

Awakenings End

~ by Gary Marks

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This book is dedicated to
James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*,
whales, dreams, love, time,
and to all other things
I cannot understand.

/b

. . . I'll try to find my way back to the dream.

"Each child who was not a sissy swam.
I swam not, being long afraid of the river."

That was supposed to be the opening of my great novel. It was going to be allegorical, like *Moby-Dick*, and say something important about life and love; hidden secrets extracted from thin air. Except something went terribly wrong. Unexpected events through me off course.

Instead of forbidden waters and the hunt for a great white whale my novel turned out to be about a salmon.

My salmon was not brave or strong. The river scared her to death, truth be told.

We find out later, for those that like to dig deep, that I was the salmon, metaphorically -- dancing around, in ways only a salmon can, to please and brighten those I love, only to have them paddle away in their canoes.

My intention was to end the book mysteriously, but with a great awakening of some kind just as I fall from grace.

I thought I might also have the last line of the book attach to the beginning of the first line, like *Finnegans Wake*. It was going to be quite something.

It's depressing, however, to realize that *Moby-Dick* was 822 pages. And *Finnegans Wake* was 688 pages. There's no way you can write that many pages about a salmon.

But as disheartening as that might be I really don't want to take antidepressants, because they're pills, and I don't trust pills.

Anything could be put in a pill, and how would you know?

They could put dog crap in a pill and call it Resveratrol. I sniffed an open Resveratrol pill once and that's exactly what it smelled like. Or they could put a placebo in the pill. And how would you ever know, since the real thing usually doesn't work either?

I tried more traditional solutions for my depression, like alcohol. But my taste buds are all screwed up. They always have been. Red wine tastes like battery acid. White wine tastes like liquid enstranglement. Beer smells and tastes like sour water combined with Alka-Seltzer. Hard liquor tastes like varying degrees of turpentine.

The few times I've been drunk did not turn out well.

Perhaps that's because I'm not part Irish. Or because I don't really know how to love. It's just hard for me to rejoice or understand anything when I'm swirling around in circles.

I could see the rooftops of neighboring houses from my room as a child. They would have looked quite beautiful if we had been living in southern France, or Italy, or Greece. But I grew up in an American suburb called It Shall Remain Nameless. A rickety town where layers of cedar shingles were pockmarked with patches of tar.

Each roof had a rusty antenna, its wire arms splaying wildly, reaching out in every direction for the public broadcasting systems: 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13. Channel 13 was the odd one. Sometimes it would only show static on the TV set.

I could also see plenty of white bird droppings among the shingles if I squinted hard enough. Some were bespeckled with dark berries. These were gifts, little bombs, from the ugly birds of summer, mostly black crows, who would caw all day and congregate on the telephone poles.

My window view also featured brick chimneys, falling apart like smoked cigars, each one puffing through sleet and snow, day and night, exhausted from years of winters. They lived in secret shame, however, knowing that the forced air heat did most of the work.

The biggest downside to my house in the suburbs was that monsters lived in the basement late at night, but only on nights when my big sister was left in charge to babysit me.

We shared the attic room. It had its advantages, like rooftop views, and its disadvantages, like the fact that it was actually only big enough for one person. And all the walls angled in.

My desk was placed right under the window overlooking "the view." Whereas, my sister's desk was in the back corner where she saw only spider webs and carpenter's nails coming loose from the wood beams. I have theorized that this was why she

was a better student. Instead of staring at the tops of houses in need of repair, she was able to focus on her books and studies, with only a wall, a few nails, and a spider web to distract her.

I, on the other hand, dreamt about being a crow – lazily gliding through the air, squawking and singing in the evening sun. A crow that didn't have any homework.

Daydreaming would become my trademark, and I was constantly kidded about it. As an example, my dad might be in the car and ask me to run up to get his wallet from his bedroom dresser. I would happily go bounding upstairs, look on his dresser, and not finding it there, would then search the entire room. Befuddled but determined, I would eventually look under the bed, then dejectedly end up in the bathroom in a final attempt to be thorough. When he turns off the car engine and comes upstairs to ask why I was taking so long, and why I was looking in the shower for his wallet, I would explain I'd looked everywhere else.

He would then, without speaking, point to his dresser, and where just a minute ago the wallet was nowhere to be found, there it was in plain view. Thick, brown, leathery, filled with money, and obviously visually controlled by trickster clowns. How else could it appear and disappear at will?

It was around that time that my family realized I was not normal. I was a spacey oddball kid that seemed uninterested in school or wallet hunting. They spent many a worried night wondering what to do with me. And contemplating how I would survive this world in tact by the time I was twenty. They kept insisting there *were no* trickster clowns.

As a high school senior I was asked to consider a future career. I thought being a college professor sounded good, even though I knew nothing about college yet. I also didn't know what subject I would want to teach. Because there was no subject I was interested in.

I figured in a worst-case scenario I could teach literature and creative writing, because neither of those had any solid facts attached to them. Everything was cloaked in metaphor and symbolism, which was as close as I wanted to get to telling anyone what I thought the truth was. After all, when seen through the eyes of literature, is history the truth? Is science? Is religion? By the very act of committing words to paper, *everything* becomes fiction to some degree: Everything is open to debate and revisions over time. Nothing is any more true or definitive than someone's personal interpretation of a poem.

I was hoping to stay cynical and philosophically neutral about everything, with every subject.

