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Source Document for "My Life as a Ghost"

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In 1968, I was shot in the head with a Colt .45 from a distance of six feet, 12 hours after and less than 10 miles away from where Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I was 14 years old.

What happens when the soul is slammed out of the body and is incompletely returned?

The art project, "My Life as a Ghost", explores certain aspects of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) from the inside out.

Most creatures feel they properly belong to their lives. But what happens when that feeling has largely departed? Not everyone with TBI experiences this ghostliness but some of us do. The witnessing of TBI ghosts has much to say, in this era of functional MRIs and the Quantified Self, about the perplexing intersection of psyche and soma.

What you will be hearing tonight is the source document for the art project. It is the text that all future collaborators on the project will need to familiarize themselves with in order to understand where the project came from and what led to its creation. In a sense, the target audience for this talk is the future.

So this reading is a one-time event; it is hard imagine that it would ever again be read in front of an audience.

And yes, at the end of this talk I will get into the details of how and why this all went down; it's a melodrama of some complexity and mystery with strange subterranean undercurrents coursing

through it. However, because I know from experience people can get caught up in a kind of rubbernecking at a car crash whenever I retell the events of Lane, who was the shooter, the gun; and me --- and because the subject of this art project is the inner life, and not interpersonal fu nor medical drama, I will leave the discussion of the actual injury (which is lurid in its own way) until the end.

I'll be happy to take questions afterwards.

And I must give a shout out to Sarah Curran in particular and the Stanford Arts Institute in general, infinite gratitude on top of 108 bows for taking a chance with me and "My Life as a Ghost" at the very beginning of its lurching into creation.

Ghost traces

My TBI was one of those medical miracles, the kind where the person should not have survived, much less remained able to walk and talk. A .45 slug is as big as a someone's thumb --- and all the bullet did was fracture my jaw, blow out a portion of my skull, go through two walls, and lodge in a brick fireplace.

The medical science of the time didn't understand that TBI can have all kinds of subtle emotional and cognitive consequences. That I was still alive and apparently just like the person I was before was all that anyone could see.

But there were longterm consequences and impairments. The strangest and most illuminating after-effect, the one that most profoundly raises questions about what it means to be human and alive --- is this: that ever after that gunshot wound, I was never entirely sure if I should be here, on this earth, in this life.

I had to figure out this most profound of alienations from my own life on my own. At the time, there was no medical or cultural guidance to be had. I discovered from the inside out that this alienation was a neurological artifact and not a character flaw.

This permanent uncertainty about being in the world and in one's own body is not unique to me. Other people with TBI also live with this ghostliness every day of their post-injury lives .

There *were* intimations over the years about being a TBI ghost. But my comprehension was equivalent to being a defective SETI radio telescope: signals weren't getting through clearly enough to make sense of what was being transmitted.

The first, and perhaps most potent, of these portents was the image behind me which ran in a April 1971 issue of "Rolling Stone" magazine. I stared and stared at it and cut it out and pasted on my dorm room door.

I couldn't have told anyone *why* the image had to be my sophomoric freak flagged waved out into the world. For sure, I had always made a vague link between the violence and political upheaval of the 1960s and my own injury. The references to the war in Indochina, the urban inner-city youth in the image --- these fit somehow with what I had gone through. After all, that gun was at the ready because the parents of Lane wanted to protect themselves in those times of urban unrest and if the wrong people had gotten uppity.

I was moved to write Lane a letter about having been so taken with the image and having turned it into a kind of brand-me avatar: and she replied something along the lines of "why are you always such a downer/here, read this Wordsworth poem". She was doing swell at Pomona College; I was failing and falling in Madison, Wisconsin.

In retrospect it's easy to see the appeal in that early bit of guerrilla marketing.

Another instantiation of ghostliness that I couldn't make sense of at the time had to do with a comment made by a guy I was involved with shortly afterwards. He remarked that the Don Maclean song "Starry Night" with its concluding line about "the world was never made for someone as beautiful as you" applied to me.

This was before the era of humblebrags and that wasn't the spirit in which the comment was made or received: he and I both knew the remark came from his concern about how I just didn't seem to know how to be *here* and my uncertainty as to whether I even *wanted* to be here.

