

The Detection of an Analogy

The first time I experienced total darkness I was 12 years old. My friend Julie Maroni and her family would spend long weekends and holidays at a cabin they owned in the mountains near Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. After a couple years of begging, my parents finally relented and let me spend a Memorial Day weekend up there. On the first evening, Julie's little sister Mindy wandered off to visit a friend who lived in a cabin down the road. With the sun descending behind the mountains, Mrs. Maroni sent us to fetch Mindy. Just as we were about a half mile down the road, with neither cabin in view, the sun disappeared and we were plunged into complete blackness.

I thought I understood what night time was, but I took for granted that my night time back home consisted of helpful street lamps and porch lights and head light beams from passing cars. There had never been a lack of some sort of light in my entire 12 years on the earth until that moment. On this dirt road devoid of any helpful light sources, Julie and I were lost in a world which could have been anything our imaginations perceived it to be. We made jokes about it to fend off the sense of gloom each knew the other felt, and we continued to walk straight ahead, hoping that the road did not bend or drop off into an abyss.

Although it felt like an eternity, I'm sure it wasn't long before the lights of the other cabin came into view and we found Julie's sister. The people at the cabin lent us a

flashlight so we could find our way back. I had never experienced such darkness again until 15 years later. I awoke to no light and no sound. For a moment, I thought I might be dead. My only memory was that I was about to embark on a mission of some kind, but I couldn't remember what. Perhaps I was murdered or hit by a truck. My soul was free floating in an endless void.

But I could feel!

My yoga exercises had taught me to become one with my body. To fully sense everything I was feeling both inside and out. At that moment, I knew my back was braced against something hard; most likely, a wall. My bottom was on a flat surface as well, and the soles of my feet were mere inches away pressed against that same flat surface. I had to be sitting on a floor, leaning against a wall. Tentatively, I reached out in front of me, stretching my fingers toward anything that might be out there. I only had to lean forward about a foot before my hands made contact with another wall. Cold and metallic was the surface.

Sliding my hands around the wall, I detected a seam, which led to another seam running perpendicular, then another and another. Four seams formed a rectangle. It was a door about three feet high by two feet wide. Near the center of the door was a metallic protrusion, like a cylinder. Applying some pressure, I felt it move. A soft *clink* and the door slid outward.

Light flooded the tiny compartment. Not just light, but overwhelming color. Bright, saturated colors burned my retinas like Dorothy opening the door onto the Land of Oz. With the benefit of illumination, I could see that I had in fact been sitting in a steel box. Stretching my legs forward, I stumbled through the doorway and fell onto a soft bed

of grass. The sky was the bluest sky I had ever seen, and the clouds were like lightly toasted meringues. Once my eyes had adjusted to the intense light, I found that I was lying in a glen on a brilliantly sunny day. Birds were chirping a springtime tune and the trees were bursting with the bright kelly-green leaves of new growth. A sultry breeze grazed my cheeks. It was almost too ideal.

Fairly aching from the beauty of the place, I pulled myself to my feet and started to walk about. A well-worn foot path led me over a hill and down toward a stream. Under the shade of a maple tree, I spotted a man with gray hair hunched down studying the ground with great curiosity. Hastening my steps, I could soon make out the objects of his concern: four rabbits. Strangely, these were not the typical wild rabbits you would see in a forest, but chubby, fluffy versions in various colors.

“Do you like rabbits?” I asked the man when I was only few feet away.

“Not particularly,” he replied. The voice was disturbingly familiar. When he looked up at me, I was chilled in place. It was my late father.

He stood up and smiled at me as he had every day that we were ever together. His expression conveyed nothing of the absurdity of the moment. How could he be here with me or me here with him at the same moment, unless...

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” I asked him.

He chuckled, which irritated me a bit. “No, you’re not dead,” he assured me. “but I most certainly am. Trouble is, I’m stuck in this glen and I can’t move on until I solve a puzzle.”

“Move on to where?”

“To wherever it is I need to go next,” Dad offered with a shrug. “You see, I have four rabbits here. Each one eats one specific type of vegetable and one vegetable only. Over there is a garden divided into patches where the vegetables grow. If I put the wrong rabbit in the wrong patch, he will never eat and die. So I have to make sure each rabbit gets in the correct patch.”

I was dumbfounded. Not only was I standing mere inches from my father, whom I saw sealed up in a casket only a few months earlier, but he was telling me some fairy tale about his journey to the great beyond depending on the persnickety eating habits of fluffy bunnies. So far as I knew, rabbits would eat any vegetation they could get their paws on. Finicky cats, sure, but never finicky rabbits. How could I accept any of this?

