

# La Chispa

John Charles Miller

©2007

Keeping both bodies alive proved damnably hard. It was more difficult maintaining the living body than the dead one. What choice? Keep working on both. If one died, then the other might also.

My name is Jack O'Neill. Susanna and I retired in the mountain-cradled town of Guanajuato in north-central Mexico. Savings and social security checks were not enough for retirement in Arizona or Florida, so we ended up here.

We liked the tranquil life of this colonial town, with winding, narrow streets, friendly people, and interesting history. We found it driving to San Miguel de Allende from Guadalajara, "exploring." Guanajuato grabbed and held us.

Life was good for me until taking the narrow older road from Silao to Guanajuato instead of the boring, straight toll road. We liked the quick turns opening new vistas. However, the curves hid abrupt danger, a large fast-moving truck loaded with sand.

It was over in a million-year second repeated hundreds of times. Each day, all day, I felt the pain of her absence, intense. The only relief was the deep depth of sleep, after long restless periods.

The Spanish-style cottage was empty. I banged and bumped around; too much space for one person with no accompanying love. Each souvenir on a table or a shelf, or hung on a wall, teased me with memories. Breezes through the windows moving gauzy curtains caused me to glance about. Was she there?

Maria del Carmen Santiago de la Cruz, our Mexican maid, tried to comfort me, as did her elderly husband, Pablo, who walked her home each evening. She was a large part of our life. Fussing about the house, cooking a delicious hominy *pozole* or my favorite spicy chicken dish, *pollo con mole poblano*, she tried to cheer me. However, day-by-day I shriveled, my eyes profoundly sad. “*Es tan triste,*” said Maria to her friends.

She confronted me. “*Señor Jack, Ud. tiene que encontrar la chispa.*”

“*La chispa*, what’s that?”

“Señor Jack, you understand it, no?” in her little English. “How you say? Espark?”

“Espark? Oh, you mean I have to find the spark.”

“Sí, find the espark.”

However, I didn’t have any spark; my life had left. Nothing to keep me going; my soul a desiccated leaf, slowly crumbling, blowing away.

The days lengthened. I wandered into the small walled patio with its pool, flowers and slender trees. On the bench where Susanna and I passed time with a glass of wine and watched her butterflies, I stared at bits of meaningless colors fluttering about tasting this and that.

Evening came; still I sat there, the mountain air chilling.

Maria leaned out the kitchen door. “*Adiosito, Señor Jack. Hasta Mañana. No olvide la chispa!*”

“Spark, humph!”

Late twilight purple set in, much colder. I went for my poncho and floppy hat. The night sky was clear and the patio moonlit. Nodding off, I awakened with a shudder. Frozen, I thought of one thing. Susanna!

The Moon passed behind the mountains. Stars brightened and blinked at me until morn began slowly casting renewing light into the valley. Soon the Sun was full in my face, warming me. So tired. A grayish mist filled my mind as I thought about what had been and what could have been.

Suddenly, I was at a street corner; yet I was not there. I sensed things. I saw and heard, but I had no body! I moved about as a by breeze.

I didn't know this place, but I continued floating, watching.

Sirens screamed and people ran about. Three cars were strewn in various states of destruction. On the pavement lay a man, medics bent over, faces and efforts showing concern, frenetic activity.

They were speaking English, not Spanish. This was not Guanajuato. Where was I?

“Quick, into the ambulance! We can keep him going there.”

Drawing closer, I watched them load the injured man. Something sucked me through the doors as they shut.

The ambulance careened down streets, siren warbling a mournful call. I watched from the ceiling.

“He’s not going to make it. Hit him with it!”

The man didn’t respond. I moved closer, his face drawing near. I looked into his motionless eyes. Suddenly, I was looking up at the medics.

“He’s responding. Watch closely. Yes, his eyes are moving! There seems to be a spark of life.”

I had no idea what happened after that. People who said they were friends picked me up at the hospital. Things I said puzzled them. “Bob, relax. The doctors say the shock jolted your memory. You should recover with rest.”

*Bob? Who is Bob?*

My friends, Barb and Tony, took me to a small third-floor apartment, helping me into pajamas. “Bob, rest, Ok? We’ll take turns until you recover.”

*Rest? How could I rest? What happened? Where was Guanajuato? Where was the patio? Where am I? Where was my body? Who is Bob?*

I heard them in the living room, talking quietly and concernedly. Pulling myself to a sitting position, I swung my feet to the floor. Standing, dizziness came. Shutting my eyes and being still, I did not fall.