Yeah this was young love --- but more important was that he was worried about something deep he sensed that couldn't be fixed. I didn't take the remark as a compliment but a sad statement of fact.

Somehow the world and I weren't right with each other and he and I both knew it but neither of us knew how to name that wrongness.

A few years later than *that* my now-exhusband made what seemed to me an eerily similar evaluation: he said I was the most alienated person he had ever met.

You have to realize this was at a time when Paul Goodman and Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School and Marxist analyses of life and work were still in the air, topped with some leftover French Existentialism, especially in Berkeley and among readers of "The Village Voice". Being alienated in general was a sign of how badly done by you were by the pressures and contradictions of late-stage capitalism, mass media, and the power elite. In other words, alienation was a marker of psycho-social-political-economic trauma and evidently I had an awfully bad case of the PTSD inflicted by the powers that be.

But I always suspected that he was possibly referring to the pained looks I would give him from time to time, the distanced responses, and the sideways glances to elsewhere. He carried his own deep sorrows (he was an only child of concentration camp survivors and both of his parents were already long dead) but my own dead zone wasn't something he could touch or heal; neither of us really knew what mine was about.

It was also a referendum on the peculiar way I could be a long-time "New Yorker" subscriber and hold up my own in a dinner conversation but didn't seem able to *make* anything of myself. We were both baffled and upset by this --- so alienation it was. Unlike him I had never had other skills aside

from those of the prefrontal cortex: I was never going to have been someone who was going to be able to make a living by working with her hands.

Yet he could be sweet about it, calling me his favorite Martian, familiar after a time with how I always seemed to have my head cocked searching for transmissions from the mother ship. A piece of art he wanted to buy (but somehow we never got around to it) was a somewhat floating-in-space depiction of a young woman wearing headphones, distracted, a bit otherworldly, and surrounded by lots of white space and what color there was, was grayed out. The title of the pen and ink was "her lost space". "That's you", he said.

Shortly after we had the kind of fight where things are said and done that shouldn't ever be said and done and I ran out of the house, in some ways never to return, I gobbled up quite by coincidence Peter Straub's "Ghost Story".

The relevant bit is that there was an evil manitou-succubus-supernatural female entity who by all appearances was beautiful and romantically compelling --- but something about her wasn't quite right, just couldn't quite connect properly with one of the horror novel's male protagonists. There's a scene where one of the protags catches her in the act of disincorporating and turning into a glowing green gassy mass, which turns out to be her native state.

And when I read this, I thought "that's me." Not that I was a being with evil intent, up to supernatural no-good with my seductive powers; but that I was a being that couldn't entirely inhabit a human existence fully --- and my partners ultimately sensed this.

I have to even wonder if the script that has bedeviled my romantic life --- "nice girl but not for me" --- has something to do with being a TBI Ghost. After all, how can someone *really* bond with someone who isn't *really* entirely here and isn't really sure if she *should* be here?

So the hints were there: I was just too dense to get them.

When I was in my middle 30s, consulting with an MD acupuncturist for the first time about some of my maddening mysterious health problems, he, after inquiring about my medical history and hearing about that gunshot to the head, smiled, closed his laptop, and said "What else changed in your life then?"

I gawped at him and I could feel the relays flipping and flapping and flopping. So *that's* what happened; *that* explains some of the trouble I've have had ever since. I didn't arrive at an understanding of ghostliness at that point then but a lot of thing snapped into place about so many of the inexplicable struggles I had for decades.

Which leads to

The impairments

I have never found victim-art interesting and after all, Milton only wrote *one* poem on his blindness. "Magic Mountain" isn't really about tuberculosis and the only novel I've ever read about illness that was any good --- the pseudonymous 1950s-era Booker-nominated "The Rack" --- no one but me ever seems to have read.

The aging Berkeley feminist in me also resists the narrative I have heard too often: when women speak, they often talk about "what happened to me". When men speak, they often describe "what I did".

And the fact that, for example, ever after my shot to the head it takes little to make me motion-sick where before I never got motion-sick at all is not interesting. That my TBI potentiated certain other inborn neurological vulnerabilities may be annoying, upsetting, and can make my life hellish but that it is also not interesting.

But where it is worth discussing the impairments --- and what *is* sort of interesting --- is how they intersected with the ghostliness.

I was a daughter of the bourgeoisie and raised with the expectation of course of a professional career.

