

Secret life of a Personality Virus

FAILSAFE

It's true that I was upset about some recent news reports on TV. It's true that I was looking for answers, but not in the tube of toothpaste I'd purchased at the health-food store.

Innocently I placed a dab of the Indian Ayurvedic herbal formula—with extracts of the ancient Peelu tree—on my electric toothbrush. No sooner did the aromatic concoction invade my mouth than I began to wonder if there was any truth to reincarnation.

"The modern term is *recycling*, Brenda. Lately you've been agonizing over the five children who were drowned in the bathtub, and the little dog who was thrown into traffic. Well, they've all recycled and are doing just fine."

The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but before I could find a name it went on in a patronizing tone, "It's *you* I'm concerned about. Your stress level has put you way ahead of schedule for recycling. Don't you want to live a while longer?"

I peered at my face in the mirror above the basin. "I won't look like a corpse once I get my makeup on. Go away. I'm going out to lunch."

"All right, but I thought you'd be happy to hear from me, since you still have my Valentine card about 'a love for all seasons'."

My electric toothbrush fell into the sink with a clatter. Only one other person would know that: Lee, my favorite boyfriend who died nine years ago. By then we'd gone our separate ways, but the romantic memories were as strong as ever. Both of us were fascinated by all things paranormal such as UFOs and extrasensory perception.

One summer when we practiced mental telepathy, I found that our "game" resulted in side effects like clairvoyance and uncanny coincidences. After we broke up, my psychic sensitivity faded but my belief in unseen forces was imprinted permanently.

Any other day I'd have welcomed a vigorous metaphysical discussion, but his timing was way off. Wiping the toothpaste off my chin, I silenced the buzzing bristles and coated my face with latex paint—sold in small bottles as Creamy Peach Foundation.

"Where *are* you, Lee?" I'd searched every corner of the bathroom.

"In the Cosmic Energy Dimension—commonly known as Home. Where we go between excursions to the visible spectrum."

I didn't have time to digress into who he meant by "we."

He told me anyway. "Our energy, our personality. We don't die along with the human body, you see, because we're a separate species."

His intensity spiked like a mild electric current. "We're a virus. "

I blinked, smearing my mascara. "Our personality—a virus? Are you kidding me? *You* may have the personality of a virus, but I don't."

Shutting him out as best I could, I hurried into my walk-in closet to find a sexy, yet tasteful, ensemble for my lunch date with Kent. I'd met him recently at the Tobacco Barn, and we bonded instantly after realizing we might be the only two people on earth who smoked True Blue Kings.

"Slow down, sweetheart," Lee said. "I wasn't kidding about your situation. If your body gives out from stress, what will happen to your cats?"

Bullseye. Whatever he was, Lee still had a firm emotional hold on me. I'd humor him for now, but not at the expense of being late for my date.

He muttered snidely, "Mustn't keep His Lordship waiting, must we."

"I don't think Kent would be impressed to know I'd been held up by a deceased boyfriend," I snapped. "He seems very nice."

"You may change your mind when you know him better."

Aha—so that was the real agenda for Lee's visit. He was jealous because another man might share his place of honor in my heart. I was flattered.

"You needn't be," he said. "It took a lot of valuable energy to come here and help you."

"Not that you *are* helping me, but why did you wait nine years?"

"I've had the same host the whole time—Winston. I'm free for a while because the boy's in a coma. He hit his head diving into a swimming pool—nearly recycled. I'm letting his body regroup before I go back to him."

He was silent while I paged through my clothes hangers, searching for two items that matched. When he spoke next his voice sounded fainter. "I've missed you. Trusting you with a few trade secrets is the best I can do for you. I wouldn't waste my energy on anyone else."

"Really? How come you've never contacted me in a dream?"

"You're hard to catch up with when you surf the cosmic net. And I doubt that you'd take a dream seriously enough to protect your host body."

"Brenda feels perfectly fine, thank you. What if I refuse to listen? I can turn you off right now if I want to, just like that." I snapped my fingers.

"Of course you can. I'll go back to Winston, and you can recycle to a remote village in India."

At a loss to trump that remark, in sulky silence I finished dressing and searched all over the house for my car keys. In a sulk of his own, Lee let me get all worked up before he volunteered that they were in my raincoat pocket.

"You can tell me more about your viruses tomorrow," I said, driving away in my Mitsubishi Expo at a high rate of speed. He finessed me by popping up again when I braked for the light at Starr Pass and Greasewood.

