

Excerpt 1 from
Notes from Hotel Misterioso

I sat up and looked through the wall of French doors to the pool area. Bergen was strolling toward the bar. He was still in his outfit from the night before: a cone-shaped fur hat and a colorfully feathered floor-length cape. Around his neck were fifty strands of colorful costume jewelry. He looked ridiculously regal: a modern Quetzalcoatl.

I met Bergen at an embassy briefing in Santiago, Chile in the early Eighties; he was the cultural attaché at the U.S. Embassy. There had been an assassination attempt against Pinochet. I had been sent in to capture the usual suspects on film. Those demonstrators would not have been such camera hogs had they known their ranting images were now in the files of sixteen different U.S. government agencies.

Despite the fact that Bergen is from Boston and I'm from Houston, we have a lot in common including our age. We stayed in touch over the years. Among the

unmentioned behavior that constituted his wife Jennifer's divorce petition after twelve years of marriage was Bergen's "drinking, womanizing and inability to take anything seriously." We liked each other immediately. When he had the chance to take an early retirement he did. Last spring he arrived in an old Fiat, which he refers to as the "Penultimate driving machine." I'm uncertain whether the car even runs, but it's parked out front.

"Hyde, you Irish dog!" Bergen called.

"In here."

He came through the French doors with authority. He was clutching a piece of paper. He surveyed the broken table, me on the floor.

"Having those fainting spells again?"

"Help me up."

He extended a hand, and then continued to the bar.

"Read me these questions," he said. "I'm signing up with an Internet dating service."

He handed me a sheet of paper. I read aloud the first question.

"What is your goal?"

"To have a goal that I feel is worthy."

"Is this for real?"

"Why do you say that? What's the next question?"

"What is your greatest fear?"

He lit a cigarette, and poured three ounces of Kimmel into his coffee. "Overweight teenagers slurping frappuccino in shopping malls."

"What is your secret fantasy?"

"My secret fantasy . . ." He sipped his coffee. "To marry a loving woman who wants to live with me on some acreage I own in the Virginia countryside."

"Favorite food?"

"Anything somebody else prepares."

“Describe perfect happiness.”

“A day with no agenda.”

“What do you consider your greatest achievement?”

Bergen puffed his cigarette. He stared out toward the ocean, seemingly in thought. After a moment he said, “What’s the next question?”

“On what occasion do you lie?”

“No occasion required.”

“What about your appearance would you change?”

“My halo.”

“Assuming you have one, ‘what is your greatest regret?’”

“The amount of time I’ve wasted catering to my fear that somewhere out there—lumbering with mechanical stupidity—is a gigantic Sinbad the Sailor tarantula just waiting to turn the tables.”

“Which talent would you most like to have?”

“Telekinesis.”

“If reincarnation were real, what would you return as?”

“No doubt, an amalgam. A black, Jewish, homosexual, quadriplegic psychoanalyst with six kids in diapers, married to a three-hundred-pound Catholic Iranian transsexual nun with AIDS who is financing a congressional run with the proceeds from his/its memoir of abused childhood which has just been featured in the Oprah Book Club.”

“If you could choose what to come back as, what would it be?”

“God.”

“What is your most treasured possession?”

“My mental health. Without that you’re lost.”

“I met a woman once who announced at a dinner party

that her most treasured possession was an autographed photo of Yo Yo Ma.”

“See what I mean?”

“What do people notice about you first?”

“Nowadays, that I still smoke.”

“In your opinion what is the essential male quality?”

“The ability to make a woman laugh.”

“Your number one requirement in a woman?”

“She must be breathing. I really insist on that.”

“What do you most value in your friends?”

“Punctuality. Being late is a form of larceny.”

“Describe a hero.”

“A volunteer.”

“How would you like to die?”

“Like most people, I guess: by firing squad on national television.”

“What is your motto?”

“Life is so long, let’s drink.”

“Isn’t that more like a toast?”

“A motto can also be a toast.”

“Greatest weakness?”

“Beautiful women at Happy Hour.”

“Greatest strength?”

“A positive outlook.”

“Your Scotch?”

“Whatever’s on sale.”

I pushed the questionnaire across the bar.

“What type of woman are you looking for?” I asked.

“A Victoria’s Secret model.”

“Then skip the Internet service and run an ad: ‘Multi-millionaire. Handsome and in shape. Seeks Victoria’s Secret model for intimate dinners in exotic locations. Loves to pamper. Orally gifted.’”

“I have that one running now.”

“I’d ask for a photo.”

Bergen studied the questionnaire.

““What words would a friend of yours use to describe you?”” he read. He looked up at me for an answer.

“Emotionally in his teens, legally, middle age, and physically, a senior citizen.”

“That could describe everyone we know.”