Mirroring reflectionlessness became my goal.

Here is a summary of my life before I met Chelsea.

I spent my years in middle school realizing that the year I spent in third grade might just end up being the best year of my life. No one can know the future, obviously, but my future *since* third grade had basically allowed me to extrapolate. And decades later, my prediction was still right.

I assume you are asking what happened in third grade to make me so happy?

The answer was, it wasn't second grade, which by all human standards, sucked. My parents got divorced.

They both wanted me, by the way. But neither of them actually had the *time*.

Post-divorce, my father took me to baseball games. My mother took me to therapy. They were equally unhelpful.

But in third grade they got remarried. That was one thing.

Also, in second grade my teacher was caught with a bottle of vodka in his desk drawer. He claimed the good fairy put it there. By third grade he was fired and the good fairy had put him behind bars in the city prison. And in third grade my teacher, Miss Smith, changed her name to something more memorable; I forget what it was. But the point is, she was nice, and not drunk in class. For those, and other more amorphous reasons she became my first crush.

Events from fourth grade until high school will prevent this book from becoming a full-length novel because I can't remember a thing. Except that my mother died, and then we moved to place where my sister and I shared an attic, while my dad and the dog shared the downstairs bedroom.

In high school all I did was get high. While fun at times, third grade was better.

At my high school graduation I was dressed in a black robe that made me feel like the ghost of Christmas past.

I never thought about any of the teachers after that day, nor any of the kids in my class. We never had a high school reunion.

Years of my life, fourteen thousand hours of school, quickly blurred into nonexistence.

In college I became obsessed with collage. I enjoyed it. It was very relaxing. I liked piecing various disparate elements into a metaphor. But third grade was better.

I came to realize collage-making wasn't going to be a career in and of itself. However, when I graduated I was at the leading edge of collage technology. Unlike my early years when we were cutting things out of magazines and pasting them together, by my senior year we were taking images and words off the internet and editing them into Photoshopped motifs.

Before I graduated, some of the students were already exploring 3-D printing collages. I had enough trouble living in 3-D without trying to make a collage out of it. In fact, right after graduation I was broke in 3-D.

I soon found my first job at a company called The Working Company, which basically had its employees work on anything they wanted for exactly eight hours a day, five days a week, for minimum wage. I eventually quit that job to work at The Quitting Company, which trained us to teach employees at The Working Company how to get out of their contract.

Wife-wise I chose unwisely and ended up wife-less, lifeless, strife-filled, penniless, money absorbed by the courts. I suddenly

found myself lost, looking for a cheap rental to live in temporarily -- until either someone found me or I found myself.

So I signed up with an apartment rental search company called, Rentals-R-Us. Everyone who worked there was an independent contractor. Therefore, the company even rented its employees (to save on pensions and health insurance). They were good at all things rent.

They found me an apartment at 200th Avenue and 656th Street, right across from The Tall Building. It was a very big and tall city, and it's only gotten worse since.

I then went back to college, a community college, to study math, since I had so little money I had forgotten how to count. And I became an accountant.

Being an accountant was the only pragmatic option. Otherwise a math student eventually becomes a math teacher, teaching other math students to teach math students. This is called a negative cycle. (Bikes that pedal backwards past Zero Street are also called negative cycles, but that's not the same thing.)

I landed my first accounting job in a section of the city called Rat Town. Rat Town was amazingly filthy. Small rodents lined the highway during morning rush hour, skittering faster than the traffic. They outnumbered the cars.

Humans are habitual creatures. So we no longer minded stepping over various piles of discarded filth when walking down the street in Rat Town, but if it started to move it creeped us out.

As I neared my workplace massive highways crisscrossed the sky above me like latticework created by the insane. I escaped only by walking into a musty smelling echoey parking garage. Nests and stringy goopy things left by odd creatures hung from the low beams. It was Halloween without treats.

Down the dark cement stairwell a dim fluorescent light would appear. This was the entrance to my private office. I was the chief accountant in a refrigerator warehouse. I was the chief accountant because, as the only accountant on staff, I gave myself the title of chief and no one objected. I also gave myself a raise that the owner didn't quite notice. But I was worth it.

I sat in a small office with no door, with the fat owner constantly badgering me to cook the books so he didn't have to pay any taxes. I explained to him he wasn't making any money, so his tax bill would be quite reasonable. He patted me on the back and told me I was doing a good job.

If my job had just been counting refrigerators on the warehouse floor I would never have had to work again. Because in my six months there I never saw a refrigerator leave or enter the building. Some of them were gathering cobwebs.

In the darkest corners where the rats roamed, spiders and cobwebs were nonexistent. Rats eat spiders. Rats would also eat

crickets, mealworms and ants. So actually the warehouse itself was cleaner than the street I lived on.

One thing I learned as a commuter. If you leave your apartment at six a.m. and someone is approaching you hunched over, talking to himself, with a hood covering most of his face, don't ask him if he wants to share a cab.

Creatively, I have found time to focus on three art forms that are very clearly the worst possible ways to make money one could imagine.

The first is collage, which I still do, but now I only collage my dreams.

The second art form is playing guitar, while never committing to playing *with* other people, or playing in front of other people. I would play only for myself, mostly during lost times -- winter sunsets, weekend nights.