Still, it was my father, and the wrinkles around his eyes denoted sadness. He was asking for my help, and I couldn't deny him. We both crouched in front of the surprisingly placid rabbits.

I said, “You were a cryptanalyst for the NSA. You decoded complicated messages every day of your working life. Surely, you're better at solving puzzles than I am.”

“I'm not so sure. You begin to forget the past here. Besides, coded messages aren't quite the same as rabbits.” Dad pulled a folded piece of paper from the breast pocket of his white shirt. “I found this tacked to the maple tree behind us. It's three lists along the top and a series of statements underneath.”

“What are the lists?” I asked.

Dad read, “The first list says: Grace, Merlin, Sally, and Chester. The next says: Turnips, Carrots, Celery, and Lettuce. Then the final one says: Behind Boxwood, Near Footpath, Under Cherry Tree, and Near Stream.”

“Well, the first list must be the rabbits’ names,” I reasoned. “and the second list must be the foods they like. But the third...”

Standing up, Dad scanned the glen carefully. He brightened and declared, “The third list is the location of each patch. Look around, there’s a boxwood bush over there, and a cherry tree further up that hill, and of course we have a stream and a footpath.”

“Okay, so what do we do with all this?” It was beginning to feel like I had fallen into an old Walt Disney cartoon, but since it all seemed so real, I had no choice but to continue on.

“Well, let’s look at the statements,” Dad said, and proceeded to read the first one. “Number 1 – *Of the rabbits named Chester and Grace, one is gray and the other likes food grown behind the boxwood.*”

“Terrific,” I groaned. “What’s the next one?”

“Number 2 – *Grace doesn't like carrots or celery.* Hey, wait a minute. I should have thought of this before. Do you have a pen?”

I patted my body and, to my surprise, found a ball point in my pants pocket. I handed it to my dad who flipped the paper over, smoothed it against his thigh, and proceeded to draw something. Leaning over for a glimpse, it appeared to be some sort of grid made up of vertical and horizontal lines. Along the top of the grid, he listed the names of the rabbits, the locations of the patches, and the vegetables. Down the side of the graph, he wrote *white, black, brown & white, and gray*, followed by the vegetables, and the locations of the patches. It looked oddly familiar to me, like some vague memory from my past.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Remember when you were a little girl,” he replied. “I used to play logic puzzles with you. That’s what this is: a logic puzzle. The clues will help us eliminate the possibilities that can’t be correct – “

“Leaving us with the answers that have to be correct,” I finished his sentence. “That’s right! I remember those, although you did all the work. I just sat in amazement, like you were some sort of magician or something.”

Dad smiled warmly for a moment, then returned to the chart he had drawn. “Okay, we have a white rabbit, a black rabbit, a white rabbit with brown spots, and a gray rabbit. Hopefully, the clues will allow us to match the names with the rabbit’s colors. Also, we can associate which rabbit likes what food and where that food is grown.”

“So what about that first clue?”

“Not enough to go on, but the second clue is a help. You see, under the column named *Grace*, I can put an X in the boxes which correspond with the rows *Celery* and *Carrots*. There, two boxes eliminated from the grid.”

“Out of what – 80 boxes?” I cried. “We’re off to a rousing start.”

“You have somewhere else to be?” Dad snapped. Then, with a grin, he said, “C’mon, buckaroo, you used to love these things!”

He hadn’t called me buckaroo in years. I never thought I’d hear it again. I felt some tears behind my eyes, but I knew this was no time to get sentimental. I was in some kind of la-la land. This couldn’t be real. I just had to keep plugging along until something made sense. Focus on the puzzle, young lady.

Dad announced, “Third statement – *Either the rabbit who likes celery or the rabbit who likes turnips is Sally.* Okay, so we know Sally does not like carrots or lettuce. X those boxes out.”

The fourth statement was, *The one who is gray likes food from the patch near the stream.* “Great!” Dad exclaimed, “That’s a positive statement, so not only can we put an O in the box corresponding to *Gray* and *Near Stream*, we can put Xs in all the other boxes from the column *Near Stream* and the row *Gray*. Look how much is filled in now.”

