverne here asked a perfectly appropriate question at a speakers’ convention and I gave her the truth.”

Laverne leaned back in her chair and looked questioningly at Tina. “Am I breaking in on something? I really don’t want to be a distraction when you all are, well, spending your last night together.”

She put her hand to her mouth and laughed, “What I mean is, well you know what I mean.” She giggled on and I laughed at her laughing and that started everyone.

When we were done, there was another pause. The Bee Gee’s were mercifully replaced by Elton John, “Laughin like children, rollin like thunder, under the covers,” seemed apropos and started another round of giggles.

Finally Angela said, “Laverne, first of all you are a really good speaker but I’ve just got to



ask, do you really believe that stuff... follow your dreams?"

"Yes, that's why I speak, because I believe it."

Angela grimaced, punched out her half-smoked cigarette and said, "Wow."

"Wow, what?" asked Laverne, turning her chair deliberately toward Angela as if she were a counselor facing a patient or perhaps a concerned friend, which of course Angela wasn't.

"Wow, like I can't believe it."

"Can't believe what?"

"Can't believe that you really believe that tripe about follow your dreams and the rest of the world will take care of you."

"Okay, so you can't believe it, what does that matter?"

Angela shook the bracelets down from her forearm, looked appraisingly at Laverne, no smile this time. Elton John singing falsetto, "someone saved my life tonight" as he watched Angela, our heroine.

"It matters because I think your message is corrupt, insincere and misleading. I'm upset that a woman with your obvious skill and experience would stoop to those tactics to get an audience. That's why."

Laverne sat still, looked at Angela, and cocked her head slightly, "Why corrupt?"

Angela fired back, "Because it isn't true."

"It isn't true to you, you mean."

"That's right, it isn't true to me, and it isn't true in the world either and I think you know that."

Tina leaned forward, placing her hand in front of Angela, like a traffic cop. "Angela, you're really embarrassing me. I brought Laverne for a drink. I thought you'd like to meet her. Why don't you just pretty yourself up a little and show us your good manners." But Laverne clearly didn't need protecting. She patted Tina's outstretched hand, and said, "No, you know this is fine. I really want to hear what Angela has to say. I'm trying to get better, and maybe she can help me."

She looked at Angela but Angela was done. She was smiling now. She held her cigarette away from her hair and returned Lavern's look. Finally after a minute or so, Angela spoke. "That's it. I don't have anything else to say."

Laverne settled in her chair. "Do you have kids?"

Angela laughed, saying, "That's my line. Yes, I have two, how about you?"

"I have three, the oldest is 28 and the youngest is just off to Brown in September. So in your children's lives, how much influence have you had?"

"Tons, I'm their mom," Angela replied.

"Well, how much control over their lives do you really think you have?"

"I see, well less than I'd like I guess, but still a lot."

"Do you believe in God?" Laverne was beginning to sound more like a therapist than a motivational speaker. Her tone was controlled, unthreatening, and her words were smooth, no edges to them.

"No, I don't. I think you can pretty much explain anything that happens in the world if you just have enough data. God doesn't have to be a part of the equation, and he or she has never been part of it for me or the world I live in."

"Really?"

"Really!"

"Well, what about birth? What about cancer and whether it kills or doesn't kill? What



about all those things that don't make sense in terms of medicine, or physics or psychology, what about them?"

Angela shrugged her shoulders, "What about them? Lack of data, that's all. If we knew more we could figure them out; we just don't know enough."

Josh, who was watching the exchange like a tennis match, broke in as if to smooth the way to a calmer discussion, "I think Angela is saying that there are no such things as inexplicable events. She thinks there are reasons for everything, solid fact-based reasons, and that following your dreams smacks too much of magic or something make-believe."

"And telling someone to believe in magic is corrupt," added Angela. "It's corrupt because it isn't true, it's corrupt because you get money for it and it's corrupt because as I've said a couple of times now, I don't think you believe that it is good advice. Not if you are a mother."

Laverne looked around the table, smiled and said, "Look, here I am, breaking into your little group and obviously stirring up a mess. I'm not sure you want to spend your last evening with each other watching Angela and me argue."

"Oh yes," blurted Josh. "I mean you are really welcome, I do want to hear what you have to say."

Angela rolled her eyes towards the ceiling. "Josh, you wimp!"