Nausea hit; stumbling to the bathroom sink, I vomited a clear yellow-green liquid. Chilled and weak, I looked into the mirror. I saw the face of the dead man. Yet, he wasn’t dead. I was he, but he wasn’t me. I was Bob, but I wasn’t Jack, but I was.

*What happened? Where was my Jack body?*

I recovered, physically. My new friends continued worrying about my strange statements. So did I.

Poking around in Bob's stuff in the apartment and looking in his wallet, I found that my body's name was Robert Olson and that I was a middle-aged bachelor living in Tucson, Arizona. This did little to clarify my situation.

Despite unanswered questions, I recovered enough to get out and walk. Often I stopped in a secluded area of a park with my newspaper and a cup of cappuccino. It was nice, but seeing the park benches brought my mind back to the patio in Guanajuato. *What's happened to my body, the Jack body?*

Two weeks after my hospital release I sat in the park, idly thumbing through the newspaper, trashing the classifieds and other sections of no interest. Society section, what a waste! A group picture caught my attention. Standing in the middle of a group of women was Susanna! I did not know anyone else in the picture.

The words underneath read, "The Women's Club of Tucson presents a plaque to Susanna O'Neill in memory of her husband, Jack O'Neill." I was stunned. *Susanna is dead! Not me!*

With the newspaper blowing across the grass, I stood up and fell to the ground.

I looked up into the anxious faces of Barb and Tony. They'd found me when I didn't come back from my walk. I said nothing.

*Who was this Susanna O'Neill? Who was this Jack O'Neill?* I was Jack O'Neill, but I was Bob Olson also.

Unanswered questions. Too many Jacks and Susannas and this guy Bob. What was going on?

A possibility: a parallel universe, a place and a time when similar things and situations could occur? A friend of mine was a Science Fiction buff and liked to speculate about such possibilities. No, that was a lot of hokey!

I had to find the Susanna in the newspaper. She seemed to be the only way out.

It took me some time in the library looking at newspapers from the last two months to find O'Neill's obituary. There was his picture, me looking out at me, smiling my toothy smile. Spooky. It told me where I might find Susanna O'Neill.

She was retired, working as a volunteer at the Sonora Desert Museum, offering butterfly education programs. I developed a plan; I became a volunteer. I knew a bit about butterflies, not as much as my wife, but enough to fake it. At least it gave me the opportunity to talk to this Susanna.

"Yes, we can use another volunteer. Butterflies? Our volunteer in that area, Mrs. O'Neill, could use help. We worry about her. Her husband died two months ago; she seems lost. It would be good for her to work with someone," said the coordinator. "Can you start, tomorrow, Wednesday? That's when Ms. O'Neill will be in. She works here Monday, Wednesday and Friday. She can show you around."

"That's fine; I'll be here when you open."

"Good. Welcome to our group, Mr. Olson."

It was cool when I arrived, but it would soon warm up and be quite hot. As I waited, Susanna O'Neill parked her car and wandered up the cactus-lined gravel path. She was lost, never looking about, not noticing me. I felt her pain; I knew what she was going through. I walked in behind her and waited.

"Susanna, you have a helper. This is Bob Olson. He knows butterflies and volunteered yesterday."

"Actually, I'm just a rank amateur. I know a few species, but I'm willing to learn."

"Glad to meet you, Bob. I really do need help."

The same voice, the same smile. Not the big one that I was used to, it was limp and tired.

Susanna showed me around and explained the work. I nodded my head and asked a few questions about butterfly host plants and nectar plants, trying to sound knowledgeable.

The sun grew hotter. We rested in the shade and ate box lunches. Not much was said, just bland conversation. I felt uncomfortable. She seemed elsewhere. Yet, sometimes, when I relaxed and talked openly, I would catch her looking at me. I commented about Red Admirals being my favorite butterflies, so friendly they will land on top of an outstretched hand, and stood up with my arms raised high. She began to cry.

"What, what's wrong? Are you Ok?"

“No, I’m fine. It was the way you said what you said. It reminded me of my husband. He loved them also and got such a kick out of them landing on his hands or on top of his bald head.”

“Does he volunteer here also?”

“No, he was killed on a mountain road in central Arizona. He loved prospecting. Never found much, but he exaggerated his finds like a fisherman. He was a funny guy.”

“Sorry to hear that. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“That’s Ok. It was the way you talked and got excited about Red Admirals. He really didn’t know much, but he tried to learn, to please me.”