But that gunshot prematurely aged my brain in ways I recognized decades later when observing my evil mother's decline into dementia. My ability to learn any mathematical or quantitative concepts stopped. I would sit in class and understand perfectly what was explained to me --- and by the time I got home, I just could not remember how to make sense of any of it. I flunked calculus three times and I had no idea why this happened.

Ever after, I simply could not process texts of a certain density, such as a geology textbook or a legal opinion. It all washes out.

My brain just cannot process and retain quantitative transactions and language of a certain abstraction --- all of which which are necessary to function as a symbolic-manipulator in a knowledge economy.

In 2012, newly arrived in TBI World, I volunteered to beta-test a computer-game meant to improve the brain-function of TBI folks. I explained to the post-doc who was my point of contact that what it felt like, when confronted with those tasks I Can Not Do, it's as if my brain were a horse and some small thing spooks me, makes me rare up and shy away from the task to be performed. She knew what I was talking about and explained it in terms of failure of different kinds of memory processing.

But the neurology of the impairments doesn't matter. What mattered is that I couldn't do the kinds of things one needs to do in order to work in the white-collar world; whatever it means to *study* something I also can not do.

And since I have lived most of my adult life in the Bay Area --- perhaps that place in universes known or unknown which places the *most* value on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and medicine) --- well, the constant message was

obviously, I am not meant to be here. And by "here", I mean in this life and on this earth.

My unconscious has always been my surest guide and I am pretty sure that the reason at Berkeley, after much thrashing around, I ended up majoring in psycholinguistics with a minor in philosophy was because I was trying to learn about and heal my deficits. In other words, in my unwitting undergraduate way, I was trying to figure out how to think or how thinking *worked* or what had gone wrong with my thinking or what the relationship was between my extant language functions and what seemed to have gone hinkywampus with my thinking processes. In retrospect I was trying to make myself strong where I was weak --- only it didn't work. I had to have been the worst student in these disciplines that Berkeley ever graduated; it is wrong that the Regents of the University of California gave me a diploma.

And no, cognitive neuroscience as an established academic discipline didn't exist then. It's not like now when every major research university has its new institute for the study of neuroflapdoodle and discussion of mind-body connections have become as common as neighborhood yoga studios and TBI is in the news daily.

So no help was to be found in my miserable experience as an undergraduate. Nobody's fault: simply, the learning wasn't there to be had.

I remember attempting to study for the math section of GREs and weeping, saying "what is wrong with me, why was I so much better at this when I was a kid than now?" Since the connection between my shot to the head and loss of capacity hadn't yet been made, all I knew was how perversely flawed and defective the adult I had grown into had turned out to be.

I was in total panic because I saw no way to make a living. What could I do? Schooling had been a disaster since the age of 14 and I just didn't get why I couldn't focus and retain in the right --- or at least fungible --- ways. I saw my cohort go off to professional schools and I *knew* I couldn't pass the one statistics class their programs required; I *knew* I couldn't parse and retain whatever it was that would make them able to pass licensure exams.

I knew all this but I had no explanation for how I had come to know this or why I had become this way. And I certainly couldn't explain to anyone else the certainty I developed about what tasks I could not perform.

So when I fell into working as a writer, the relief at having a trade was connected to the vanishing of some of the ghostliness. "Ah, I guess there is some way for me to be here". Writing was for me a sheltered industry for the handicapped: what I had been left with (pattern-recognition, intuition) had some working value in that vocation.

So the grief and terror I flipped into when writing died as a profession was beyond that which any normal would feel when his or her trade and livelihood is destroyed. I had thought I had permanently found a way to accommodate my disabilities --- but life and circumstances dictated otherwise.

I would try to explain "no no you don't get it there is NOT anything else I can do, my being a writer was far less about choice than you realize no I can't program or really, do much of anything". I can't concentrate I can't think I can't make myself pay attention I can't I can't I can't.

I skitter over the surface of things, water glider on a stream, and if there is no way for me to feel into the subject matter, an unconsciously-developed compensatory mechanism of looking for meaning based on whatever emotional intelligence I had been left with --- nothing stays registered.

And this is where it is a curse that I was left with fluency: because I can still create coherent speech, the expectation was that I could do all the other things that fluent speech implies.

