



MEWS-PARI

meaningful encounters with strangers
preservation and reenactment initiative

report no. 1



Introduction

An overview of MEWS-PARI and its reports

Most people have had a meaningful encounter with a stranger. These are usually out-of-the-blue (and sometimes jarring) interactions that come to take on special meaning for at least one of the people involved. They occur in public settings, and often cause two strangers to suddenly connect with each other in a way that neither had expected. Perhaps their most interesting aspect revolves around the meaning people take from them; the same encounter could be meaningful to one person, but easily forgotten by another—or meaningful in an entirely different way.

MEWS-PARI (the Meaningful Encounters with Strangers Preservation and Reenactment Initiative) documents and analyzes these types of encounters. It does so by:

1. collecting people's stories;
2. analyzing them (with charts and maps, and by trying to detect common themes); and
3. reenacting Dramatizations of these stories. These Dramatizations incorporate improvisation, are often open-ended, and sometimes involve passers-by.

All are welcome to join the Initiative. This can be done:

1. by submitting a story;
2. by reenacting a Dramatization; or
3. by doing both.

This report is part of a series that presents our findings. Each reproduces four of the stories we've so far, as well as dramatizations, charts and maps based on each story.

More stories and data can be found at our website, <http://timdevin.com/encounters.html>, and we can be contacted



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at mews.pari@gmail.com . If you have a story you’d like to share,
we hope you’ll contact us!

Sincerely,

MEWS-PARI



Object 1(a): “The Lovesick Man and His Kung-Fu Sapling”

Element (i): *Original story by Tim Devin*

I was crossing Mem Drive near MIT on a lovely summer evening. In the linear park between the two lanes, a guy about my age was making strange kung-fu motions over a sapling—almost caressing it, in fact. In the middle of rush hour traffic. I was with a woman, and I wanted to make her laugh, so I asked him what the hell he was doing—if he didn’t mind my asking.

He looked startled, and then sheepish. He told us it was a form of kung fu, the kind that Bruce Lee practiced. It involved feeling the energy of whatever you were fighting, and began with the letter W.

We thanked him, and crossed to the river side. I was playing tour guide that night, and was midway through a fascinating lecture on the Back to the City Movement and its long-term influence on Back Bay zoning laws. My date was politely not-yawning. You see, when construction started on—

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” our new friend shouted, crossing the street. “Did I seem angry when you came over before?”

“No, not at all,” replied I. “I just figured we’d interrupted you, no big deal.”

He asked for a smoke. After lighting up: “Because I was angry. I was angry at you,” he said, pointing at my date. She edged away a little. “I get angry when I see couples together. Old couples, young couples, it makes me angry.”

“You’re not going to hit me, are you?” I asked with a smile and a step back.

“Oh no no no no, I’m not like that. No no. It’s just I’m jealous of couples. Cuz I’m single.”

This really struck me, because I’ve felt the same way at times. I’ve been unhappy and lonely, and have found myself glaring at people holding hands, or talking with smiles and all-eyes. I’d never admitted it to myself—I’ve always justified it by saying “Good for them, but here, right in front of me!?”—and here was this complete stranger telling me that he had the same reaction. I suddenly realized that everyone probably feels this way at times.

“When’s the last time you had a girlfriend?” I asked.

Less than an eye-blink: “Two years.”

“Sheesh,” I said, about to launch into my standard speech on the subject, entitled “Looking For Love Is Like A Chinese Finger Trap: The More You Try, The Less It Works (And, Sadly, Vice Versa)”—when the girl I was with asked: “So what do you do?”

“Well, this,” he said, pointing towards his sparring partner, the sapling. “I used to go to MIT, but they, um, kicked me out. Now I just do this. It works by feeling the energy and soul of whatever you’re fighting. Like, I could probably rip your eyeballs out if I wanted to—”

Two pairs of feet shuffled at this point, while two pairs of as-of-yet-unripped-out eyeballs scanned the scene for escape routes.

“—but I’m not going to. I’m not like that. See, watch.” He moved his

hands over the railing. “Nothing, because it’s just metal. It has no soul. But watch.” He waved his hands in the air. “I’m grabbing that tree over there. See?”