To myself, I thought; so, he was a real bozo about butterflies. Just like the other Jack, way back wherever that was. Which reminded me, I needed to find out about him, but how?

The days went by, we continued our work, becoming good friends. I enjoyed being with her; my spirit was renewed. It was the *chispa* working its magic.

While eating our lunches, it was with considerable trepidation that I worked up the nerve to ask her to dinner. She thrilled my heart when she said that would be nice.

I found a small Mexican restaurant, a quiet non-tourist place. We sat looking at the menu. “I see they have *pozole* and *pollo con mole poblano*, two favorites,” I said.

Startled, she looked at me and began to cry. I knew what had happened. Her Jack was very little different. Parallel universes were real; these two were close.

“What did I do?”

“Jack would always order one of those two if he found them on a menu. I can’t believe this is happening. You are either so much alike or you already knew Jack and are playing some game with me!” She squinted, head tilted to one side, looking at me.

I must say something or lose her. If these reminders of her husband kept coming out of my mouth or were exhibited in my movements, she would feel I was up to no good.

“Susanna, what do you know about parallel universes?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I am trying to answer, and much hinges on your answer to mine.”

“Yes, possible, but not probable.”

“It’s hard to begin. Let me tell you my story.”

I told her about my wife’s death and how it had devastated me. I did not tell her my wife’s name or my real name. Her eyes widened when I told her about entering Bob’s body and bringing it back to life. I told about seeing her picture in the newspaper and how much she resembled my wife. I also explained my locating her and volunteering to work at the museum. Yes, I was a dummy

about butterflies, just like her husband, and *pozole* and *pollo con mole poblano* were my two favorite Mexican dishes.

She stood up, looking disgustedly at me and began to leave. I took another chance, no choice. "Please Little Dove, don't leave me again!"

Her back stiffened and she spun about, spitting out, "That's enough, whoever you really are!"

The few people in the restaurant turned to look at us, but quickly went back to their meals.

"I'm not crazy and I'm not stalking you. Give me five more minutes. If after that you want to leave, I'll understand."

Slowly she sat down. Angry; she crossed her arms, glaring.

"I'll tell you the story again, filling in empty spots with names. First, I want to tell you things that only you and your husband Jack would know. If you don't want to hear anything after that, I'll stop. Reasonable?"

"It all depends."

It depended on how close these two universes were to each other. However, nothing to lose.

"Do you remember how, on your honeymoon night, you dropped your wedding ring in the motel sink and Jack fished it out with a clothes hanger?"

"I've told that to lot's of people."

“In your bedroom closet there is a floor safe. The combination is: start at 84, turn three times to the right and stop at 27, turn left twice and stop at 16, turn right four times and stop at 75. Then insert the key and open it.”

She stared at me, and then smugly said, “So where is the key kept?”

“In the refrigerator, under the vegetable bin that slides out.”

She sat there, eyes and mouth open wide, hands held out stiffly in front, as if pushing me away. “That’s right, but how?”

“I’ll soon explain the how. There’s one more thing, to make you believe in what I’m saying.”

“I’m afraid to ask what it is.”

“It’s your deepest secret; only Jack knew. You liked to walk naked in your patio at night. You didn’t think he knew, until he took a flash picture of you dancing beneath the big trees. It scared the heck out of you, but all was well when he stripped and chased you about, caught you and made love to you by the pool.”

With a gasp, hands moved to her mouth.

“So, you believe? Here’s the rest.”

I told her about Susanna. Yes, I named her. I told her my name was really Jack O’Neill, and that my *chispa* had entered the body of a dead man, Bob Olson. I told her about the intense loss of my Susanna and how it had separated me from my body and threw me into this universe.

She was very quiet. “Bob, you poor man! No, your name is Jack. I can see you in there. I’m so sorry I was mad. What about your body, the other Jack’s body? Oh, I’m so confused.”

“I don’t know what to do about that. My body is back there or over there, wherever. How do I get back?”

She stood up and sat down again. “Let’s think this out.” A deep frown furrowed her brow.

“Do you think you could go to the intersection where the accident occurred? Maybe that would cause something to happen.”

“It might, but I feel so happy being here with you. I’m afraid I would never see you again.”

She blushed. Looking down, she said, “Is there any reason why you should go back?”

“Yes. I have two daughters, Lee and Sarah. They often come from Nebraska to visit. Maria, our maid, probably contacted them. I wonder what they’re doing. Is my body alive? Or did it die when I came here?”