"To appreciate your personality, you need to know our history," he said calmly. "I'll give you the thumbnail version, okay? Basically, we go for the most sophisticated equipment available. Our first hosts were the dinosaurs. Our last, before humans, were chimpanzees and dolphins." He broke off. "You're way over the speed limit, you know."

"You do your job and I'll do mine. So humans are the best we can do?"

"Our relatives who stayed with the animals would disagree. The more creative personalities saw the potential of humans and ran with it."

"Ran with what?" I said, checking my makeup in the rear-view mirror.

"A trick we borrowed from our cancer cousins. We built an annex over the primitive human brain where we could develop new talents."

That got my attention. I'd often wondered why the top part of the brain looked so different from the bottom part. It tied in with what I knew about the older section controlling basic human needs and reactions, while refinements in voluntary behavior are in the larger, squiggly area.

"Without our improvements, *Homo* would be neither *sapiens* nor *erectus*," he bragged. "Watch out!"

I swerved, narrowly missing a cyclist who was ignoring the bike lane. "Don't distract me. I agreed to stay alive, didn't I? You're not helping."

He gave the mental equivalent of a sigh. "Okay. If you only remember one thing, this is it: we personalities and our human hosts are separate entities." His point was emphasized by a jolt like a mild taser. I shrieked, he apologized. "Can't help it, love. Moving on, we need to address the way you freak out about people getting maimed and murdered."

Impatient honks from the cars lined up behind me made it clear that the left-turn arrow at 22nd and Kino had turned green.

"Getting killed is not as terrible as it seems," Lee continued. "We have a 'failsafe' device. When our host body gets more damage than it can survive, we buzz off Home to—"

"To the Cosmic whatsaname—what we earthlings call *dying*?" I broke in sarcastically.

"Destroying a body may appear to be horrendous, but getting hung up on what you see can mess you up big time." He nudged me with an electric tingle. "Bodies are expendable. Personalities are eternal."

Lee's "failsafe" concept got my vote hands down when he added that it also applied to animals, and that our pets' personalities mingled with ours at Home like the family members they were.

Feeling more appreciative of my dead lover's motives, I paid attention as he waffled on about why many famous and infamous icons have returned down the ages unnoticed because they recycled in totally different bodies.

The dashboard clock told me I was fifteen minutes late for my date, and it didn't help that the fuel gauge was tickling empty. If I could just get as far as Coco's, I'd let Kent take care of getting me to a gas station.

I sensed a tweak of hostility from Lee. "You have no idea where you and I and Kent met before, do you?"

I jammed on the brakes as a motorbike cut me off, but Lee barely paused. "Remember when you got hypnotized and had a past-life regression to Spain in 1649? You were an 18-year old manservant to a wealthy merchant. He sent you to Marie de Medici in Florence with a gift of emeralds. An evil monk strangled you and stole the emeralds."

"I remember telling you about that when you were alive. It was only a figment of my subconscious."

"Of course it was. That's where we keep our past-life recall apart from the current one. During hypnosis or meditation—and of course between hosts—is when we connect with universal memory. That's how I know that I was the Spanish merchant and Kent was the monk. Small universe, eh?"

Picturing Lee's know-it-all smile, I mopped my perspiring face with a tissue, taking most of my makeup with it. He was silent for so long that I wondered if he'd been recalled to the boy in the coma.

"You mean Winston. Not yet, love. I have time to help you with an issue that always gets your knickers in a twist—racial pride versus democracy."

He'd picked a good topic to get my mind off Kent. "Damn right," I said. "It's a moral paradox."

"Morality has nothing to do with it—it's biology. Two brains in one skull—two species—opposite goals." His intensity gave me a sharp electric twinge. "In the primitive human brain, bonding depends on physical factors to maintain breeding consistency. In the advanced brain, personality bonding depends on energy factors—electrochemical energy invisible to humans—so we couldn't care less how the host looks or acts."

"The Odd Couple syndrome!" I shouted. The answer to May-December romances, sexual orientation, other alliances that defy logic, prison, death.

It was a *Eureka!* moment that struck me as hilarious going on tragic. No wonder history kept repeating itself. The world's endless conflicts between neighbors and nations originated, not from noble or heroic principles, but from two different brains inhabiting the same territory for lack of a better alternative.