But I can't. And facility with language isn't about preference.

My attempts at doing those things that normals can do and that by rights I should be able to do is like, well, reaching out for something and whatever it is just isn't there. It's the folly of attempting to activate circuits that have gone dead for life.

I am all icing and no cake --- but the assumption is always that when people see icing there has to be cake.

When I first heard about phantom-limb pain, I got it: just as people enduring phantom-limb pain have sense-memories of limbs which aren't there any more, I too could remember what it was like to be a quick study, read or hear once and get it forever, learn foreign languages, have the experience of boredom rather than panic when confronted with novel mathematical concepts, constructs, and transactions.

When I've read folktales and myths about the dead who don't know they have died and they hang around mistakenly thinking they are among the living --- I knew exactly how those ghosts felt.

It's confusing being a ghost, for both the living who are around them and for the ghosts themselves.

How the project came to be

In the winter of 2012, I was extremely ill with one of my neurologically-mediated conditions, cold isolated and mopish. I happened to read an article in my local newspaper, the "Santa Cruz Sentinel", about living with TBI written by a reporter who had acquired TBI as a child. There was a sidebar listing changes in mood, character, and mental function as caused by TBI --- and as I read this, tears came to my eyes. And my frequency of weeping is about once every five years (see "GRE test preparation weeping", mentioned above. An outlier event).

In the article was a reference to meetings of a local TBI support group. I had never been a member of TBI world but maybe it was finally worth checking it out.

On my fact-finding mission to the group (I hate groups and generally fear them to be potential lynch mobs), which by coincidence was filled entirely with people like me (that is, with mild impairments), I had that sense for the first time of being around my peeps. No neurological or cognitive wackitude was scoffed at, mocked, dismissed, or discounted.

I marveled at this, in contrast to the experiences I had so often had with many people close to me, who would argue that I was lazy, self-destructive, willful (or, later in life after I had established a career), melodramatic, hypochondriacal, an attention-whore, misguided in my self-assessment, engaging in self-pity for imaginary reasons, and that there was nothing wrong with me. I had learned to not even try to talk about the impairments because I was never believed. Whatever I was mistakenly complaining about obviously had to do with having a female brain or being melancholic by nature or being innately non-neurotypical or having too active an imagination.

What I could never make sense of was why these intimates who generally regarded me as a reliable narrator somehow, when it came to the subject of TBI-associated impairments, decided I was a self-deluded and wimpy fool.

But I learned --- better not try to talk about my Swiss-cheese of a brain with normals.

That day in that group reminded me of encounters with 1970s feminism: what, you too? You know what I am talking about and don't think I am exaggerating, making things up, fussing about nothing?

The most found moment came when, as we all went around in a circle to tell each of our stories, a guy stood up who clearly came from law enforcement or the military. He hinted at as much, and he had the command presence and trim prime-of-life physique those guys often have. His body had been severely damaged and he had been in rehab for months --- and when he finally returned to work a year after his accident it took him awhile to realize he could not do what he had done before.

It was when he said after recounting all this, that "I don't know why I am still here" --- I had that zing to the heart you get when you know someone has spoken Truth.

I saw three or four other people in that group of 20 also nodding their heads. In that moment I knew: there is such a thing as a TBI Ghost and I was one and it explained so much.

Oddly, that same winter I had become obsessed with the image of the Golden Fleece. I read lots of retellings of the myth from different countries, harassed reference librarians, emailed people all over the world to inquire if they had heard any lesser-known variants or deeper interpretations of the myth. Nothing I read or was told of had any resonance: whatever I was after wasn't a retelling of the Medea, Argonaut, Persephone or spring-renewal myths, myths of sacrifice, or any other Golden Fleece-related stories I could find.

But I couldn't get it out of my head.

One day that spring, shortly after I had attended that TBI support group for the first time, I was doing trancework with the fellow I do that with from time to time (no, no candles, incense, chanting, or wardrobe effects are involved and if you saw us together you'd think we were just two people chatting over a decaf soy mocha at Starbucks. Where, by the way, he and I have done trancework from time to time). He and I were tossing around images we were both visualizing.