“Well, wow, that’s...huh.”

He must’ve realized he was making us nervous, so he thanked me for the cigarette, and walked away. I tried to decide whether he’d had a breakdown because of a breakup, or whether his mind-state had driven his ex-girlfriend away. Either way, he was deep in the Finger Trap—and was moving his hands far too much. I found myself wishing him every happiness, but couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud.



Object 1(a): “The Lovesick Man and His Kung-Fu Sapling”

Element (ii)-a: *Dramatization #1 by MEWS-PARI*

Note: The first version requires three people, and some improvisation.

Characters:

*Storyteller,
Storyteller’s Date, and
Kung Fu Man*

Storyteller and Storyteller’s Date are walking together. In front of them, Kung Fu Man is making strange hand gestures near a tree—or just in the air, and let’s pretend there’s a tree there. It’s fun to pretend.

Storyteller: Excuse me! Hey, excuse me. I don’t mean to interrupt, but what in the hell are you doing? If you don’t mind my asking.

Kung Fu Man: (gives a weird look) Oh, uh, yeah. I’m practicing this form of kung fu. I’m uh, feeling the energy of the tree, is how it works. I know it probably looks weird. It’s the same one that Bruce Lee did, if you remember him.

Storyteller: Sure. Huh, neat. Well, thanks!

Storyteller and Storyteller’s Date walk a little further, and improvise a hushed date-ish conversation. They don’t notice Kung Fu Man walking over towards them.

Kung Fu Man: Hey, can I ask you a question? Did I seem angry when you came over before?

Storyteller: No, not at all. I just figured we’d interrupted you, no big deal.

Kung Fu Man: Because I was angry. I was angry at you. (*Kung Fu Man points at Storyteller’s Date.*) I get angry when I see couples together. Old couples, young couples, it makes me angry.

Storyteller’s Date, and then Storyteller, edge away a little.

Storyteller: You’re not going to hit me, are you?

Kung Fu Man: Oh no no no no, I’m not like that. No no. It’s just I’m jealous of couples. Cuz I’m single.

Slight pause.

Storyteller: When’s the last time you had a girlfriend?

Kung Fu Man (very quickly, without considering): Two years.

Storyteller: Sheesh.

Storyteller’s Date: So what do you do?

Kung Fu Man: Well, this. (*Kung Fu Man points to where real or imaginary tree is.*) I used to go to MIT, but they, um, kicked me out. Now I just do this. It works by feeling the energy and soul of whatever you’re fighting. Like, I could probably rip your eyeballs out



Object 1(a): “The Lovesick Man and His Kung-Fu Sapling”

Element (ii)-b: *Dramatization #2 by MEWS-PARI*

Note: This version requires one person, and involves a good deal of improvisation.

Characters:

Reenactor, and

Someone Doing Something a Little Strange

*The next time **Reenactor** sees **Someone Doing Something a Little Strange**, **Reenactor** asks him or her about it. This should be done in a kind and polite way, in an environment where the **Reenactor** can run away if need be. Not everyone who acts odd in public is dangerous; some are just hurting deeply, and there but for the grace of God go you or me.*

if I wanted to. (**Storyteller’s Date** and **Storyteller** act very nervous, and start looking around for places to run to.) But I’m not going to. I’m not like that. See, watch. (**Kung Fu Man** moves his or her hands over a railing or a bench or something that isn’t alive. Or just in the air, and let’s pretend there’s a railing there.) Nothing, because it’s just metal. It has no soul. But watch. (**Kung Fu Man** waves his hands in the air again.) I’m grabbing that tree over there. See?

Storyteller’s Date: Well, wow, that’s...huh.

Storyteller: Huh, yeah.

