

David Ambrose

Coincidence chapter 4

I've never been a big movie fan. Sara was somewhat more so than I, but neither of us owned any reference books in which I could check out the film careers of my mysterious childhood friends. However, I had noticed a specialist movie shop a few blocks from where we lived, and I walked over to it the next morning. The only "Harts" I could find any trace of in all the books on the shelves were Dolores Hart, Harvey Hart, Moss Hart, and William S. Hart. There had been a Mary Hart in B-pictures in the thirties, who had later changed her name to Lynne Roberts. Of course there was Lorenz Hart, the song lyricist, who died in 1943. He had been popularly known as "Larry", just as Lauren Paige had been nicknamed "Larry", so that after her marriage she would presumably have been known as "Larry" Hart. But that was a pretty tenuous connection. In fact not a connection at all, just a vague coincidence. As to the careers of either Jeremy Hart or Lauren Paige, there was nothing.

I asked the greying pony-tailed man in charge if there were other sources I might consult. He produced a couple of tomes that specialized in obscure cult-movies, but we drew a blank there too. He himself had never heard of Jeremy Hart or Lauren Paige, or any variations thereof. Refusing to be defeated, he withdrew to the computer behind his desk and began a search of the web. Fifteen minutes later he handed me a print-out listing five movies starring Jeremy Hart, four of which co-starred Lauren Paige.

The information on the sheet of paper that he'd given me was minimal to say the least. Titles, stars, director, and in one case the writer. No plot descriptions, no critical comments or biographical information. "Spring In Piccadilly" was dated 1953 and starred both of them, as did "Whistling Through" in 1958. They appeared in support of a pop star trying to break into acting in "Girl Scout Patrol" in 1963, then in "There's A Spy In My Soup" in 1967. Jeremy alone played a small role "The Silver Spoon" in 1973.

Little though I knew or cared about the cinema, I formed the impression that this amounted to a less-than-glittering career. The "rising heart-throb" written about in "Variety" had risen, it seemed, not very far. Whether he and Ms Paige were still alive I had no idea, though I imagined that if they were it would not be impossible to track them down. But just to find out when and where I had been photographed with them? It hardly seemed worth it.

It was a bright clear morning when I left the movie shop, not long after eleven. I was crossing Amsterdam at 87th, going east when, as I reached the far side, my attention fell, quite by chance, on something lying in the gutter. It was a playing card: the ace of hearts.

It wasn't the word-play, the pun of "Harts" and "he arts" that drew my attention to it. What made me stop and pick the card up was a memory that it triggered which had lain dormant for many years. It was a memory of a literary agent I'd once known who'd since moved out to Los Angeles. Her name was Vanessa White. She had never been my agent but she represented a couple of other writers I knew well. Maybe it was the association of Los Angeles and Hollywood and the movie bookshop I'd just stepped out of that made the connection, I don't know. All I know is I saw that playing card and thought of Vanessa White.

She was an attractive and sophisticated young woman who delighted in telling the filthiest jokes I'd ever heard. I never figured out whether she was trying to shock people, or whether gross-out was the only thing she found genuinely funny. It was an odd contrast with her svelte appearance and normally rather delicate manner. She was a thoughtful, reflective woman. I remember her telling me once that she used to collect odd little things that struck her as signs pointing in a certain direction. She showed me a pocket at the back of her "organizer" where she kept small items cut out of newspapers and magazines, a stranger's scribble on some hotel phone pad, a pressed flower, and a playing card she'd found under a restaurant table. These things, she said, tended to lead her on to other things, to guide her life along a certain course that was for some reason the right way for her to go.

I never pretended to understand what she was talking about, nor did she explain it very clearly. But there had been something fascinating and oddly compelling about the way she talked about the phenomenon and it obviously held some deep personal significance for her. And there I was, finding a playing card in the street and thinking about her for the first time in years. Vanessa, of course, would have picked the card up and kept it, convinced that it would in some way lead her on to something else.

Impulsively, and I still don't know why I did this, I bent down, picked the card up and slipped it into my wallet. As I did so I felt a self-conscious, slightly sceptical smile spread across my face as I imagined the odds against running into Vanessa herself in a couple of blocks, or maybe just into one of those friends of mine that she used to represent. That would have been a coincidence worth, as the saying goes, writing home about. Or at least, perhaps, writing about.