I saw something that looked very much like the Brooks Brothers' logo of a sheep hanging in a sling on a wall. That is, the Brooks' version of the Golden Fleece. In fact, I saw several of these hanging all over the walls of a room, very decorative, not grisly or bloody or goth or cavebear. As I focused further on what the room looked like, I saw sheaves and garlands and bouquets of flowers also draped on the walls of this room.

It was *festive*; and as I looked at the room more closely I saw "Ah, this is a celebration of some sort. A wedding banquet? a commencement dinner? no, it's a cast party".

And then I got the sick feeling in my chest, that inarguable 'uh oh' that is another one of my instant perfect semantic markers for Deep Truth.

Because I knew if there were a cast party, there had to be a performance. And this wasn't a symbolic dreamscape oogiegoogie-of-the-unconscious cast party --- it was a real one.

"My Life as a Ghost" sprang into my head fully formed at that moment, all of a piece the way anything any good I have ever done has always appeared. Since then, all I have done has been to find better ways to explain that shock of insight to the normals: my vision for the project hasn't changed. What *has* happened is that experience Michaelangelo talked about where he said he didn't create sculpture ; all he did is chip away the marble that wasn't sculpture. The project knows what it wants to be.

June 1968

Many people with TBI have no relationship with what caused their injury. A bicyclist doesn't usually have a complex back story with a bump in the road and a diver customarily has no feelings about hidden rocks. Veterans, victims of domestic or gang-violence --- their stories are more like mine, but they aren't the majority of those with TBI.

TBI people often don't remember much about their casualties: it's not uncommon for people to not remember the hours, days, weeks, or even months before they became injured.

And the TBI sequelae I am talking about are not PTSD: if you can't remember what happened you are not going to be triggered and hypervigilant about your injury. My ghostliness has nothing to do with the fact that I don't like sudden loud noises or bright lights and nor much like it when watching a movie if a gun is pointed directly at the viewer. That smattering of PTSD has little effect on my daily life, except for maybe that during a thunderstorm like a dog I want to hide under a table. For me it's not an occasion to marvel at the majesty of nature but to whimper silently, much as with things that provoke motion-sickness: 'make it stop'.

I did have a relationship with the person who shot me; she was one of my closest friends at the time. It was accidentally on purpose and for the purpose of this talk I shall refer to her as Lane --- because we were both minors at the time. I will talk at some length about who I saw her to be and what our friendship was about --- because those elements of character and connection determined what happened that day and where she and I are today.

And as I lay in the hospital bed in which I was finally parked, I watched on TV the hourly status reports about Bobby Kennedy's dying. The point of impact for his bullet was not so different than mine --- but the angle of attack was entirely different. It turned out that a friend of my-then boyfriend had sold Sirhan Sirhan the gun and that Sirhan Sirhan had been the gardener for the grandmother of someone I knew.

When I emptied out my dead sister's house a few years ago I found the issue of "Time" magazine with the cover story on the death of Bobby Kennedy that had my subscriber label on it. How this ended up at my sister's house I have no idea: she hadn't been living at the time where my parents and I were living and she had moved so many times since then. I had not seen it since its issue date --- and I realized I had doodled when I was lying around in the hospital on the pages where the Pasadena/Sirhan connection was detailed.

So on one hand it is absolutely preposterous that there is any connection with Bobby Kennedy's death and my near-miss --- as absurd as the identification some young women made with Lacey Peterson because they too had been cheerleaders and they too had been told they had nice smiles --- but there is something I can't quite shake off. Of course it wasn't with the glamour of the Kennedy's where there was a sense of parallels lives and dynastic fate; that would be absurd. It was the darkness. The epilepsy, suicidal inclinations, and the strange ends characterizing my family of origin felt like a much less pretty version of the extinction curse that appeared to have been pronounced on the Kennedys.

Lane shot me in part because I had been mouthing off about how I had known Bobby Kennedy would be shot. Or at least that was the proximate cause. And to this day, whenever Bobby Kennedy's assassination is mentioned I feel "we are connected", it was connected.

Trying to explain who Lane was and how we were to each other I first got some inkling of when I read Conrad's "A secret sharer" and was introduced to the notion of the doppelganger. In the decade after the shooting introduction to the Jungian notion of the shadow, Ingmar Bergman's "Persona", and Ingrid Bengis' "Combat in the Erogenous Zone" were also helpful. Our friendship had a

passionate complex love-hate quality that perhaps only adolescents can have, eros and aggro mixed.