*Pause. **Storyteller** and **Storyteller’s Date** shuffle their feet, and look around.*

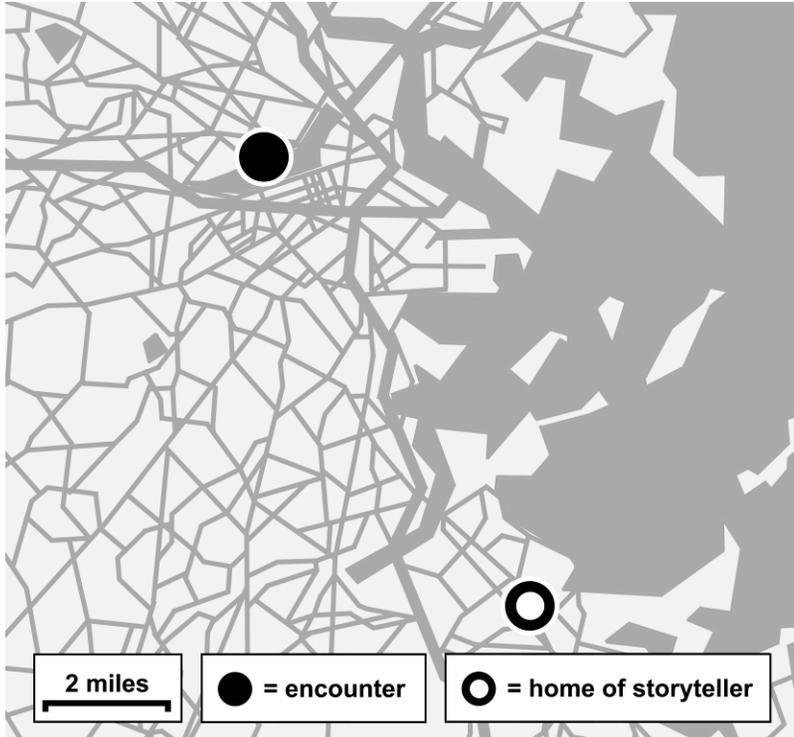
Kung Fu Man: Well, take care guys.

Storyteller: Yeah, hey, you too!

Storyteller’s Date: Bye.

Object 1(a): “The Lovesick Man and His Kung-Fu Sapling”

Element (iii): *Map*



Object 1(a): “The Lovesick Man and His Kung-Fu Sapling”

Element (iv): *Data*

| | |
|--|--|
| Gender of storyteller | Male |
| Storyteller's age at the time of the encounter | Early 30s |
| Length of time between the encounter and when the story was written | About 1 week |
| Type of environment the encounter occurred in | Urban (Cambridge MA) |
| Type of environment the storyteller was living in at the time | Urban (Quincy MA) |
| Distance from the place where the encounter took place, and the storyteller's home at the time | About 10 miles |
| State of mind of the storyteller when the encounter happened | During a good time of life |
| What the storyteller was doing when the encounter happened | Engaged in leisure activities |
| Themes | Insight into others Insight into self Love |



Object 1(b): “The Decision”

Element (i): *Original story by Jeremy Quinn*

I was studying in Scotland for 6 months, and in between semesters had a 5-week break. During this time I traveled around Europe on a rail pass, staying in Hostels, and visiting architectural works all over the place. Before leaving for Scotland, I had been seeing this woman, Michele, in a non-committal kind of way. We kept in touch while apart, but expected that we would no longer be together by the time I returned. It was not a big deal either way—we were, as I said, non-committal about the whole thing.

I stayed in a great hostel in Barcelona for a few days, and met three Americans there. I hung out with them during the evening. It was two guys and a girl. They didn't know each other really, but had all met at the hostel. They were fun, and the girl was pretty cute, but seemed interested in the guys. Her name was Sabina, I don't remember the guys' names.

I left Barcelona for Italy, stopped off in Nice because of a rail strike, then spent three days in Rome. After Rome, I headed up to Venice. I disembarked from the train, caught the waterbus across the city, and got off at the small island the youth hostel was located on. I walked in to the registration area, and a familiar voice called out across the room, “Hi Jeremy!” It was Sabina, who was sitting with a guy I had met up in Scotland, Jeff. The three of us met a few other Americans at the hostel and became a small entourage while in Venice. We saw the sights, ate at cafes, drank wine, and walked a lot. That's what you do as a tourist in Venice. I tracked down the architecture I had wanted to find, and made drawings.

