

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING

by Ian Brown

Life after Morocco lost some of its surreal quality. However, it still proceeded in fits and starts unlike the smooth, orderly plot and character development of a good story 'line'. Life, it seemed to me, unlike a novel or a movie, did not have a 'line'. For most people it was perceived and experienced on several levels at once. Events did not occur consecutively, but rather in overlapping clusters. Try as you might, you could not control the tempo and rhythm of Life. Nor could you control when the unexpected occurred to complicate or throw off whatever rhythm you had established.

In the imaginary novel, the phase of 'life at The London School of Economics' was over. In real life, it turned out there was one more page in the chapter - an epilogue.

I arrived back in England feeling like I'd made a terrible mistake in leaving L.S.E. - that I'd let the pressures of what was happening with Ellie influence my decision as to how to best deal with the situation at L.S.E. The truth is that I was terrified about the future. I was having withdrawal symptoms from my cold turkey exit from 'straight' society.

Within a few days of returning, I was on my way to an appointment with Mr. Steuer, the man appointed as my thesis supervisor, the man who despite teaching Econometrics had apparently an alter ego, one that might just mesh with my esoteric interests. As I entered the office, I felt like the prodigal son, ashamed of his misadventures and pleading to be taken back into the fold. I was guilty of wasting my opportunities. 'If I could only have hung in there for six more months', I reasoned, 'I would have had a Masters, and the world would be my oyster'.

I had hardly begun my confession before Mr. Steuer, cut me off abruptly. He informed me that he had written to me in Morocco, that he was disappointed that I was back so soon, and that all he could do now was to tell me a story.

The story went something like this:

Once upon a time in Japan, there was a young man who was an accomplished swordsman. Although already skilled at his art, this young man decided that he wanted to be the very best swordsman in all Japan. He had heard of a Master Swordsman, an old Samurai, who lived far away in the mountains. The young man made up his mind to seek him out.

After many days travel, he eventually found the old man.

"Master, will you teach me all the skills of swordsmanship?" asked the young man deferentially.

On hearing this, the old warrior slapped him and told him to come back the next day. The next day the young man returned and repeated, "Master, will you teach me all the skills of swordsmanship?" Again, the old man slapped him and told him to return the following day. This went on for several weeks. Every day, the same thing. Gradually, the young man became more and more frustrated. One day, his frustration turned to anger. As the old man once again slapped him, he drew his sword and took a fighting stance. On seeing this, the old samurai did likewise. There ensued a tremendous fight. Neither man gained the upper hand. It seemed as if whatever advantage the old man had because of greater experience and skill was offset by the young man's vigor and determination. In the end, both men dropped their arms, exhausted. Then the old samurai picked himself up, turned to the young man, and said: "Go now, I have taught you all I know."

I looked blankly at Mr. Steuer.

"I don't see how this relates to my situation," I began. "Could you explain ...?"

"I'm really very busy," snapped Mr. Steuer. "I must ask you to leave now."

"But ..."

"Goodbye."

So I left - unenlightened and unappreciative of the pearl of wisdom that had just been cast before me. This time I hadn't closed the door to L.S.E. - they had closed it.

Moral: to would-be purveyors of Zen wisdom: 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing'.