“Well, that settles that,” said Susanna. “Jack and I never had children, a very big difference in our universes. Yet, they would be my other self’s children, actually mine in a way. So, you must go see them, return to them.”

There was little chance to argue, same old Susanna, no matter the where or the when. So, we began to plan.

Two days later, in the early morning five weeks after my departure from Guanajuato, we stood on the street corner of my arrival. As I approached, I felt a soft mental tug that increased with lessening distance. I mentioned this to Susanna.

“Susanna, what’ll happen to this body? Will you take care of it? I want to come back again!”

“Jack, do what you have to do. I will take care of Bob’s body as best I can. Maybe you’ll come back, maybe you won’t. The fact that you feel the pull makes me believe your body is still alive. Resolve your situation there and see if you feel a pull back to this place. If you do, it means Bob’s body is alive.”

“Come back in three days, just like today in the very early morning when there isn’t much traffic. I’ll try to return. Have Bob in the car with you.”

“I will. When you leave, I’ll put him into the car and take him to my house.”

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me lightly. “Come back, please! Twice lost would be too much.”

I looked into her tearing eyes. She began to fade.

A girl screamed, “Sarah, his eyes opened and moved!” It was Lee.

Suddenly four dark brown eyes were peering at me. “Oh my God!” said Sarah.

Maria found me in the morning after I first left. I was a little cement man, stuck to the bench. She contacted a doctor and my body was taken to the hospital. There was no response to stimuli, even though my body functioned

normally. The body remained soft and warm, and breathed, with a slow heartbeat. They kept it alive with intravenous feeding and catheterization

Later my body was moved back to the house and placed in my bed. After a long period of waiting, my daughters were preparing to take me to the United States for medical treatment, in hopes that I could be revived. Three days before departure, I returned.

At first, I did not tell my daughters what had happened. I waited until I rested three days and enjoyed the old body a bit. I was extremely stiff from the inactivity and had to be helped about. When I told them my story, they didn't believe me.

I asked them to sit on the bench with me in the twilight of the third day. Old Maria was also there, but very leery after I told her the story of my whereabouts. Fearful of the devil, she kept crossing herself and saying in a very low voice, "*Virgen Santísima, por favor de salvarnos del Diablo!*"

Slowly the purple sky descended. We ate a late supper under the Moon and talked until early morn. Then, I felt the familiar tug. It was time to go. If all went as planned, Susanna would be there with Bob's body.

Turning to Sarah and Lee, I embraced them and kissed them. "I'll be back in a week. Wait here with my body." They looked at me with disbelief, rolling their eyes.

The grayish mist slowly entered my mind once again.

I was sitting in the car, looking out of Bob's eyes at my sweet Susanna. Tears ran down her face. I embraced her, but was very weak. We had not

realized that Bob's body had needed the same medical care as mine in Guanajuato.

"I was so afraid, I just knew that you wouldn't be coming back!"

It was a joyful reunion. A week later, recovered, I returned with Susanna to the intersection. Then I was gone.

Lee and Sarah were there. They hugged me. Maria, crossing herself, kept saying in a low voice to her husband, "*Es la chispa! Es la chispa!*"

My daughters believe everything I have told them. In fact, they are so excited they still have a mother, or kind of a mother, even though they will never see her. It'd been hard on them also when Susanna died; now she has been replaced.

Susanna is now Mrs. Robert Olson. It was too complicated to do otherwise. But to the confusion of my faithful friends Barb and Tony, she calls me Jack.

Resolving Bob's medical needs, I move back and forth. We found that early mornings had nothing to do with my movement; it was just a matter of coming and going from the same intersection.

Sarah and Lee live in Guanajuato, where they married fine upstanding Mexican businessmen. They, Eduardo and Rafael, thought their wives to be *muy locas* when they heard about my comings and goings. The three grandchildren think it's really neat to have a spooky grandfather and an invisible grandmother somewhere else. They say that I am even better than the *momias*, the mummies, which are in the old Guanajuato catacombs.

Susanna wishes she could see them all. The best I could do was to take sketching classes to show her what everybody looked like.

My concern was to end up with Susanna. As I got older, my daughters suggested I spend little time here in Guanajuato, just quick day visits or less. That will have to stop also; we are quite old now and Susanna cannot keep caring for the inert Bob body when I am away. However, I wonder what will happen to the Jack body when I die?