Sabina and I flirted the whole time, slyly at first, then as we noticed each other noticing, more and more boldly. We were all scheduled to leave on the same day, so we went en-masse to the train station. Along the way we got caught on the waterbus without a current ticket. The boat captain wanted to take our passports, and

threatened to toss us in to the river. Because of the language barrier, we had a hard time figuring out he was joking. He wrote us up illegible tickets (so we couldn't pay them if we tried) and let us get off at the train station. There, Sabina and I decided we would travel together to Milan, hang out there for the day, and sleep in the train station before going our separate ways. Everyone else got on trains heading elsewhere.

I don't remember the train ride for some reason, but we arrived in Milan, checked our bags at the train station (I doubt you can still do this) and headed out to find the huge cathedral. We explored its forest of giant columns until we got hungry then found a cafeteria-like spot for dinner. We split a bottle of wine, then bought another one to go. We wandered around Milan for a while, drunk from each drinking one whole bottle of wine, and enjoyed getting lost in the city. On some side alley or street somewhere, I turned around and kissed her. I remember she was small, skinny, and a good kisser. We made out a little bit, and then laughing made our drunken way to the train station to try and catch some sleep. The locker room was closed for the night, so we could not get our bags back until morning. It was late, and we tried to recline on the reclining-proof seats inside the terminal. It was an awkward process of shifting and sliding and sitting. Around 1 or 2 am, a man came around and told us the station was closing and we would have to leave! Shit! We had been informed we could somehow sleep in the station. So we took up residence on the sidewalk in front of the building not too far from a bunch of Italian bums.

It was around this point that Sabina started to feel sick. Apparently, a bottle of wine was just too much, and she proceeded to throw up on the sidewalk for a while. This was turning into a nightmare. I was out on the street trying to comfort a sick-drunk girl I barely knew surrounded by homeless people trying to talk to us in Italian.

Somehow we stuck it out until 6 am or so when they opened the station and we could get our bags. It was cold, and she grabbed her sleeping bag so we could sit on the steps with it wrapped around us. I remember some random guy trying to tell me in broken English (oh, it was obvious we were Americans) that he knew Bob Dylan personally. Probably because I carried a small guitar with me everywhere I went.

Our trains were due at 8 am, and we were glad to finally have a place to stretch out and sleep. I don't know where she was headed, but I went to Lyon, France. I half-slept the whole way there, then immediately booked a real hotel room in Lyon and slept for 12 hours before catching another train to Paris to meet a friend. Before we left Milan, I invited Sabina to come stay with me in Glasgow if her travels took her up there. The invitation was genuine, as I still thought she was cute and wanted to hang out with her again.

My Europe trip ended, and a new semester started in Glasgow. Michele and I wrote more and more, and called each other, and emailed a lot. We were not sure where this would lead, but had to admit that something was going on between us. We agreed over email that now we were dating even though we were over 3,000 miles and an ocean apart.

Then Sabina called, she was coming up to Glasgow to see me. Luckily my roommate was going to be out of town that weekend, so there was a free bed in my room. She arrived, maybe I met her at the train station, and that night when we went to sleep I sat on my bed and she on Ramsey's (my roommate) and we talked. She asked if she could come sit next to me to talk... I said yes. I don't remember if I could see what was coming next. She lay down next to me, and the next thing I knew she was on top of me, kissing me. I went along for a second, and then pulled away. I told her she had



Object 1(b): “The Decision”

Element (ii): *Dramatization by MEWS-PARI*

Note: This dramatization requires two people, and involves some improvisation.

Characters:

*Storyteller, and
A Girl*

Scene 1

Storyteller and A Girl are sitting on a curb, or a bench, or the ground. Both are drunk.

A Girl: Hahahahahaha!

Storyteller: I didn't really like that hostel, though. The one in Barcelona was nicer.

A Girl: (leaning against Storyteller) Yeah, it was too...

Storyteller: Too hostile? Hahahahahaha!

A Girl: I was checking you out when you first walk in though.

Storyteller: When?

A Girl: First time I saw you. In Barcelona.

Storyteller: (smiles) Oh yeah?