But nothing happened. No familiar faces, nobody I even vaguely knew.

I walked on for several blocks.

Then something happened.

I think the image had reached my brain and my body had responded before I was fully conscious of what was in front of me. All I remember is finding that I'd stopped and was gazing into the window of one of those specialist cake shops

that will make any kind of cake in any design of your choice. There, right in the middle of the window, was an ornate and sugary creation in the shape of a playing card. It was the ace of hearts.

As I've mentioned, it was early fall, a long way from Valentine's Day. If it had been February 14th, it would hardly have qualified as a coincidence. New York would have been wall-to-wall hearts. But what was a cake like that doing in the middle of a shop window in the fall? And how did I happen to chance on it just a few minutes after picking up that playing card?

My first instinct was to find a rational explanation. Suppose, for example, that the whoever had ordered the cake had used a playing card to show people in the shop exactly what they wanted. It was conceivable, although unlikely: after all, who in the world doesn't know what the ace of hearts looks like anyway? But supposing that was what had happened. Then whoever it was had walked a couple of blocks north and either dropped the card or thrown it away. It was a reasonable explanation.

But then most people would think that coincidence was a reasonable explanation. The point where things got interesting, it occurred to me, would be where coincidence was not a reasonable explanation but something remarkable.

I walked on. Although the subject had been buzzing around at the back of my mind for the last few days, it was only then, I think, that I made the conscious decision to make coincidence the subject of my next book.

Chapter 5

I wasn't starting on the subject from absolute zero. I'd been briefly interested in the strangeness of coincidence years earlier. The first time I really wondered about it was in school, when I came across a list of remarkable similarities between the assassinations of presidents Lincoln and Kennedy. It went like this: Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1847, Kennedy in 1947. The names Lincoln and Kennedy both contain seven letters. The wife of each president lost a son while she was first lady. Both presidents were shot in the head from behind on a Friday while sitting beside their wives; both were succeeded by a southerner named Johnson, and the two Johnsons were born a hundred years apart. Both their killers were themselves killed before they could be brought to justice. The names John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald both contain fifteen letters. Booth was born in 1839, Oswald in 1939. Lincoln had a secretary called Kennedy; Kennedy a secretary called Lincoln. Lincoln was killed in the Ford Theatre; Kennedy was killed in a Ford Lincoln.

Since then I've seen many variations of the same list, often longer and embellished with obsessive and borderline-insane detail. People have made careers out of investigating this single aspect of the Kennedy myth.

But then you'd expect a thing like that to attract the cranks.

I don't suppose anybody can remember the first coincidence that ever happened to them. I know I can't. By the time you become aware of coincidence it's already a fact of life, something you've always taken for granted because it's just been there, like the weather. A friend telephones as you're about to call them. You bump into some stranger who knows your cousin on the far side of the world. You have an amazing run of luck - which, after all, is just a chain of coincidences - at some game of chance.

There is no explanation for such things, and most people would probably say no need for one. A coincidence can be trivial, in fact usually is; or it can change your life - like the woman who picked up a phone and got a crossed line, and found herself listening to her husband calling his mistress from the office.

One man I know was given a coded flight reservation that was the same number as the licence plate of his car, which he'd totaled the previous week. (He took the flight: nothing happened.)

When Sara and I first met she had two cats named Daisy and Alice, which also happened to be the names of my two nieces. We laughed about the coincidence, but didn't regard it as an omen or anything like that.

But what is coincidence? Is it anything more than fluke? Blind chance, indifferent and unconscious of the human fates that may hinge on it?

Or is there more to it, something behind it?

A while after coming across the Kennedy-Lincoln connection, I discovered there was a fancy word for unlikely coincidence. The word was "synchronicity", and it was coined by the psychologist C. G. Jung who, with the physicist Wolfgang Pauli, published a treatise called: "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting principle". That was in 1952.