Dad showed me his chart, which looked like this:

	Chester	Merlin	Sally	Grace	Under Cherry Tree	Near Stream	Boxwood	Behind Footpath	Carrots	Celery	Turnips	Lettuce
White						X						
Black						X						
Brown & White						X						
Gray					X	O	X	X				
Carrots			X	X								
Celery				X								
Turnips												
Lettuce			X									
Under Cherry Tree												
Near Stream												
Behind Boxwood												
Near Footpath												

“Cookin’ with gas,” I said, trying to humor my dad.

Next statement was, *The one who is gray is Chester.* “Bingo, another positive statement. That gives us a lot.” Dad marked off more boxes. “We now know that the gray

bunny is Chester and he likes the food grown in the patch by the stream. Now all we need to know is what kind of vegetable is grown there and we have one rabbit taken care of.”

Flipping the paper back over, Dad read, “Number 6 – *The rabbit who likes celery has one more color than the rabbit who likes turnips*. Well, there’s only one rabbit that has more than one color, so the brown and white rabbit must like celery.”

More boxes were filled in. *The one who is gray likes lettuce*, was the next clue and Dad almost squealed with delight when he read it. Marking up his chart, he said, “We know Chester is the gray bunny and his food is near the stream so the lettuce patch must be near the stream! Quick, take Chester over to the lettuce patch. I’ll keep working.”

Obediently, I picked up the fidgety gray rabbit and headed along the stream looking for rows of growing lettuce. Along the way, I thought about how excited my father was; a sight I hadn’t seen since – well, since I was a little girl. His job seemed to take much of the life out of him over the years. While he enjoyed the challenge of unraveling the mysteries every coded message presented to him, there was a serious weight behind those messages. The more we knew about the enemy, the more harm we could inflict. Often the words he uncovered determined whether people lived or died. He never pulled the trigger or dropped the bomb, but he knew he had some indirect connection to death and suffering. Of course, it was for national security and he was performing a patriotic duty, but that rationale could only take him so far. Little by little, year by year, the joy of life drained out of him.

What made matters worse was that I didn’t recognize it until after he died. There was a streak of rebellion in me and the lack of interest my dad showed toward life I interpreted as apathy toward his only daughter. Joining the Navy was my first attempt at

getting a rise out of him and, when that didn't shake him up to my satisfaction, I became an explosive ordnance disposal technician. Looking back, I'm sure it bothered him terribly that I was putting myself in harm's way voluntarily. He never showed it though, and at the time it bothered me. Only later, when he was in the ground, could I understand that he was trying to be supportive.

My ruminations were interrupted when I stumbled across several rows of leafy green tufts sticking up from the earth. I'm no farmer, but I recognized the vegetation as lettuce, and set Chester carefully in his feeding ground. Heading back to my father's spot under the maple tree, I realized that this moment, whether it was real or imagined, was my opportunity to have the conversation with my dad that I missed out on while he was alive. As soon as I crouched down next to him, I said, "Dad, you know I – "

"Angie, I've made some real progress here," he interrupted me. "By process of elimination, Grace must be the rabbit who likes turnips. And if you go back to the first clue, the turnips must be grown near the boxwood bush. Also, using the third clue, Sally must be the rabbit who likes celery and clue six lets us know that Sally is the brown and white bunny. By filling in the boxes we know, that leads us to the fact that Merlin likes carrots."

Pulled off my train of thought and back into the puzzle, I deduced, "So all we have to find out now is what color Grace is, where the celery and carrots are grown, and what color Merlin is."

"Exactly," Dad said, proudly. "Okay, statement 8, *The one who is white doesn't like carrots*. There you go – Grace is white!"

With a grin, I picked up the white rabbit and carried her over to the boxwood bush where, sure enough, a cluster of turnip greens plumed from the ground. They were on the other side of the bush and hidden from our view at the maple tree. I raced back to see what the next clue was.

Dad read, “*Merlin doesn't like turnips – yes, we already know that - and never visits the patch under the cherry tree.* Ha! Merlin is the black rabbit who eats carrots in the patch by the footpath!”

“And Sally is the brown and white rabbit who eats celery in the patch under the cherry tree!” I exclaimed.

It was silly, I know, but the two of us laughed and hugged each other like we had just won Final Jeopardy. I hadn't realized the amount of tension I was feeling until the solution of the puzzle released it, morphing into a wave of euphoria.

“Okay, go ahead,” Dad said in a flustered voice. “Put little Merlin with the carrots and little Sally with the celery. I'm sure they're starving.”