A Girl: Yeah.

to go back to the other bed, and that nothing was going to happen. I said it was nothing to do with her; I still wanted her to visit, and hang out, but that a lot had happened in between Milan and now.

Even at the time, this amazed me. I had just thrown a girl out of my bed that had taken a six-hour train ride out of her way to seduce me (well, that and to see Scotland). And I did it because I felt something for someone an ocean away, with whom things may or may not develop. I was surprised by my strong feelings about Michele, and I went with them. I explained to Sabina the next day about the Michele thing, and she understood. She still hung out for a few days, and that was that. I think I might have exchanged letters with her once after we got back to the US, but that was it.

Michele and I are still together, and got married on the ten-year anniversary of my return from Scotland. I think the whole experience with Sabina really helped me to recognize that something serious was going on with Michele and me. Of course I told her this story right away, and it has become part of our history.

Storyteller: I thought you were with that other guy, the one from...

A Girl: No. You didn't notice? I thought you noticed. I was like, "Stop it. You're staring at him."

They gaze in each other's eyes for a while.

A Girl: God, who knew Europeans were such early-to-bed party poopers? Back home all the train stations are open all night, right? *(Starts choking.)*

Storyteller: You ok?

A Girl: Yeah. No. *(Vomits. This can be faked. No need for real vomiting.)*

Storyteller: Um, I'll get you some napkins.

Scene 2

Storyteller and A Girl are sitting next to each other on a bed, or on a couch. They are kissing, or pretending to kiss--whichever you both feel comfortable with. ***Storyteller*** pushes her away.

Storyteller: You need to stop. I can't do this. I'm sorry, it's just... I'm glad you're here though. It's really nice to see you.

Awkward pause. A Girl stares.

Storyteller: I'm sorry. It has nothing to do with you.

A Girl: I came all the way from Paris. It took me six hours.

Storyteller: Yeah, it's just... A lot's happened for me since then. See, there's this girl I'd met before I met you. We were just casually dating then, nothing big, me and Michele, is her name. *(Slowly)* But that was six months ago, you know? And we're, um, sort of, more serious, I guess you'd say, now. Michele and I.

A Girl: Well, hey, that's great. I'm, like, really happy for you. And this... Susan girl.

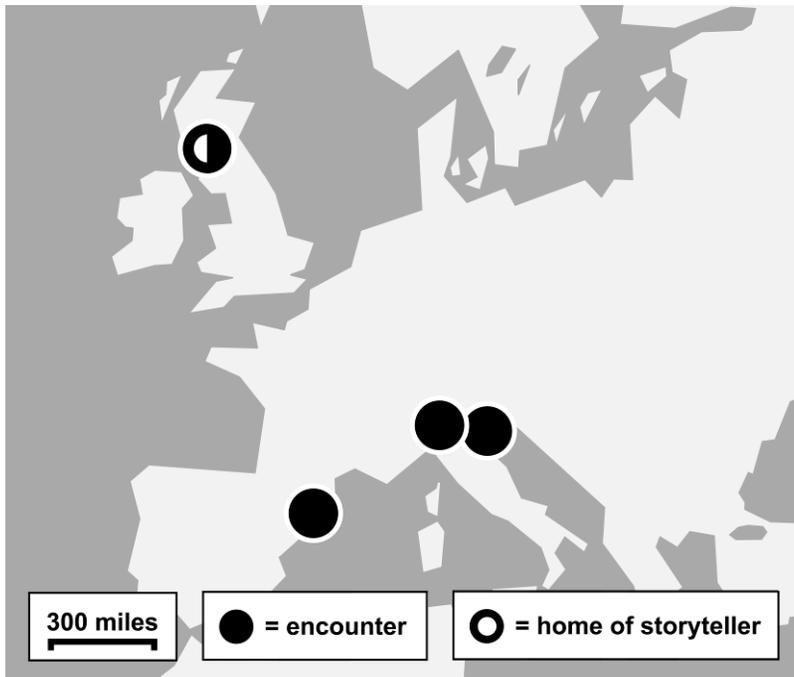
Storyteller: Thanks.

A Girl: I'm gonna go to bed now.