When I read John Knowles' "A separate peace", required reading for middle-schoolers of my generation, about a deep friendship between two young men at a boarding school, one the golden child the other the tagalong --- and when the tagalong, for reasons he isn't even quite clear on, jangles a tree branch that golden child has climbed onto --- which leads to a fall, a broken bone, and then a death --- well, I realized my ambiguous ambivalent relationship with Lane was not without precedent.

To get at the heart of the matter, let me first attempt to reconstruct what it was to be young in 1968. If your early childhood had been in peacetime 1950s white North America, the amount of disorder, violence, and chaos everywhere in 1968 felt like the world as we had known was blowing apart.

There were student riots in Mexico City, Paris, and elsewhere on campuses and cities all over the world, evoking the spirit of 1848, when there had been major populist revolutions pretty much everywhere in Europe.

In 1968, there was Prague Spring, a Czech attempt at "socialism with a human face", crushed a few months later when Soviet tanks rolled in; recall this was more than 20 years before the Berlin Wall came down. This was the year of the Mai Lai massacre, the Tet offensive with the U.S. embassy in Saigon under attack, the Catonsville Nine burning their draft cards with home-made napalm. Martin Luther King was assassinated; my culture hero Andy Warhol was shot a day or two before I was; there were the Chicago police riots where peaceful protestors were assaulted by law enforcement at the 1968 Democratic Party presidential convention.

There was the intergenerational internecine warfare of draft-resistors and protestors against the war in Vietnam versus the advocates and apologists for the War. We were all living the war at home.

It's hard to parse how inured to omnipresent violence we have become *now* compared to then. 9/11 and terrorist attacks in Madrid, London, Mumbai, Bali, and Boston frame our everyday

epistemology and cosmology of how the world works; we can't return now to how we felt then. We don't even much remark when there's another schoolyard shooting, another crazy-person with gun running amok, football hooliganism, baseball fans killing each other outside sports arenas, WTO street actions, "Grand Theft Auto" generating sales in one day larger than the annual budgets of many moderate-sized cities. And I won't even discuss what Quentin Tarantino hath wrought and Cormac McCarthy has much to answer for.

Back in 1968, violence felt like something that went on in what were then called Third World countries or in the past, not in the safe civil-society homeland of the American Century.

So violence was creeping into everything and the old safe world was blowing apart. This was not the 60s of "Mad Men" --- which existed I suppose in parallel --- but was not the late 1960s I knew.

That's the world Lane and I and the gun were embedded in.

She and I were two of the three young women of our year attending our snotty girls' school who were equals in precocity, emotional volatility, and outsize-distressing homelives. We three had each skipped two grades, came from Jewish families in a school that was a mix of low and high WASP --- and, well, we were called by more than one person 'the unholy triumverate'. Lane was a prodigy with languages, the member of the triumvirate who is not mentioned here was a prodigy with mathematics --- and I had no special talents but I kept up as best I could. Mostly I read all the time.

Until I was in my late 20s, I never encountered someone of the female persuasion as sexy as Lane. She embodied an unconscious female-animal allure that was irresistible, was as much driven by *who she was as a being* as *what she looked like*.

When she and I would greet each other, I would say "hello, stupid" and she would say "hello, ugly". She was hardly stupid and I wasn't aggressively ugly. But our friendship was this mix of love and hate that to this day I don't quite get: she was Jessica Lange/Gwineth Paltrow/the woman no man could resist and I was Lisa Lubner girl nerd.

As can be imagined, there were escapades involving boys and drugs but these incidents aren't of much note, being neither unusual nor having any longterm effects.

Lane was also a creature of impulse. I think some of this impulsivity was tied to her vibrant healthy animal nature (and perhaps tied into her having led an absolutely charmed life --- but that is also not the subject of this talk). I was the friend who tried to rein in her impulsivity in to protect her, talk her down when she got too high, be the annoying voice of reason and the killjoy.

After the incident, I would sometimes offer the facile explanation that I was Lane's conscience and that was why she shot me. Perhaps, but that doesn't quite get at it and reality is not that simple. It was suggested that she shot me because I was the only one of her friends her parents liked. That has to be specious and stupidly reductive as well.