I took Sally first since finding the celery patch under the cherry tree was the easiest. For poor Merlin, I had to carry him some ways along the footpath before the rows of carrot tops revealed themselves. The black bunny wasted no time nibbling on the greens and pulling the stubborn carrots from their hiding places. Such a simple thing, but I felt so relieved that the four rabbits were safely in the places where they could eat contentedly. My father looked wonderfully contented as well when I returned to him. He was sitting under the maple tree, idly studying the clouds. Once I was near, he rose and stretched out his arms so I could gladly fall into them.

“Oh Dad,” I said into his chest. “It’s so good to see you again. I’ve had time to think since you went away. I have to tell you – “

“Sssshhhh...” Dad gently took hold of my chin and lifted my face into his. With a placid expression I don’t think I had ever seen on his face before, he asked, “Are the bunnies okay now?”

Feeling the tears tickle my cheeks, I nodded. He looked pleased and said, “Then everything is in its place. Have a great life, buckaroo.”

The pressure of his arms and hands lifted from my body. Then, ever so slowly, he faded from view. My knees buckled and I collapsed on the ground, as if my dad’s touch was all that was holding me upright. Suddenly, the glare of the sun felt too bright again. I crawled back to the door which floated a few inches above the ground revealing a dark pit beyond. I craved the darkness, sensing that I had to escape the light at all costs. Slamming the door behind me and firmly throwing the latch into place, I was in my ebony cocoon once more. So safe, so quiet.

Sleep was interrupted by the murmuring of voices. Nothing clear at first, but then I heard someone say, “She’s waking up.” With an effort, I pulled my lids apart and looked up at a gently whirring ceiling fan. A few strange faces hovered over me and I glimpsed an IV bag in my peripheral vision.

“She’s conscious, sir,” one of the men standing over me said. He wasn’t looking at me, but somewhere across the room. Then the familiar face of The Colonel loomed overhead.

“Welcome to the land of the living,” the old man said, and offered the barest hint of a smile. “You gave us a bit of a scare. I’m going to think twice before using *that* drug again.”

“So, I was drugged?” I asked, faint bits of memory beginning to settle on my forebrain.

“Yes, it helped you complete the mission but, damn if it didn’t leave you a wreck when we pulled you out of there. Feeling okay now?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t so sure. The whole experience was a dream, a hallucination. As comforting as that realization was, I had no memory of how I had gotten to this spot in the first place. “Where am I?”

“You’re still in Manila,” The Colonel replied, as if that was supposed to make sense to me. “The doctors want to monitor you for awhile before sending you back to the states.” He squeezed my arm gently, and then left the room.

Fragments of memory started to gather in my mind. *Manila*. I kept running that name through my head, like a thread that would stitch everything together. Manila. Philippines. Something about a hotel. The Hamilton. It was all leading back to a meeting I had with The Colonel in his office in Washington DC a few days earlier.

“Cortega is in deep cover with a terrorist cell in Manila. He informs us that they are about to plant a bomb at the Hamilton Hotel and detonate it in three days time. The bomb will be housed in a brief case with a false bottom and a member of the cell, posing as a guest in the hotel, will ask to have it stored in their room-sized safe. It’s a fairly sophisticated device and we only have scant details about its design. Nevertheless, we need you to diffuse it.”

“Give me whatever information you have and I’ll do the best I can,” I replied.

“There’s more to it,” he went on. “We can’t just go charging in there and diffuse the bomb in the usual manner without compromising Cortega’s cover. We have to lead them to believe that the bomb was faulty and did not go off. Therefore, we plan to place you in a storage trunk and have you wheeled into the safe like precious luggage. Once inside the safe, you will find the bomb and diffuse it.”

My stomach fluttered. Although I had dealt with many challenges, claustrophobia was still something I had difficulty with. Before I could say anything, The Colonel addressed the matter head on. “The pressure of diffusing the bomb with limited information about its design will be difficult enough, but the added stress of the close quarters in which you will be required to work could potentially sabotage the entire endeavor. Therefore, we will be using a new drug which should induce a hallucinatory environment more pleasing to your senses. Also, prior to receiving the drug, you will be placed under hypnosis and the bomb specifications, so far as we know them, will be told to you. We believe that the combination of the drug-induced, dream-like state and the hypnosis will allow your brain to process the information and complete the mission under conditions which will be far less stressful. The world you perceive will be allegorical, if you will, freeing you from the anxiety of reality.”

At the time, I barely understood what The Colonel was telling me. My implicit trust in him allowed me to accept the mission blindly. Lying in the hospital bed in Manila days later, I began to question my blind faith. How could I ever volunteer for an experience such as that again?