"No, I do," said Josh, "I do want to know. You're still my heroine Angela, you know that, but I am interested in this."

We nodded at Laverne. I reached for a bowl of nuts on the empty table behind me, and placed it in the center of our table, removing a handful for myself.

Then Laverne began. "Naturally, I've met people like Angela before, out here on the speaking trail. They get angry with me, about my message. Few are as articulate as Angela, but all of them firmly believe what they are saying, which is: there is no magic in the world. I was asking her about kids and God because sometimes these people are able to see some magic, or what passes for magic as the result of a relationship with a child or a God, but only sometimes.

"I'm not going to try to convince you either, Angela." She extended her hand and touched the back of Angela's hand as it rested on the table, then pulled back into her therapist posture. "I'm not going to try because I don't want to insult her intelligence or her view of the world. Angela sees things in a way that doesn't allow for magic or unexplained occurrences. I'm just as confounded by this view of the universe as she is of mine, except to say that once upon a time I believed, like she does, that science and man could and would figure it all out. But life, living life, has taught me something else. Frankly, when I thought we could explain the whole thing with a microscope or a computer it was very comforting, and sometimes I wish it could be that way. But my truth - which is not Angela's truth - is that there is more unexplained than explained, that there is magic, and you and I would be better served in life to welcome it and go with it - hence follow your dreams."

I felt it was time for us to clap, nicely delivered. But she wasn't done. "Since I keep running into people like Angela, I like to use these encounters to learn what I can. And this is at the heart of my next question to you, Angela. For every person who is upset as you are now I meet and get messages from a thousand who are fiercely appreciative.



And among the thousand or more I hear from for every one of you there are men, women, all races, all personality types, scientists and spiritualists, a full spread of humanity, saying thank you for your message, it gives me help or courage or energy or insight. How do you explain that, Angela?”

“You’re a good speaker. The wig, the theatrics, the stage, the fact that most people are pathetic and wimpy, that’s why. Oh yea and I forgot the money; that helps too. These people look at you as a celebrity.” Laverne took a deep breath, smiled and said: “Yes, the money. Are you working for free these days Angela?” Angela shook her head. “Of course not; neither am I. It just turns out I got a couple of well timed breaks and I get paid very well for what I do, and you get paid too. This is how I earn my living – just like you I presume – to pay the mortgage, put my daughter through Brown and go shopping at Nordstrom’s.”

“Touché” said Angela. “I’m out of bounds on the money thing, but I still can’t believe. . .” “Believe that I believe in magic?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I do. I think the world has lost at least half of itself by rejecting the unexplainable, magic if you will. Yet, when I listen to those who like my work, I am strongly called to continue. I didn’t beat cancer, it left . . . maybe it was the radiation, maybe the poison drugs that helped, but there was something more, and it left. When my first child opened her eyes and could see, it was clear to me she could see more than I was seeing. I know if you are comforted by data this sounds nuts. But believe me, most people aren’t. Most people long to open up to a fuller spectrum of living which includes the part we can’t measure or weigh or count.”

Laverne thanked us for the drink, shook hands all around, and retired into the dark red gloom of our cave. We were mesmerized; it’s what good speakers do: they mesmerize you whether you agree with them or not. Tina slapped both hands on the table, “Hey, folks, this is our last evening together, what do you say to one more drink and we skip the bar food and go out for a real dinner? There’s a pretty good-looking Mexican restaurant a block down the main drag. We can walk, it’s warm out tonight.”

We decided to take the long route to the restaurant, along the beach away from the traffic and noise. Even with the bright lights of South Florida, the sky was black and many bright stars sparkled. We walked along the boardwalk, all holding hands like kindergarteners on an outing. A warm breeze was puffing gently, pushing us along. Tina said, “This may be the best moment of the convention.”

Josh asked whether any of us would have signed up for the convention if we’d known what it was going to be like. No one answered for the longest time.

Then Angela said: “You know I might have, I’ve learned a lot. Plenty of bullshit, a couple of really good speakers; you guys were the best of course, I learned a belly full about bar food and. . .”

We walked for another minute, with the waves breaking gently, small Florida waves, the foam picking up light from the resorts that line the beach.

“And what?” asked Tina.

Angela giggled. “And you know, does this feel like magic to anyone else but me?”