Storyteller: Oh, sure. *(looks at the time, and frowns.)*

Object 1(b): “The Decision”

Element (iii): *Map*



Object 1(b): “The Decision”

Element (iv): *Data*

| | |
|--|--|
| Gender of storyteller | Male |
| Storyteller's age at the time of the encounter | Early 20s |
| Length of time between the encounter and when the story was written | About 10 years |
| Type of environment the encounter occurred in | While traveling |
| Type of environment the storyteller was living in at the time | Urban (Glasgow, Scotland) |
| Distance from the place where the encounter took place, and the storyteller's home at the time | Variable: began 1400 miles from home |
| State of mind of the storyteller when the encounter happened | During a good time of life |
| What the storyteller was doing when the encounter happened | Traveling |
| Themes | Choices and decisions Leading to a change in life's direction Love |



Object 1(c): “Ectoplasm”

Element (i): *Original story by Pam Summa*

My last campgrounds story took place in a trailer park/hotel on the beach campsite on the Washington coast. My daughter and I had just driven, pretty much nonstop, across the country, doing the northern route. A woman was awake when we pulled in sometime after midnight. She invited us to her camp-fire, and then told us her story.

She had been raised fundamentalist Christian, but had become someone else. By which I mean: She had taken a new name, to go with her new beliefs. Which seemed to center around occult occurrences, what would have been called ‘spiritualism’. She had a book showing one of those people who conjured or channeled ...ectoplasm. The photograph of the ectoplasmic man looked like a picture of a fairly normal man, sharp-featured and maybe an actor—there was something odd about him, or his clothes. I didn’t see at first that he was issuing from this ‘stuff’ that came out of the mouth of another man sitting on a stage. The photo looked fake, but she assured us it wasn’t, which was why the book was worth some money: there were very few photos of such things. She was matter-of-fact about all this, not trying to convert. But still, there didn’t seem to be anything more to say once this topic had been raised.

There was, though. My daughter asked her some question, and she told us about her life, her abusive father, and how she got shut of Christianity. She told us her life story until 3 in the morning, because we were strangers to her.

Additional context/meaning (written by the Initiative): Pam’s daughter had just broken up with a spiritual person, and here was another one. This must have been a strange coincidence for Pam—one that intrigued her, as did the details of the spiritual woman’s

After the trip, Pam wrote a short story, with a religious character based on both the spiritual woman and her daughter's ex-boyfriend.



Object 1(c): “Ectoplasm”

Element (ii): *Dramatization by MEWS-PARI*

Note: This dramatization requires three people, and involves some improvisation.

Characters:

*The Storyteller,
Her Daughter, and
A Spiritual Woman.*

Spiritual Woman is showing ***Storyteller*** and ***Daughter*** a book.

Spiritual Woman: It's called “ectoplasm.”

Storyteller and ***Daughter*** look at each other.

Storyteller: Ectoplasm. Huh.

Spiritual Woman: Yeah.

Daughter: It looks like it's...Is it...?

Storyteller: Is that coming out of the other guy's mouth?

Spiritual Woman: Yeah. What he's doing is...it's called “channeling.” He's channeling it, and that's the spirit that's coming out of it.

Storyteller: Is that...real?

Spiritual Woman: (a little put off) Yes, it's real.

Storyteller: Oh, I just meant...

Spiritual Woman: I know a lot of people don't really understand it. But it's real. That book is worth a lot of money, actually, because there aren't many pictures of it.

Pause.

Daughter: (earnestly) So... Have you... always been... interested in these... things?

Spiritual Woman: No, not always. I recently converted, which is why I took a new name.

Daughter: Right, you said that.