I would caress the guitar, pulling it towards me; I would feel it gently merge with my body, like the lover I someday hoped to have. I would feel the pliant wood reach out to me, with its faint smell of something wonderfully old, like the aura that exists around a first edition book. The sound emanating from the instrument, when perfectly tuned, with new strings, was unsurpassable -- angel echoes; distant memories sung by a jangly poetess.

Anyway, back to my original point, the third worst art form imaginable, one that has broken and killed many a poor soul, is writing what seems like an incomprehensible novel that wanders around without purpose until suddenly it does.

Most readers seem to prefer books about murder. Or they enjoy diving into a story about political intrigue that leads to unspeakable corruption and heartless exploitation, inevitably including a political assassination disguised as a robbery. They read these things to lift their spirits late at night, nestled alone with their paperback, lying under the glow of their reading lamp. There is something seductive and deeply fulfilling, apparently, about being scared out of your wits just before you go to sleep -- I just don't know what it is.

I love moving. I don't mean walking around and flailing my arms. That's insane. I mean moving to a different town or city, and becoming a completely different person in the eyes of others, until I believe it myself. The mind can expand and fill in the empty spaces.

My new town was hundreds of miles from Rat Town and refrigerators that may have been glued to the floor. I lived in a small apartment. My monthly rent was exorbitant under the circumstances, but affordable for an ex-chief accountant of a big refrigerator warehouse.

The name of the town was Seacliff, although no seas nor cliffs existed there. It was flat, and walled in on every side by other towns that didn't lie as much about their names. What hills existed were of the rounded variety, gently sloped and very grassy, and gave the townsfolk no cliffs to comfort them when they wrote their return address on the top left of an envelope.

What most of the pleasant, but rather dull-eyed citizens failed to realize -- although the mystery would have easily been solved during a trip to the local library -- was that the town was named after a rich settler of yonder-year, John James Joseph Seacliff, son of John James Joseph Seacliff Senior, an oil baron from southern Texas. It's unknown whether or not Seacliff Junior saw the irony in naming a flat sea-less town Seacliff. It's also unknown whether he had ever considered naming the town Seacliff Jr. — but I can't see how it wouldn't have at least crossed his mind. Otherwise, how would the future citizens know whether it was named in his honor, or the honor of his father, whom he despised apparently for having been shut out of his oil business and his will. Seacliff Senior left all of his money to his

secret lover instead of his wife and child. She lived hundreds of miles away in a desert-like cactus-wild hamlet called Rivertown.

Anyway, after a time I was glad I had created this new life. I quickly got a job as the "in-house" accountant at the Seacliff Hotel and bought a nice black suit from The Black Suit Company to look the part.

In third grade, after my parents remarried, each night before bed I would look at a book my father gave me with pictures and descriptions of different species of dinosaurs and whales. It was called *The Biggest Animals Ever*.

I began to have a recurring dream. It was about a white whale that lived in a river. It was like my pet. I named it Alice, I don't know why. Perhaps I was unconsciously calling up the anima spirit of Ahab, although I knew nothing of Moby-Dick at the time.

Alice would come up to me and eat right out of my hand. She was so gentle. Almost like a mother. She would sit with me on the rocks while I read my big animal book. She helped me with math, and to this day I believe that's one reason why I became interested in the subject. In fact, I think Alice told me she herself was an accountant. But maybe I'm making that up, as we often do in dreams.

Anyway, Alice the whale was quite beautiful, and I assumed she would someday be added to *The Biggest Animals Ever* book my father gave me because she was, without a doubt, the single biggest animal that ever was.

Many years later, when I met Amelia, I immediately liked her, in part because her name began with "A," like Alice, like Ahab. I was hoping for some kind of integration, I suppose.

Amelia was a stewardess for Airway Airlines, a fleet of old planes that carried discount-minded passengers to distant islands like Maui and Fiji and Tahiti. I met her at the Seacliff Hotel while she was checking in after a flight.

As I came out from my little hole of an office to look for a pen that worked I was shocked by how beautiful she was. She looked stunning in her dark blue stewardess uniform. It felt like I

was struck by a boulder. I crumbled to my knees and went unconscious. When I came to, I was having a drink with her in the bar. I ordered a chocolate milkshake, which was terrible. Don't ever order a milkshake in a bar. It's like ordering a hamburger and fries at a Japanese restaurant. Avoid both.

I liked Amelia's red hair, which seemed wistful, slightly curly, perfectly and elegantly out of place. She had a broad smile, painted with a subtle shade of lipstick -- traditional red but lightly applied. I liked her thin orange-red eyebrows as well, and her piercing blue eyes; eyes that exuded experience and trustworthiness. Her sophisticated flawless banter was impressive. I was nervous to be around her.

She liked my awkwardness, shy at six feet, and my unkempt careless look -- I was unshaven that day. I wore a black suit, now rumpled from eight hours of wear, and black sneakers, which were kind of a trademark of mine. I always wore them to work with my suit. One had to rebel in some way, at some point, I suppose.

She also liked the fact that, because I was so extremely nervous, I listened to her continuous chatter about the trials and travails of being an airline stewardess without saying a word about myself. She kept looking at me in an odd way, like, could this really be happening? A man who listens, and smiles at my jokes, and empathizes with my pain?

She stayed at the hotel twice a week from then on. I found out later she was hoping to see me there. I, in turn, made sure I was always available when she came, which became less difficult the day she told me her work schedule.

One night she invited me to her room.