Some final words about Lane, before I discuss my role that day in June 1968. Lane's parents were way-right-wing Republicans, what used to be called John Birchers and what might now be called Tea Partiers. No one will never know all the reasons that revolver was in the kitchen in that nice house on a nice street in a nice area of a nice city, Pasadena, but it was true that the Watts riots of a few years past were not that far away in time and space. Pasadena did have neighborhoods that weren't white and affluent; and Lane's parents were not fans of civil-rights legislation. Lane shared her parents' politics until they kicked her out of the house (not for shooting me but for having a friend over when they weren't there. Nice folks.). For what it's worth, Lane very shortly afterwards changed her politics to that of what pretty much everyone I know is, and she became the kind of person who volunteered few years later to work as a translator for some Chilean refugees fleeing the overthrow of Allende.

But at the time, Lane and I were in total and disagreeable political disagreement.

One last thing about her: her father used to take her target shooting on the weekends. She knew her way around a gun.

As for my role in this drama --- how to characterize it: in the mode of Anton Chekov? Douglas Sirk? Patricia Highsmith? --- I have to confess to my own adolescent awkwardnesses. I was just coming into my animal powers, which in my case turned out to be the curse of intuition, or what some have termed my spideysense or suprarational abilities. I didn't ask for this blessing I am cursed with, I can't summon it, it just appears when it does. And the insights range from the mundane (after glancing at multiple listing service for friends who were househunting in Berkeley a few years back, I picked out two addresses and said "go here". And these were the houses they bought) to dire: when I saw my best friend from the 1970s and 80s walk into my office just after he got off the plane from attending the funeral of his brother dead of an overdose, I took one look at him and thought "he will be following his brother down into the grave in four years." As he did, almost exactly --- and no, we had not yet heard of AIDS.

I was unwieldy with this unasked-for gift --- and as teenagers will do, boasted about my strange new power. It was obnoxious and annoying and one thing I took away from being shot in the head was --- keep a lid on it. Only talk about what you Just Know quietly with people you trust --- and maybe mostly don't talk about it at all. Just Know.

But I didn't know that then.

So the day *before* Bobby Kennedy was shot, I went around *predicting* that he would be shot.

The day that he *was* shot, Lane and I decided to walk over to her house for lunch, in between two-hour finals in the morning and two-hour finals in the afternoon.

So we went, and somehow we got onto the topic of Bobby Kennedy's assassination, and I was being I-told-you-so and Lane was getting annoyed.

She walked into the kitchen, pulled out the loaded and cocked revolver that her parents kept in a drawer, and started waving it around.

I had not grown up with guns but nonetheless I had always been taught "you never point a gun at anyone, not even a toy gun". My parents had been adamant about this.

Lane started pointing it in my direction and I wanted nothing to do with whatever larking about she was engaged in: I told her to knock it off (as I had always been telling her to knock various things off) and walked out of the kitchen into a breakfast room.

I ducked behind the wall of the breakfast room, but then not hearing anything, I stuck my head around the corner to see what she was doing.

"Put that down!"

Ready aim fire .

I attempted to duck out of Lane's line of fire.

What I remember is a distinctive ringing pulsing sound --- and then the silence.

Lane immediately started shrieking, horrified and penitent. I, true to the border-collie nature I have to this day, told her to call the operator (this was pre-dial-911) and while I stuck my head under cold running water in the kitchen sink, I said something to her --- I don't remember exactly what but it was tacit and involved terse indirection --- about how we needed to get our stories straight, play up that we were just dumb kids horsing around --- and not that we were, well, whatever we were. At the end of our sophomore year in high school, we were leading high-intensity lives not Like The Other Kids.

When she came to visit me in the hospital, we (also indirectly) acknowledged that something very odd had happened that day which had to do with our tangled friendship, that what had happened was accidentally on purpose.

Because the hardest thing here is that she and I were *friends*. I refused to testify against her, although I heard vague intimations that some DA wanted to bring charges but I would not cooperate. When she wanted to come back from having been a runaway to Venice, California (still boho and low-rent and somewhat safe in those days, not the skeery mix of wealthy and underclass as it is today), what else could she do but show up on my parents' lawn and ask for help? Which we did: we found her a place to stay with an empty-nester and from there she integrated into a kindly foster family and was given a full scholarship to our snotty girls' school. And from there, with talent, ambition, brain, and drive --- and luck, oh her luck --- she went on to have a fabulous life.