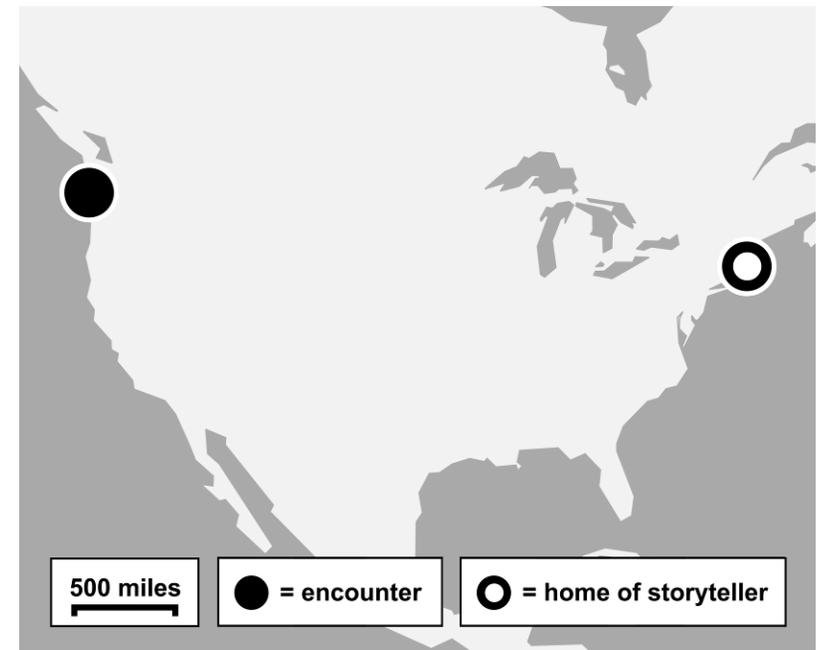
Pause.

Spiritual Woman (seems suddenly eager to talk; improvises story about sad childhood, abuse father.): When I was a kid, I was raised fundamentalist...

(Storyteller and Daughter are skeptical at first, but listen more attentively as story goes on, and ask numerous questions.)

Object 1(c): "Ectoplasm"

Element (iii): *Map*



Object 1(c): “Ectoplasm”

Element (iv): *Data*

| | |
|--|---|
| Gender of storyteller | Female |
| Storyteller's age at the time of the encounter | 50s |
| Length of time between the encounter and when the story was written | About 15 years |
| Type of environment the encounter occurred in | Natural/Wilderness (Sea View WA) |
| Type of environment the storyteller was living in at the time | Urban (Somerville MA) |
| Distance from the place where the encounter took place, and the storyteller's home at the time | 3000 miles |
| State of mind of the storyteller when the encounter happened | During a good time of life |
| What the storyteller was doing when the encounter happened | Traveling |
| Themes | Coincidence Insight into others Spiritual/religious |

Object 1(d): “Sunglasses”

Element (i): *Original story by LuQ*

Yes, of course I've had such encounters. However, I imagine that I've been “the stranger” more often than not. Most encounters, I've forgotten the details, but one was on a plane ride on a trip back from New Orleans. I'd had a good time, but was feeling very unsure about everything in my life (insecure) and this guy was just so friendly, totally open to what I was (a freaky post-goth 24-year-old) and seemed to see potential in me, that I ended up feeling a lot more confident after the plane ride. He also gave me a pair of expensive sunglasses.



Object 1(d): “Sunglasses”

Element (ii)-a: *Dramatization #1 by MEWS-PARI*

Note: The first version requires two people, and some improvisation.

Characters:

*The Storyteller, and
The Other Person*

Other Person: You coming or going?

Storyteller: Sorry?

Other Person: Are you going on a trip, or going home?

Storyteller: (a little uncomfortable) Oh, going home. I was visiting my sister. She goes to school in New Orleans.

Other Person: Nice. College?

Storyteller: Yeah.

Pause.

Reenactor playing Other Person talks about college. If he or she went to college, talks about where he or she went to school in real life, what he or she studied there. If he or she did not, then talks about college in general. Storyteller politely listens, asks questions.

Another pause.

Other Person: So those are some fancy threads.

Storyteller: Oh, yeah. Well.

Other Person: No, I mean that. Takes a lot of confidence to wear things like that, to not just dress like other people. Especially when you're far from home. I really respect people who can pull that off.

Storyteller: Thanks. Yeah, people stare, sometimes.

Other Person: Well, you've got to expect that though, right? But God, it would be so boring if everybody dressed like, well, like me.