I said, "Why, is the TV broken?"

She said, "Yes, very."

When I entered, to keep up the pretense I went over to the TV and looked behind it where there was a mass of wires dangling. "Hmm, I think I see the problem."

She came close behind me until I felt her body brushing against mine. "What is it, Mr. Repairman?"

"Nerves," I said. "Your TV is very nervous."

I turned around and kissed her.

And that was the beginning.

But as a white whale sage in a dream once told me: As the beginning ends, the ending slowly begins.

My name, by the way, is Shelby Stone. I never really liked the name. But I remember feeling quite proud for some reason when a young girl from my youth would sing a certain song each time she saw me.

"Que, sera, sera, whatever will be, will be," is the song as it was written. But she sang: "Que sera sera, whatever Shelby, Shelby. . . the future's not ours to see, que sera sera."

When I turned eighteen I wanted to change my name. I loved the name Shelby Waters. It sounded like the name of a great ball player, or an astronaut. I made a pact with myself that if I ever became a ball player or an astronaut I would officially change my last name to Waters.

One always has high hopes for a fulfilling career at eighteen, just before reality sets in.

So you know how at least one person in every family loves their dog? I mean, in some families everybody likes their dog. But in some families the dog is introduced as "my brother's dog," or "my daughter's dog."

Well, in my family it was different. No one loved our dog, or even liked it. In fact, none of us could remember why we got the dog in the first place, because none of us liked dogs even as a concept.

Other people in the neighborhood loved, dogs. They would walk their dog in the rain. They would stand on the street corner sheepishly waving hello to their neighbor while little Fido shat on their best friend's lawn.

When it came time for either me or my sister to feed our dog, it was always, "Hey, not me." Because, as most everyone clearly knows, dog food is disgusting to smell, touch, see, feel, and even hear when you're scraping it out of the can with a spoon. A spoon that you assume can then be used after you wash it off. Personally, I highly doubt that would be a good idea.

"Well, not me either," my sister pleaded, "I fed him last week."

"So did I," I protested.

At that point my father would usually chime in, "Wait, this dog hasn't been fed since last week? You can't do that! Feed the dog!"

"Which one of us are you talking to, dear Father?"

We knew not to ask him why *he* hadn't fed the dog.

"I'm talking to both of you! Now feed the damn dog before it dies right there in the back of the living room. Because I swear, I'm not dragging him out if he dies! That's going to be *your* responsibility."

We hated responsibilities.

Yet, it still left us asking which one of us would have to drag him out?

We finally, as a team, shuffled slowly over to the dog food cabinet. Our dog had its own segregated pantry for cans of luscious food, leashes, wash towels for baths, a container of dog soap, a canister of Flea-Be-Gone, and a tooth gel Father had bought from a TV blue screen ad that we never opened because it didn't come with the toothbrush.

It was then that we discovered we were plumb out of the very dog food we were asked to gather for doggy supper. We would no longer have the honor of shoveling a tin can of vitamin-rich goop into our dear dog's plastic yellow bowl, which no one had dared to wash out since its virgin voyage.

My father then had to rush down the street in the dead of winter, darkness descending, in a wind chill factor slightly below zero, to get a can of dog food from Quick Stop. By the time he came back inside and took off his big gray overcoat covered with frost and icicles, we knew we'd better be standing there in the kitchen with a can opener.

Come spring our dear dog ran away and couldn't be found. Now here is one of the great mysteries in dog folklore. If you hate your dog, can't afford your dog, and don't even want to feed your dog, why would you be driving all around town looking for your dog if it voluntarily wanted to escape?

It's probably thinking, if I can just make it to the pound from here maybe they can save me from this living nightmare, not realizing that, like people, one runs away from one nightmare dead on into another one.

So there we are, wasting away another summer night, driving around town with our brights on, looking in every alleyway, until sure enough there he is sniffing some other dog's butt outside the movie theater, just like last time.

"Dad, leave him alone. He's having a great time. We're only going to torture him until he runs away again."

But no, Dad dutifully parks the car and sneaks up on him, grabs him from behind, turns back towards the car with our dog wiggling around in his arms trying to get free. All the way home he's shaking his flees on us and shedding his smelly hair all over the floor of the car.

And here's what I have never understood. As soon as we pull into the driveway he'd always run towards the front door and bark to get in. All the while knowing there was not one person in the family that wanted him to be there.

Why is that?

Anyway, that's how I gained my respect for dogs. And why I bought one when Amelia and I moved in together.

The reason Amelia and I broke up and eventually divorced is not particularly complicated to explain: she had an affair.

However, it's more complicated than that because I always assumed that if someone as sophisticated and gorgeous to behold as Amelia were to have an affair it would be with a pilot or a captain during one of her overnight stays in Fiji or Tahiti. After all, there were many fine looking young pilots freshly minted from the ranks of the Air Force; or perhaps a former test pilot working for the C.I.A. -- someone who knew how to keep secrets and was comfortable living a life of coercion and conspiracy.

I thought for sure, if there was to be indiscretion on Amelia's part it would be with one of them. Or one step down from there, some other member of the flight crew. Co-pilots would make a nice second choice.

But no, she fell in love with a waiter. An Argentinean waiter named Ander.

Ander was taller than me, more unshaven than me, more shy than me, and didn't wear black sneakers. In fact, he wouldn't be caught dead in sneakers of any kind. He was a formal black shoe man. Therefore, on paper, I suppose to some, he was a better man than I could ever be.