Surprisingly, there is still no mention in the Encyclopaedia Britannica that these two remarkable men, despite being treated at length individually, ever knew each other. You will search the index in vain for any mention of synchronicity. In fact you will search pretty much the whole of scientific literature without success. It is an unsung collaboration between one man who created some of the most fundamental terms in which we think (including "introvert" and "extrovert", as well as the "collective unconscious"), and another who made a vital contribution to quantum physics which won him the Nobel Prize.

Not exactly people in whose company you need feel embarrassed to be seen, I would have thought. Which makes the omission all the more curious.

Twenty years ago the Concise Oxford Dictionary didn't list the word either. Now it does, defining it as: "The simultaneous occurrence of events which appear significantly related but have no discernible connection".

One reason for the word's cautious emergence from the intellectual closet to which it had been consigned was Arthur Koestler's book, "The Roots of Coincidence", published in 1972. In it he linked the idea to developments in modern physics such as quantum indeterminacy and probability theory, and traced it back to work done on "seriality" around the turn of the century. Seriality means things happening in clusters. The Chinese wrote about that centuries ago, and most people have experienced this in one form or another. Why, for example, do so many people believe that things happen in three's? (And even if they do, does it mean anything?)

*

The following day I made a date to have lunch with my agent downtown. It was another pleasant fall day, so I decided to walk - at least part of the way.

Somewhere on Madison and a little way below 57th I began to feel like a cup of coffee. Glancing at my watch, I saw that I had plenty of time, so I stopped at a small cafe that I didn't remember ever having been in before, or for that matter ever having noticed.

I slid into the first empty booth I came across. Someone had left a newspaper in the corner and I moved it out of my way. As I did so, I saw that it was folded open at a partially completed crossword. I don't normally have much interest in crosswords, but for some reason this one caught my attention, and I thought I'd try finishing it off as I drank my coffee.

Six across, I noticed, was filled in "Heartfelt".

More hearts. The card, the cake, now this. My interest moved up a notch.

By the time I finished my coffee I'd finished the puzzle too. (It was no great intellectual feat; the paper was just one of the tabloids.) One clue had "Playwright Shaw's first name", which was George, which was also my own name. Another was "No star without one", in five letters, which I worked out was "Agent".

I had read somewhere that crossword puzzles (as I say, I have never been a crossword addict), are well-known sources of synchronicity. Addicts say that they frequently find something they've been thinking about for days cropping up in one of the clues or as one of the answers. That was what seemed to be happening to

me. I was on my way to see my agent, and this whole chain of "false" or "genuine" or simply "marginal" synchronicity had started when I saw a playing card, the ace of hearts, that reminded me of yet another agent. And here I was finding my name, George, in a crossword puzzle that also contained the words "heartfelt" and "agent".

A man laughed loudly in another booth across the room. I turned and saw that he was sitting with his back to me and was talking on a mobile phone. It was obvious that he was as unaware of my presence as I had been until then of his.

"Wow," he said to whoever he was talking to and with absolutely no reference to me, "that's quite a coincidence!"

*

When I left the cafe, I realized I'd been sitting there longer than I thought; if I didn't hurry, I'd be late for my lunch. I took a cab, giving the address in Little Italy where I was meeting my agent. As I rode I continued turning the morning's events over in my mind.

What I had was a string of coincidences which, so far as I could see, meant nothing, yet formed a pattern. But do patterns have to mean something? Or, to put it another way, can order arise from disorder without there being any significance attached to the process? Could so intricate a little sequence of coincidences, such as I'd just experienced, be pure fluke?

Or did such things, I asked myself, using Wordsworth's phrase of which I'm sure Jung would have approved, point to "something far more deeply interfused"?

It was a while before I registered the fact that my cab wasn't moving and hadn't been for some time. I was staring at the same stalled vehicles all around me and a stretch of wall with a faded banner saying "Liquidation Sale". Traffic had been running smoothly till we reached a point just north of Penn Station, where we hit a gridlock so dense that it seemed as though all the vehicles in it had been welded together into a sprawling, immovable mass. There was the usual amount of honking, arm-waving and insult-calling, all to no avail. I decided my best bet was to take the subway, so I paid off the cab and started to walk briskly towards the nearest entrance.

