

Concussion!

Ken was carrying a 16-foot aluminum extension ladder down the street. They were going somewhere to do something, but he was not, for the moment, exactly sure where or what. The ladder was going to be important. Thunder sounded nearby; they ran to seek shelter, running down the road toward the nearest building, Jean putting her hands above her head to ward off the first drops of rain, he carrying the ladder above his head while he ran.

In a flash of enlightenment, the insanity of carrying an aluminum ladder over his head in an electrical storm struck him. He threw the ladder to the side, and it clattered on the ground when it landed. Lightning struck nearby and there was a terrible loud clap of thunder.

He was walking on Kauai in the rain. "Watch your step, Ken," Jean reminded him, "it's slippery when it's wet." And they walked on in the warm moisture through jungle-like overgrowth partially sheltering the pathway from the rain. Eventually, the path would emerge onto a beach, where they could go swimming.

The jungle path opened out onto a sunny hillside, winding through a field of grass on its way down to a lake, where there was a picnic table, set for a giant picnic. His mother and father were there, and his brother and sister. They were all smiling, happy to see him and happy to see Jean too. They had a nice picnic, lounging in the sun and swimming in the lake.

Then it was later in the afternoon, and he was anxious to return because he wanted to take Jean's picture in the jungle on the way back to the car. They walked along the path, Ken in front, followed by Jean and Ken's mother and the others strung out behind. Ken rounded the bend where the jungle should have been, but it was not there.

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Ken was disappointed, but Jean told him it would be all right and he could relax about it. She reached out and touched him on the forehead; in her hand was a cold washcloth, and he was lying in bed and the out-of-focus world was moving quickly by around him while she gently replaced one cold washcloth with another. Ken closed his eyes.

And found himself in a dark tunnel, stumbling his way forward, sure a beast was about to catch him. Did he feel the hot breath of a beast on the back of his neck? He began to run, tripped over a stone and fell forward – and kept on falling.

While he fell, he became aware of listening to a horn concerto. The orchestra had apparently failed to catch the audience's attention, because there were many people talking. The horns continued on in a non-melodic, monotonous way, high-low-high-low. He discovered he was not falling, he was on a soft bed, lying on his back.

Jean was putting a cold washcloth on his forehead. And the voices and the horns were gone. The world was silent.

So silent. Snowflakes were falling all around him, and he was dressed in shorts and a tank top. He was freezing. He began to shiver in the cold.

A warm blanket was being wrapped around him. No, not around him, that was not right. He was lying down, and the blanket was being placed over him. It did not matter. It was warm, and he felt much better. Yes. It was as good as being out in the sun.

On the beach, a warm wind blowing in from over the ocean, the sun beating down, he was lying on the sand, listening to the sound of waves breaking against the coral reef several hundred feet away, offshore. Jean was there. Wouldn't he prefer to lie in the shade? Yes, he thought, in the shade would be better. You could get a bad sunburn out in the sun on a day like

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this. Jean got up. She was naked. Ken looked at himself. He was naked too. They walked to the palapa. It felt cooler in the shade.

“I’ll fix lunch,” said Jean. She was gone. There were loud mechanical noises and clanking and the palapa shook and Ken thought he must have been dreaming because he was on a railroad train and things were going by very fast outside. He heard the wheels clatter on the rails. And he had a bed he could lie back on to take a nap.

Someone was moving his bed. It was like it was on wheels being rolled along and Ken realized he was in a bumper car at the county fair, scooting around the ring, not being bumped by anyone except those two people dressed all in white who seemed intent on bumping him every time they could. They gave him one tremendous bump and he went flying through the air and landed, crumpled up into a little heap on the moist grass.

The grass was short, recently mowed, and it smelled of it. There were feet around him. And concerned voices.

They were telling stories, if only he could make out the stories. He focused on one voice. A man. What was he saying? Something about percussion? No wonder the horn concerto had sounded wrong – there had been no percussion! Now he heard it coming back – the high-low alternation of the horns, accompanied now by percussion sounding like running feet.