Ander had a rather goofy girlfriend named Lucy. Obviously, she was far younger than the archeologically famous Lucy. And far prettier, and wittier, you would assume. Lucy also carried a constant supply of very good marijuana, pre-rolled in perfect white paper cylinders.

The four of us met at a small party. As the night progressed, while Lucy and I were on the balcony overlooking the oily gray skyline, Amelia and Ander sat in a corner by themselves. Ander was listening, without saying a word, to all the trials and travails

of Amelia's marriage to me, the black sneakered accountant, for three long unbearable years.

Lucy, meanwhile, came closer to me on the balcony to share one of her lit cylinders, and as I was inhaling, her face came close to mine, her dyed blonde hair mingled with my natural brown hair, and when she took the joint from me, it seemed as though her lips brushed against mine. I was stunned, quite alarmed, and very disgusted at her lack of morals.

The four of us got together a number of times after that, and, as coincidence would have it, we would always end up huddled in opposite pairs. Lucy and I would light up, Ander was pretending to be enraptured listening to Amelia vent about work and marriage and the current state of her health. She also liked to talk about the recurring nightmare she had of her plane crashing on a deserted island, which Ander said was ridiculous.

One day I received a very polite text from my dear wife saying that she was moving in with Ander, at least temporarily. I politely texted her back that this would necessitate me filing for a divorce, permanently. And that I hoped she understood my lack of choice in the matter.

She didn't respond, later telling me that her battery had lost its charge.

She took as much money as she could, with the help of a very short, mean attorney, who took half for his fee.

I asked for the dog, but she told me Ander had grown close to it and that it wasn't negotiable.

She and Ander left Seacliff on a bus headed towards someplace a bit more Argentinean, and most importantly filled with cafes in need of waiters.

A year later, Ander had an affair and left her. He took the dog.

She moved to Tahiti and fell in love with an airline pilot.

What I did the day after Amelia and I broke up seemed like a natural response. I drove out to a footpath in a hillside about twenty minutes from where we lived. I went down the trail far enough to be unseen by anyone. Once I found what I thought was the perfect spot, a ridge overlooking an empty valley that was being made into a water storage facility, I screamed at the very top of my lungs until I couldn't make another sound.

Then I lit up a joint Lucy had given me and smoked nearly half of it before assessing the internal damage.

I then became aware that I couldn't find the joint in between my fingertips. I searched the ground for many long seconds, fearing it might start a forest fire. Finally my eyes saved me from panicking, good old eyes. I spied the joint on my black sneaker. It was white and ghostly against the night-dark cloth; a small zigzag of gray smoke floating upwards. From my bird's-eye view it looked like a white sailing ship adrift upon an ink-black ocean. And the ancient ones were right. They all could indeed sail right over the edge, into another reality.

Just beyond the great black sneaker-ocean lay a fierce white rock, whale-like, suspended in the dark matter just beyond the edge. The ship, the whale, they would sadly never be able to merge into a single reality.

I wondered about the people aboard the ship. Were they aware of the peril on all sides? Did they know that I, the captain, couldn't be trusted? Were they getting married? Playing shuffleboard? Fighting? Breaking up?

I remembered Amelia, off with Ander now, and almost felt a tear fall, but it ducked back into my tear duct before it could splatter down from what would have been a great height when seen through the eyes of a tear. . . . And what if it hit the ship?

I lifted the wayward joint back up towards the heavens, towards my parting lips, but I couldn't bear to smoke it. I realized there could still be people onboard. Unsuspecting.

I looked around to make sure no one was hiding in the bushes watching me attempt not to cry.

I knew no one was there, but there was no harm in being more than one hundred percent sure. A few turns of the neck was all it took. Almost no effort at all.

After satisfying myself that only crows could see me, I had an odd thought -- maybe I did want to cry. It might reveal something to me, like the desire to live.

I wanted to BREATHE. SCREAM. *FEEL PAIN.*

I wanted to cry out to the wind at the end of my days that the world could not, *would not* deaden me, or stop me, from. . . something.

Or maybe crying could calm me, pacify my anxiety, teach me how to find peace in the smaller things, subtle things, like watching a bee land on a dying flower right next to my foot. I wondered why it was not noticing that the nectar was scarce and that a juicy blooming flower of the same species was growing just inches away. It made no bee-sense. Nor did it notice the giant *me* towering above it; nor would I have noticed *it*, if I wasn't looking for a revelation.

But searching for a revelation could actually also prevent a revelation, couldn't it? Because revelations by definition should just come falling down on you like a meteorite. Or like a boulder aflame from a distant mount.

The oddest thing began to cross my mind as I continued to contemplate whether or not to cry. I thought it would be important to write all this down. Something about what I was thinking was making sense, but I was beginning to lose the thread. There was no way I would remember any of it by the time I drove home.

I also knew there was no way I was going to drive anywhere in my current condition.

Another thought bubbled up that I wanted to write down; it had something to do with why Amelia and I broke up, aside from the obvious reasons. There were subtler reasons. I had to remember those most of all. I would never want to repeat a past mistake.

But that was going to be tricky, since so many choices I *hadn't* made might also have turned out to be mistakes. Was anything *not* a mistake? That was the question. That was the revelation I came to: What isn't a mistake?