"Attracting more compatible hosts to this planet has been our goal for millennia." Lee's voice sounded uneven as if his battery needed recharging. "It's frustrating because the human element is morbidly defensive about sharing." He cited the Roswell fiasco and the suppression of UFO information.

In the distance, the Coco's sign rippled with heat waves. Mount Lemmon was wearing its rain hat down over its ears, the puffy crown a brilliant white, the brim a purplish black.

Ω

As we approached the notorious Grant/Campbell intersection I felt a jolt followed by a peculiar, detached sensation as if I'd shot out of my body and back again. My rear-view mirror showed a Rent-A-Van closer than it appeared which had rudely connected with my bumper. The distraction made me miss what Lee was saying about the two types of personality virus.

"Keepers and Killers," he repeated patiently. "The Keepers—like you and me—are programmed to preserve life. The Killers are a mutation of us with no genes for compassion. All they know is recycling. That's why their destructive behavior toward everything on this planet is unstoppable."

My "fight" response flared up. "We could genetically engineer them out of existence, now that we have the Human Genome Project."

He chuckled. "Unless there were too many Killers on the project's board of directors. And trust me, if a bill *did* get to congress, bleeding-heart Keepers would support the Killers in the name of civil rights."

I had to admit his ideas were seductive, but a phenomenon he hadn't covered was suicide. "Which type of personality kills its own host?"

"A confused one." He ignored my inappropriate snicker. "I'll have to backtrack for a moment. We enter the host brain when human conception occurs. The ideal life is

to link up with the descendant of a host that was healthy and well off, with the same DNA we've been used to."

Another light bulb went on in my mind—the point of having children, which had never seemed worth the trouble to me. That in turn made sense of amassing a fortune far beyond the needs of one lifetime, to support your future lives. Proof of the pudding was the success of famous dynasties, from the British royal family to the Kennedys. Being childless and happily unambitious didn't seem such a great bargain after all.

"Don't blame yourself or your host, love. Your tour is a success if you didn't get your wires crossed in your new brain and develop into a raving lunatic. Your human genes are good quality too, so your brother's descendants would be worth recycling to."

Lee's reassurance gave me a comfortable feeling. I had a moment to enjoy it before he returned to my question about suicide.

"Suicidal types are Killers who are born into life-oriented Keeper families. What they hear is the opposite of what they feel, so they're extremely conflicted, especially as teenagers. Sooner or later the killing instinct wins, and they often take others with them for company."

It dawned on me that Lee's information was an even better stress reliever than my True Blue Kings. Traffic had come to a standstill, and the discordant wail of approaching sirens meant there'd been an accident near Grant and Campbell. I turned off the engine and the cooling went with it. Rolling down the window I lit up a tranquilizer, while my thoughts wandered to what my virus personality might look like.

"Like electricity—no particular shape," Lee responded. "You can't 'kill' electricity, which is why we stay intact even when our host doesn't. The closest we've come to being visible is through magnetic resonance imaging. It's not sophisticated enough yet to show *what* we are—only *where* we are."

The sirens grew deafening as police and an ambulance arrived. "Did someone *recycle*?" I asked, to humor him.

Lee's silence made me uneasy. I wondered if he was getting any ideas about joining Kent and me for lunch.

"No, but thanks anyway," he said drily, his voice barely audible. "Keep the home fires burning, love."

A sensation like a hug was followed by a chilly emptiness. I felt both disappointed and relieved that my visit, or hallucination, with Lee was over.

As I pulled into the parking lot in front of the restaurant I saw Kent waiting at the entrance. He forgave my tardiness with a brief smile, barely listening to my excuse of the traffic accident.

His firm grip on my arm let me know who was in charge as he guided me to a secluded table. The narrow, dark corner gave me a trapped feeling—like the cellar where I hid the emeralds and met my death in 1649—but now didn't seem the time to mention it.

When Kent picked up the menu I noticed he was wearing a gold ring set with a huge imperial-cut emerald. He saw me staring. "Like it? Emeralds are my passion. You must come and see my collection."

Don't panic. It would take more coincidences than the emeralds to convince me that Kent was my 17th Century strangler. When Lee was alive we discovered dozens of parallels with Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton, which we stretched to include the fact that they met in 1789 and we met in 1978.

I tried the numerical approach with Kent. "Do the years 1649 or 1946 mean anything to you?"

He thought for a moment. "Not really. I was born in 1946. Why?"

I drew in my breath sharply. "Same year as me!" I blurted to cover up my shock, and we clinked glasses.