He was blindfolded and told he would be hung for his crimes. A noose was placed around his neck. Only it was not exactly a noose since it was not rope. It was wider and softer than rope, but when it jerked his head, his neck would break just the same.

And he was flying again – had they dropped him? Was he about to feel the noose tighten and pull his head off when he hit the end of the rope?

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No. There were hundreds of angels carrying him gently through the air. They laid him on a cloud. And the cloud began to move.

And he was back on the train, lying in his bed, hearing the wheels making their click-clack sound in a silent interlude in the horn concerto.

Jean was there again, putting a cold washcloth on his forehead. He opened his eyes to a strange dream in which everything was blurred, including Jean. It was not a train. He was in a gray room without decorations on the walls. The bed had fences around it. The head of the bed was up a bit.

And his head was pounding pain from the base of his skull, where they had tried to hang him, to the top of his head.

Ken closed his eyes. It helped a little bit. "Ow," he said.

Jean said, "I think he's coming around. Get Doctor Kelly to come in."

Ken was gone again. Giants were hitting him over the head with huge hammers; they were trying to drive him into a piece of wood; they thought he was a nail.

He understood. He had had too much to drink, and he was now suffering from a hangover. It must have been quite a party. Why hadn't Jean been there, why didn't she seem to have a hangover too? And what did she mean by "he's coming around?"

He was running in the rain, carrying an aluminum extension ladder in his hands, held up over his head like it would keep him dry. Jean was screaming at him not to do it. He was not sure what he should not do. He stumbled and fell forward, the ladder landing on his head while he fell. He ended prone on the ground, the ladder thudding heavily on top of him. He rolled over

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and was another person, dressed in shorts and a tank top. “Sorry,” said the other person and ran off.

Ken was lying on the grass again, smelling it, watching an ant climbing up a leaf. The sun was hot, and he needed to get into the shade. Jean was fixing lunch and making a terrible clattering noise in the kitchen. The horn concerto was playing again.

He was lying in the bed surrounded by fences and a cool washcloth on his forehead and Jean was beside him and the world was out of focus. Ken reached for his glasses, to take them off and wipe them clean so he could see.

His glasses were not there, but Jean’s voice was. “It’s OK, sweetie. You got hit on the head, but you are going to be all right. Just relax. I’m right here and I’m not going to leave you.”

Ken was on the beach again, the beach where he and Jean were both naked and Jean was fixing lunch. He was under the palapa now and the shade felt cool on his forehead. His head was pounding – he must have been in the sun too long.

“I’m so glad you’re coming back.” It was Jean’s voice. They were not at the beach. It was the gray room, and he was in the bed with a fence around it. Jean had another cool washcloth for him. He closed his eyes again.

“Oh, that’s better.”

“Good. Just relax and rest. You’re going to be fine.”

Ken was walking along the slippery jungle path again and Jean was behind him. He turned a corner in the path, and it opened out onto a meadow into full sunshine. Ken liked being in the jungle. He turned back, but the jungle was not there anymore, and neither was Jean.

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Something cool touched his forehead. It felt wonderful. “Is that a moist washcloth?” he asked.

“Yes, my darling. Just relax and rest. I’m right here.”

He felt a hand in his. Yes, it was Jean’s hand. He wanted to squeeze it, but his head hurt when he tried to close his hand.

The horn concerto was playing again and the two men in white were playing bumper cars while they wheeled his bed. The bed went over several bumps, each one hurt a lot, always in the base of his head.

He was skiing in the Swiss Alps. He had taken an aerial cable car to get here, to the mountain’s top, and he began to ski down. He was cold. He was skiing faster and faster, turning to the right and the left, trying to get warm.

There was Jean’s voice again. “Thank you for coming, Dr Kelly. I think Ken is beginning to come around. He has spoken to me several times, but he seems to drift off to somewhere else very quickly.”

There was a man’s voice. He was at the train station. The PA was announcing the departure of Ken’s train, but Jean was nowhere to be seen. Where was she?

“See how he is tossing and turning? I think he is cold. He did it before, and we gave him a hot blanket and it helped a lot.” It was Jean’s voice.

A man’s voice said, “He’s hallucinating. It sometimes happens. Let’s sedate him and see how he is in the morning.”