Eventually, as things unfold, mistakes reveal themselves. That was life. That was the world. The stuff history is made of. One mistake after another, interrupted by accidental flashes of love or courage or genius.

I didn't want to stand here and watch the bee and think any longer. To further confirm my instinct, the bee was gone.

Go back down to the car and get something to write with!

Suddenly a new idea flashed before me. One I had never considered before. Maybe I should decide to go absolutely counter to my instincts to see what would happen. Since everything in my life had turned out so badly, maybe all I had to do was. . . the opposite!

I turned around and walked up the path instead of back down to the car until I came to a literal fork, not a figurative fork. I had to choose now.

But choosing was what I always did. So I decided to go back down the hill after all and walk back to the car. The one thing I didn't want to do was drive back home in my condition, so, counter to my planned destiny, that's exactly what I would do.

Two blocks into my counterintuitive experiment I accidentally ran a red light and smashed into the back of a police

car. A brand new Ford Taurus apparently, with a big rack of ruby red lights bolted to the top.

I can't remember why I didn't see the light. To be honest, I don't think it was there, until it was. But that would be hard to prove in court.

The blue clad policeman didn't even have to put his red flashing light on to warn me I was in trouble. By the time I got out of my car to see if he was alright, he was already writing out a ticket, moaning.

I was then summarily handcuffed and taken to jail.

The Seacliff County jail was a real kick -- so many fun-loving, crazy-assed, completely wacko beings to get to know in such a short time. With all the terrific food, new friends offering me a free smoke, open public toilets, and several men with excessively hairy arms, why would I ever want to leave?

A day later they put me in a lineup as a decoy for someone who had witnessed the murder of a local politician. The motive was unclear. Police suspected it could have been random, possibly part of a robbery.

The timing of the robbery was unfortunate for me, because it was exactly the time and day I was getting stoned out of my mind with a bee.

Of course, the witness immediately picked me out of the lineup. I was certainly the murderer. He wore black sneakers just like mine.

I started screaming, these are *Vans*. Everyone wears *Vans*. They took me away screaming and put me in a private cell.

The public attorney assigned to my case was an ex-con who studied law during his decade in prison. He told me not to worry. He could totally relate to my situation. I told him I didn't think so because I didn't do it! He smiled and whispered he didn't commit his crime either.

He was obviously crazy. So I took the small amount of money Amelia's attorney, out of good will, had left me after the divorce, and hired a private attorney.

A month before the trial someone looking vaguely like me from a distance got caught robbing a house in a rich neighborhood while wearing a pair of black sneakers. The witness immediately changed her mind and tapped him as the murderer. And I was set free.

I blamed Amelia for my troubles for a long time after that.
But Chelsea made me forget and forgive.
I was about to come to a whole new chapter of my life.

If marriage was supposed to be a high-born journey, with hearts thrown joyously into the air, then Amelia crashed the plane.

I'm glad we crashed. The only journeys we took whenever we tried to talk were like previewing various hell realms. In case we ended up being defined by God as terribly evil at our prescribed time of death, we would definitely have déjà vu on our long staircase down towards introducing ourselves to the Devil. Traversing familiar hallways. Echoes of memories of fights about who wasn't listening to whom.

Chelsea was an altogether different being than Amelia.

She was smart, yet her style of dress could only be called purposefully careless. Amelia was superficial, yet fastidious with her wardrobe.

Amelia had to go through a long complex ritual before I could lay my hands on her. Chelsea would just grab me in the middle of breakfast.

Amelia hated to travel, since that was pretty much all she did for work. Chelsea wanted to travel the world, and loved planes, and even ate every morsel of whatever was on the white plastic tray of death the airlines would serve up. She loved the little napkins and the white plastic forks. She loved the free ginger ale and coffee.

Amelia, in between her work hours, was housebound and stern. Chelsea was reckless, stayed out late at night, and was overly silly when she was with friends.

Amelia *had* no friends.

Not that I'm comparing, mind you.

I met Chelsea in Seacliff a few months after I got out of jail. We fell in love in ways that were not about love at all. It was a sensual riot, a physical revolution that took over the castle of rational thought and slayed the King of Words. In fact, the king died on the first night.

Aside from eating, running, whooping, sliding, diving, and clawing at each other like the desperate animals we were, our sounds were limited to passing grunts that translated loosely as either laughter, hello, more, good, or see you tonight. This went on for some time. All fall and winter, actually. Then came spring.

As an April Fool's joke Chelsea bought me a dozen novels to read, hoping they would teach me how to talk. She was sick of all the blank space I had been allowing in between the times we were having fun.

Knowing it was a joke, I read them anyway.

The most impressive book of the lot was a surreal comedy called *Salmon Ella*. It was about a beautiful pink-ish female fish. The book was couched in metaphor, making fun of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and its author.

A Cliff Notes version of the book might go something like this: Ella fell in love with Albert Canoe, a depressed writer who hardly ever got out of his boat because he was afraid to put any of his dark thoughts on paper.

Ella tried to bring him out of his absurd funk by teaching him to dance. Except Ella had no legs so she taught him at great sacrifice to herself. In the end, despite wiggling like crazy doing The Get Out of The Boat dance for him, she remained childless because she wasted so much time falling in love with what the author called 'a b-ore-ing shipwreck of a man.'

The ending was sad: Albert was smashed to death by a falling rock while padding upstream to find Ella.