We always stayed in touch; I would stay with her in Amsterdam and she would stay with me in New York and the Bay Area. We wrote each other great letters.

I didn't think to engage in revisionism about me and Lane and that day until many many years later. Why that revisionism happened was that during the years my career was doing very well --- I was even getting profiled in the newspaper she wrote for --- I never heard from her. Ever. That decade marked the longest time she and I had ever gone without communicating.

What began to seem fishy is that she popped up on email a few years *after* my career had tanked. I wondered at that; could it be she really didn't want me to do well? Could an element of our strange bond be dependent on my being in a bad place relative to her? And that somehow, over the waves and beyond the sea, she waited silently until I had returned to being so assuredly one down compared to her?

This was unsettling. And when in our fitful email conversations we had in the next few years I mentioned "you know, I seem to have suffered permanent damage from that day in ways we could not have anticipated at the time" --- she didn't respond.

It took another friend pointing out that there was something screwy going on (another example of my not making connections). She pointed out that if *I* had caused someone permanent harm, even inadvertently as an adolescent, and then I heard that the person I had harmed was having a hard

time years later, my impulse would have been "oh dear, who knew it would have played out this way, how can I help?"

But Lane just went silent.

Which turned my thinking in a grim direction: perhaps she couldn't deal because her impulses had always been darker than I had ever imagined and hmm, maybe I really am not supposed to be here and my life ever since has been an accident.

The whole thing falls into the category of what someone I knew once phrased as "you have the strangest karma of anyone I have ever met."

So is it really that the deepest aspect of my permanent brain damage parallels the intention behind it? Someone was trying to make me go away and I feel forever after that I *am*, at least somewhat, permanently away? Neurological damage as echo of interpersonal plot arc --- well, that sounds like something out of a not-very-original graphic novel. As above as so below and all that --- but for the purposes of the "My Life as a Ghost" project, perhaps it's just a striking but superficial coincidence. Or maybe it's just one more way I know how it *really* feels to not be sure if you should be here.

Another reference back to my exhusband (I can go years without thinking about him but somehow he figures in this narrative more than other people I have loved) is that during one of those fights one should not have (and which I never had with anyone else after him: I may be slow but I can learn some things sometimes) he yelled at me "I know why Lane shot you!"

Really? You do? Because I really don't.

Forget about Lane

So even with all this: the impairments, ongoing health problems, being forever unclear as to why some people who have been close to me seem to think it should have been a good idea for me to

Depart --- none of these would have created that state of TBI ghostliness. Many people far more impaired than I don't always run to the corner of "Why am I still here?" Many people with chronic illness, such as MS or scleroderma, never question why they are still here. And certainly many people who have survived personal violence, whether in wartime, with crime, or in their homes --- don't walk around feeling "why am I still here?"

But we TBI Ghosts do.

Even though I went through some classic near-death experiences I do not think they had anything to do with being forever after a TBI Ghost. As I lay in the ER I *did* see my life pass before my eyes and I felt, whether this was actually true or not, as I was getting fainter, that if I let myself pass out I would die. I decided to stay and kept myself awake.

Such experiences are rather common and I would insist they have nothing to do with being a TBI Ghost.

TBI Ghosts pose the deepest questions about self and consciousness. Some medical academicians concerned with waking states and anesthesia are now exploring issues related to TBI Ghostliness as are present-day philosophers going under the grouping of New Mysterians, who insist that felt senses of self and consciousness are trickyly irreducible.

Because I am a writer, I know the limits of words. "My Life as a Ghost" the art project will be a visual and immersive environment that people can move through. A performance the opening night of the installation will be a collaboration with a composer, a sound designer, and a choreographer.

And "My Life as a Ghost" won't just be about me. The experiences of TBI ghosts, captured in interviews with beautiful cinematography, will lay the foundation. The filmed documentation of their gestures, anecdotes, and metaphors will help shape the project but it is not the project itself. "My Life as a Ghost" will be art and not documentary.

With the project to come, if people walk through the final built environment and find it a little bit beautiful, a little bit disturbing, and a little bit haunting, then "My Life as a Ghost" will have done what it set out to do.

Thank you for your attention.