Ken felt a burning on his arm. He thought it was poison oak. Or a sunburn. Then he saw the snake, hanging from a tree, its teeth in his arm.

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The next thing Ken knew, he was waking up on the beach. They must have stayed overnight. Jean, where was Jean? He heard a voice (his voice?), “Jean. Where are you, Jean.”

He heard a scuffling sound just behind his right shoulder, then Jean was there, talking to him. Something about everything going to be OK.

Ken opened his eyes. His head hurt, but he seemed to remember it being much worse before. He looked to his right, and there was Jean. She looked tired and worn, but she was smiling and happy. Ken tried to turn his head to look at her, but the movement made his head hurt much worse. “Ow!”

“Poor darling. Your head hurts. Let me get you a cold washcloth. Don’t move.”

She walked away. He noticed she was wearing the short pants and blouse she had been wearing when they were running from the rain. Carrying the ladder. Not naked, like when they were on the beach. He was a little disappointed. He closed his eyes.

And found himself on the beach. And Jean was there, and they were naked, running and playing and splashing in the water. It was wonderful. The short pants and the blouse must have been just a dream.

He wondered what had happened to his family and the picnic. Then he remembered – the picnic had happened several years ago, just when he and Jean were first engaged to be married.

There was something cold on his forehead. He opened his eyes long enough to see Jean there, holding a wet washcloth to his forehead. Then he closed his eyes. He opened and closed his right hand and one of hers joined him.

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He awoke again, opened his eyes, and his head did not hurt. Interesting! He was in a bed. It had a fence around it. Its head was elevated. Someone was snoring softly off to his right. Cautiously, he turned his head to the right. He thought he remembered moving his head hurting badly, but now it only hurt a little. Jean was lying close by him on a narrow bed, sleeping.

Poor thing, I wonder how long she has been here beside me. She needs to sleep.

He closed his eyes and slept.

He woke again. Jean was awake now too, talking to a tall man in a white coat. Something told Ken this would be Dr Kelly. “Good morning,” he mumbled. “Jean?” He wiggled his fingers and her hand was there. “Dr. Kelly?” he asked, his voice improving with each try.

They both stopped talking and looked at him. Then Dr. Kelly spoke. “Yes, Ken, I am Dr. Kelly. It is amazing that you knew who I am. You have been more aware of what was going on around you than anyone except your wife gave you credit for. You have had a bad concussion. She will tell you about it. Expect to sleep a lot and have strange dreams for a while longer. You are doing well. I expect we’ll be sending you home in another day or two.”

“Thank you, Dr. Kelly,” Ken responded. Ken was overwhelmingly tired and sleepy. He closed his eyes.

He awoke again. Jean was there. “Hi, darling. Have you been here the whole time?”

“I went to the bathroom several times. Other than that, yes.”

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“You poor thing. I’ve been alternating among strange worlds. I’m not sure if any of them is real. Maybe this one is. Tell me about concussion.”

“We were going to prune the cherry tree. You were carrying the ladder. There was thunder near us and it began to rain. We ran to get to the shed to get away from the rain. You were running along, carrying an aluminum extension ladder above your head. Maybe you thought it would protect you from the rain. I yelled at you. You threw the ladder to the side and kept on running. Lightning hit the ladder. The percussion from the lightning knocked you down and the lightning, after it got through using the ladder for a target, lifted it and tossed it at you. It hit your head. I called 911 and they brought you here. You’ve been here for five days, coming and going from time to time, never staying long enough that I could get anyone else into the room to see.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. Yes, this is the real world, or at least I think it is.”

“Being naked on the beach was a better world.”

“It was. We were naked on a beach on Kauai four years ago, on our honeymoon. When you are feeling a little better, I think we should go back there, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Ken responded, his mind wandering again. He was now finding other thoughts more interesting. Maybe all those places he had been visiting were real. What would it mean if they were? Ken closed his eyes.

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Over the following two days, Ken was in the world where Jean put a cool washcloth on his forehead more and more often for longer and longer periods of time. One day he went home. He and Jean began planning a vacation on Kauai.