Rivers flowing in a valley surrounded by tall rocky mountains can be quite dangerous in that way.

Chelsea was younger than me, laughed louder than me, had big eyes with dark speckles inside them, brown as coffee grinds. She was curvy but petite, nice to look at if you just happened to glance at her, and at work she showed herself off. But outside of work she liked to wear baggy clothes. Her milk chocolate hair was cut short enough to frame her impish oval face, a face that was sweet enough to beckon friends and fiends alike. She came to work as the concierge at the Seacliff Hotel a few months after Amelia left me. This is how we met. Her job was to steer the already disappointed patrons of this less than stellar establishment to any one of three putrid local restaurants -- each one being too far to walk, but not worth the cab ride. She did warn them that all the *good* restaurants were a bit too far from their present location: had they ever eaten the pesto in Cinque Terra? Or the house made grape sorbet in Paris? But, hey, people have to eat, she would smile. And they would walk away with grins on their faces and greatly lowered expectations. That was her job.

That sparkly but realistic attitude was pretty much the way Chelsea approached love as well. She realized that in the end it would probably be disappointing, after a long journey getting there, and that lowered expectations were going to be critical for the survival of the word love. She was searching for someone who wasn't even close to perfect, someone who had wild stories to tell, someone who had lived life to the fullest.

So when we met -- after I had spent a veritable lifetime in Rat Town, realizing that life was frighteningly like the crisscrossing steel beams that buzzed and rattled overhead -- a still-life tidal wave of fat-cemented grayness, a microsecond of overwhelmingness caught frozen into a nightmare -- then got

hauled off to jail wrongly accused of murdering a local politician because of my *sneakers* -- Chelsea instinctively felt she had met her match.

We were eating at the Seacliff Cafe minding our own business when we met Zander. He was our waiter but seemed uncomfortable with the role and shed it immediately. "What are you guys doing here?" was the way he greeted us. He had never laid eyes on us before. The cafe was rather empty since the food was awful but we were there for coffee and dessert.

I myself didn't like coffee. My taste buds recognized it as some permutation of liquid dirt. Add sugar and it was still dirt, but with sugar. Tea was not much better, as my brain translated the taste as slightly off, possibly mold-infested, water with an infusion of a bunch of leaves to hide the overall flaw. But desserts, especially chocolate, were immediately translatable. I was therefore situated in the cafe for chocolate, and chocolate only.

Chelsea smiled at him and said, "We have traveled here from a faraway land, young man, to choose from the world-renown specialty desserts of the Seacliff Cafe. What have ye tonight?"

Zander was nonplussed. "Chocolate ice cream, m'lady, from a magic box hidden away in the Seacliff Cafe industrial freezer."

We laughed. He kept staring at her as if to say, *Please think I'm funny – because I would like to lick your ear.*

Chelsea noticed none of this. She was blindly committed to me. And as far as loyalty on a given evening, she was beyond reproach. I didn't worry too much about Zander at the time. He was a sardonic young waiter in a clean white shirt. His tall frame was paper thin. He had middle-eastern dark skin, but with an inconsistent Western nose, a bit too long and thin. He had overly-large, rather startled eyes, as if he'd just seen a ghost. I wasn't worried at all.

As lovers' stories get told, the past is framed, often camouflaged, from the truth. How is one expected to know what they were feeling, much less actually said, during a certain critical time in their relationship? It's all fiction at a certain point. In fact, memory is fiction. Future is science fiction. Even the present is being woven as quickly as possible into some storyline that, to others, could be completely unbelievable. The truth can hardly be found anywhere. That may be the only truth worth believing.

But Chelsea and I did the best we could after "the era of taking to each other" began.

I told her about Amelia and my dark days working in Rat Town for the refrigerator baron. She told me that just before I came along she had been in a relationship with Ernest, the hotel receptionist (who, in direct contrast to his name, was the biggest liar I had ever met). I lost a bit of respect for Chelsea for getting involved with someone like him. And she lost respect for me because I had gotten involved with someone like Amelia. So, really, that score evened out.

"In fact," she admitted, "you were my affair. I was still going out with Ernest when I met you. After our first night together I broke up with him. He called me a liar, I called him a liar. He said, 'What did I lie about?' I said, 'What haven't you lied about? Is your name even Ernest?' He said, 'Maybe.' The next day he quit, remember? That wasn't a coincidence."

"So I basically killed two birds with one stone, since I hated working with him. I stole his girlfriend and got him to leave with one perfectly thrown rock."

In the end, I was relieved we had told each other our stories. It freed me to be more myself. It was refreshing not to have any

secrets. Although, obviously, being adults, there were plenty of secrets left, and plenty yet to come.

That night I revisited my childhood river dream with Alice the white whale. It had a few variations. Chelsea was in it, lying by the river in a bikini. And the whale that lived in the river was bright red. Blood red! And even bigger than when I was dreaming of Alice as a child. It asked me if I wanted to see the world. I could hop on its back and it would fly me anywhere. I said, as long as you bring me back home the moment I want to return.

It promised.

So I hopped on its back and we toured the world from high above. The dream must have lasted all night. The last scene left me sitting next to Chelsea in her bikini. The whale dove back into his river home and disappeared. I woke up in a cold sweat.

We never went back to the Seacliff Cafe because everything was inedible. But Zander became a friend of ours. He would come over to our apartment to listen to me play guitar. He was the only living human who liked listening to the songs I played. I appreciated that. He would say, "Play more, play another, play it again." I was always happy to oblige.