If he knew I'd lied he didn't show it. After lunch—and more than my usual quota of wine—I accepted a ride in his Cadillac to his home nearby and take a look at his emeralds. Between Lee's advice and my pepper spray, I was confident I could handle any hazardous situation.

As I bent over the glittering gems in their bed of black velvet, I kept a weather eye on Kent hovering around behind me.

But he outsmarted me. Vice-like fingers tightened around my neck and I felt engulfed in black velvet.

Ω

The letters on the glass double doors appeared to spell ECNARTNE YCNEGREME.

Through half-open eyes I saw that I was lying on a stretcher with a tube in my arm and a couple of kids with white coats and stethoscopes peering down at me.

If I was going to have a near-death experience, this seemed the right sort of place to have one. It would be fun to hover near the ceiling, watching heroic efforts to revive me. I'd take my time coming back so as to give the youngsters plenty of practice in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Before I could do any out-of-body tricks, my juvenile retinue deserted me to field another stretcher barreling through the entrance. On it lay an unconscious boy with a parent running along on either side, gripping his hands.

A white-coated adolescent with a stubbly beard and "Dr. Fine" on his name tag swooped down and whipped the I.V. out of my arm. "Good to go, Brenda," he said with a grin, offering his hand to help me off the stretcher. "We gave you a little sedative, so you might not remember much about the accident right away, but we couldn't find a thing wrong with you."

I felt my throat where Kent's fingers must have crunched down. It didn't hurt at all. "How did anyone know Kent was trying to strangle me?"

"Someone tried to strangle you?"

"You know—the man I was visiting, Kent. He strangled me to death in a past life, you see, and I was afraid he was going to get away with it—again."

The boy-doctor's eyes showed more white around the edges. Instead of pulling me up he pressed me back down, his formerly helping hand wrapped around a syringe with a triple-X size needle.

"Just kidding!" I screeched with a hysterical giggle, leaping onto the slippery tiled floor. Regaining my balance I torpedoed the double doors and ran out into the setting sun. Now I had to find my car in the packed parking lot.

It was nowhere. I had no option but to retreat to the hospital, where a clerk was waiting for me with a form to sign. It stated that someone with my name driving a minivan had been rear-ended by a large rented van near Grant and Campbell. No

injuries were found, but as the patient was fairly incoherent she was treated for shock and dispatched to St. Mary's Hospital.

"This must be for someone else," I said with a superior smile, handing back the form. "Trust me, I'd know if I was in a car accident." But even as I spoke I relived the sight in my car's rear-view mirror of that nasty Rent-A-Van looming up behind me. I realized that Brenda must have blacked out in the collision, but my personality had been too focused on Lee to notice what was happening to my unfortunate host.

Had my energy been, to quote Lee, "surfing the cosmic net" in the interval between the collision and the hospital? Had my lunch date with Kent been simply a dream, or clairvoyance?

The fact remained that in the "real" world I was stranded without wheels, which is not a good thing to be in Tucson. A call to the police confirmed that my car was crippled and had been towed to the impound lot. How infuriating! But I had the number Kent gave me at the Tobacco Barn in my cell phone list so I knew at least that meeting had been real. It was high time I explained why I'd stood him up. I dialed but the voice mail was full.

Unable to reach him after three more attempts, I called a taxi and sat down to wait on a bench outside the emergency entrance. Moments later the parents of the boy on the stretcher sat down next to me. The father's face looked carved in stone while the mother sobbed into a shredded tissue. "How many times did I tell Winston not to dive off the side of the pool?"

Winston? That name, the pool, sounded familiar. A shiver went through me. "Excuse me, did you say Winston?" I blurted.

The parents nodded in sync. "He's in a coma," the father said gruffly.

"Don't worry," I said with an encouraging grin, "his personality will be back any minute now. I was just talking to him."

Instead of being grateful they glared and moved away. I shrugged. With my new insight I'd simply have to get used to that kind of reaction. I was tempted to stick around and say "Hi" to Lee until I realized that, while he was Winston, he wouldn't remember me anyway.

In three weeks my car was repaired as good as new. I gave up trying to contact Kent but, in case the date in the restaurant was clairvoyance, I'm taking it as a warning and keeping my guard up.

What I've learned from that weird experience with Lee is that it's pointless to agonize over the unexplainable. All the answers are waiting for me in the Cosmic Energy Dimension, or should I say, at Home.