At the top of the steps my mobile phone rang. I'd finally given in to progress a few months earlier and bought one. As far as I was concerned, it was just one more thing to lose; all the same I had to admit that, when I didn't lose it, it was sometimes useful.

"Hello," I said, backing up a couple of steps and moving clear of the two-way torrent of people entering and exiting the subway.

A man's voice said, "Larry, how's it going?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "you've got a wrong number. This isn't Larry."

The man laughed and said, "Come on, Larry, stop kidding around."

"My name isn't Larry," I repeated. "You need to dial again."

"You sure sound like him."

"Listen," I said, growing a touch exasperated by his insistence, "I don't have time for this. I have to hang up now."

I did so and carried on down the steps. I had some tokens in my pocket, so I went straight through and followed the signs for my platform.

Another small coincidence happened on the journey. The "heart" image cropped up again. Across from my seat in the subway was an advertisement for the American Heart Association. I began to wonder - more whimsically than anxiously - if fate was trying to tell me something. Was I about to have some kind of romantic adventure, or a myocardial infarction? But I checked myself with a smile, marveling at how fast we react to the slightest element of strangeness: at how the tiniest dislocation in the fabric of our everyday reality can throw us into the arms of fantasy. All it takes is an all but imperceptible change in the rhythm of things. A coincidence or two.

When I reached my destination and emerged into daylight, I still had a five minute walk to the restaurant. I was already ten minutes late, but that wasn't a disaster; my agent would be contentedly sipping his first martini and leafing through a copy of the "Times". Nonetheless, I hurried on as fast as I could.

I was vaguely aware that I was walking in the direction of an old movie theatre, beautifully kept in its near-pristine thirties design. I knew it well because it had recently presented an Orson Welles season. Sara was more of a film fan than me, but I'd gone along with her to see "Kane", "Ambersons" and "Touch of Evil", all in what the publicity boasted as "sparkling new prints".

The marquee reached out over the sidewalk, all red and white glass with silver and black trimmings. I glanced up at it, not really interested in what was showing, but what I saw stopped me in my tracks.

Facing me on the side of the marquee were two words, arranged as follows:

LARRY

HART

People pushed past me in both directions as I stood there. Patterns kept racing through my brain, but refused to make sense. All morning I had been seeing images of "heart" as well as the printed word itself. Now here it was once again spelled as a surname, the name of my parents' mysterious friends, Jeremy and "Larry" Hart. And "Larry" was who the man on the phone had wanted to talk to. Now this.

As I stared up at the name, I became aware of a man on a ladder that brought him level with it. I continued to watch in fascination as he reached for the "T" of "HART", then the "R", and handed them down to a colleague on the ground. In a moment all the letters had been removed and that side of the marquee was blank; obviously there was a change of programme that day.

I walked on underneath the canopy and out the far side. There I stopped to look back to see if the name "Larry Hart" was repeated on that side.

What I saw was this:

	LARRY PARKS
GINGER ROGERS	in "THE JOLSON STORY"
in "ROXIE HART"	

As I watched, the two men dragged their ladder over from the far side and began dismantling these words too, starting on the outside and working in.

I was, frankly, beginning to feel just a little bit odd. I went on my way quickly, anxious suddenly - and irrationally - to reach the comforting familiarity of the restaurant that I knew so well, and the reassuring company of my agent and old friend.

But my mind was buzzing with questions and possible answers. The first one was whether somebody could be playing a joke on me. But I didn't see how that was possible.

So what was going on?

Was something going on?

I remembered reading somewhere a theory that just by thinking about synchronicity you can make strange coincidences start happening around you. I suppose I could believe it up to a point, but only in the sense that you might be more aware than usual of things that could be interpreted as coincidences.

But even if the theory was true in a literal sense, it didn't explain anything. Attracting coincidences just by thinking about them was perhaps even more extraordinary than simply having them come at you out of the blue.

Anyway, there was no escaping the fact that since I had started thinking even half-seriously about coincidence and the theory of synchronicity, odd little coincidences had started happening to me.

At the very least I could enjoy the comfortable thought that my next book was taking shape with gratifying ease and speed.

Maybe (the eternally optimistic dream of every writer) this one would write itself.