Reenactor playing Storyteller makes up story about where he or she got his/her clothes, favorite store, etc. Other Person is interested, and asks questions.

Other Person: I didn't know about all that. I've seen that store before, but I never really knew what it was. I guess I thought it was a music store. Hey, you might look good in these.

Other Person hands Storyteller a pair of sunglasses. This can be mimed; you don't need a real pair.

Storyteller: Uh, um...

Other Person: Relax, I'm married.

Storyteller puts them on.

Other Person: You know what, why don't you take those.

Storyteller: These look expensive.



Object 1(d): “Sunglasses”

Element (ii)-b: *Dramatization #2 by MEWS-PARI*

Note: This version requires one person, and involves a good deal of improvisation.

Characters:

*The Reenactor, and
Someone Who Looks Sad*

*The **Reenactor** casually strikes up a conversation with **Someone Who Looks Sad**. Without ever calling attention to the fact that **Someone Who Looks Sad** looks sad, the **Reenactor** tries to make him or her feel better.*

*At the end of the conversation, the **Reenactor** gives **Someone Who Looks Sad** a small present, for no real reason.*

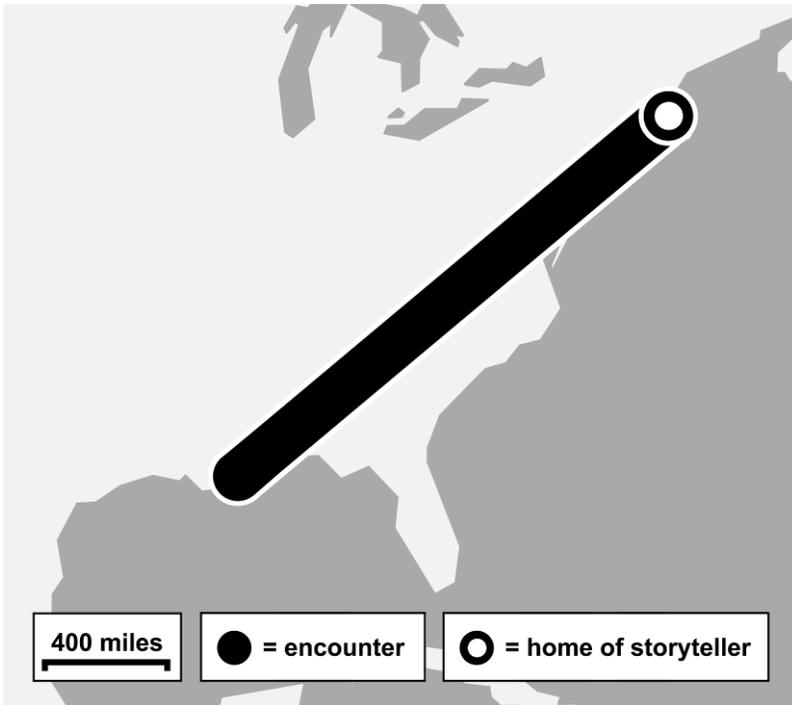
Other Person: Yeah, well. Sometimes I buy things. I guess to change my image. Then I think, that’s not really me, you know? Feel self-conscious I guess. Either that or I’m just boring. One of the two.

Storyteller: I like these. (*Looks at self in a window or mirror.*) These are nice.

Other Person: Take em. Seriously. I can’t pull them off, but I think you can. If you don’t like them, give them to somebody else.

Object 1(d): “Sunglasses”

Element (iii): *Map*



Object 1(d): “Sunglasses”

Element (iv): *Data*

| | |
|--|---|
| Gender of storyteller | Male |
| Storyteller's age at the time of the encounter | 24 |
| Length of time between the encounter and when the story was written | 5 years |
| Type of environment the encounter occurred in | While traveling |
| Type of environment the storyteller was living in at the time | Urban (Somerville MA) |
| Distance from the place where the encounter took place, and the storyteller's home at the time | Variable: began 1500 miles from home |
| State of mind of the storyteller when the encounter happened | During a period of change |
| What the storyteller was doing when the encounter happened | Traveling |
| Themes | Connection with others Feeling better about self |



Notes