I came to like Zander. The three of us planned a big summer picnic by the river one weekend. Maybe we would bring other friends along. That sounded like innocent fun. It would be a quintessential act to honor middle America -- sharing food, sharing time together, pretending all was fine; whatever shall be, shall be.

There is a river in the town of Seacliff. A real river, not a dream river. It's where families go on summer days. And where lovers go in the rain. To escape the humdrum nonsensical days streaming by without name or reason.

The winters are lonely. People stay huddled in their homes. Animals hide in the warmth of fallen leaves by night.

In the spring, birds gather at the water's edge. They flap their wings as if allowing themselves to shiver, as their feet brush against the cool surface of their feeding grounds.

The summer is joyous. Humans awaken. They come to the river's edge to picnic and gather for music concerts, while swimming in the shallows.

In autumn, the entire town is sucked back inside a dreamless place. Quiet leaves tumble, caught in the updraft, swirling above the empty shoreline. They fall. They crash. They become water-soaked, flattened, translucent; their brief life airborne forever ended.

Winter whispers.

Then one day winter is.

In this way, life on the river is circular.

There's a built-in time frame bias -- a trick of the mind -- that we cling to, yet we are rarely aware of.

As an example, if you are writing a book, you probably hope it will have some lasting value. The time frame bias for that hope might be ten or twenty years, or a hundred years if you can make that kind of case for yourself.

But once your time frame extends to *thousands* of years, your reasons for creating the book come into question.

And if someday we extend our lives for an indefinite amount of time by some sleight-of-hand of science and we colonize other planets for generations to come, that enormous endeavor to colonize also has a time frame bias. Because *billions of years* from now any attempt at human life extension, any hope for immortality, will probably run into some very serious problems.

By the end of the universe as we know it, trillions of years from now, hope for immortality will likely be insurmountable.

I suppose, there is also a "time beyond time" time frame bias that some cling to, in theory -- the timeless realm of the spiritual. But day to day they are still blinded by, and motivated by, the same desires, fears, and time frame biases, as everyone else.

My opinion: I think the mind just endlessly makes stuff up as it goes along, just to save its own ass.

Unless, time is circular.

In which case, everything we do and say and write would be critically important, forever.

Bear with me. I am trying to explain how murder can happen quite spontaneously. How it can be partially accidental and no one's fault. Yet still be murder.

The concept of murder is quite new, when seen with a 500,000 year time frame bias.

Unless you're going to believe the bit about Cain killing Abel, then the first known murder was discovered by scientists around 430,000 years ago. It was during the Middle Pleistocene epoch. Scientists analyzing the fragments of a skull belonging to an early Neanderthal male found that he died of blunt force trauma. Possibly a rock being smashed upon his head. It was deemed murder because of an equal and similarly blunt force discovered on both sides of the skull.

Murder, however, can sometimes become hard to quantify. Thou Shalt Not Kill. Yes, but is it okay to kill during war when you're the one starting the war? Everyone has their reasons.

Murder can be quite subtle, and controversial. It's not a black and white thing. It's not always guilty or innocent.

For instance, God's commandment, Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's House (or anyone living *in* his or her house). What if the neighbor goes ahead and covets the guy's wife or girlfriend?

What if we're all still part Neanderthal, and things get out of hand?

Unlike Captain Ahab and his crew, I was afraid of the water. I hated to swim, I could hardly keep afloat. I would never consider swimming in a lake, ocean, river or pool.

It all started back in the suburbs, way back when my sister and I lived in the attic. Oh, by the way my sister's name was Alicia. She died a few years after my mom did, but for different reasons. I think it was heroin. Although others say it was cocaine. Still others say it was heroin *and* cocaine.

Anyway, we had a neighborhood pool and because I was afraid of the water my dad insisted I take swimming lessons from the local teenage lifeguard, Bart, who unbeknownst to my father, was a sadist.

He loved to scare the hell out of the little kids. He would scream from his perch, "Stop running," "No jumping." "No diving." And if some kid didn't obey the evil Bart -- especially if he was forced to blow his ear-piercing whistle -- he would ban the kid from the pool for the day.

For me, that would have been a best case scenario. I hated being near any body of water, be it a lake, ocean, river, or pool.

Nonetheless, there I was being jostled around in his muscular grip. He was standing behind me with his hands on my shoulders. I readied myself to be pushed in at the count of three -- ready to sink down into the cold, chlorine-thick, piss-filled pool, then emerge buoyantly, and begin flailing my way to the other side, to show him my stroke.

My main problem was not being able to turn my head to breathe. I had too much fear of swallowing water.

My secondary problem was that no matter how hard I kicked or stroked, my body would not move forward. It was as if I were tethered to the starting point.

I also had an irrational fear that someone was going to jump in and land on top of my head.

Falling unconscious, I would tumble down to the bottom and die there. Or, if not found dead in a pool, I would die in a lake, ocean, or river.

Certainly the Seacliff River qualified as one of my potential death traps. Still, I loved playing upon its shore in the summer, having picnics, attending the music concerts. Or just hanging out with Chelsea -- she loved to swim there.

Zander's life was analogous to the myth of Sisyphus. The Greek legend, as most people know, is about a man, actually a King, who was punished for his crafty deceitfulness. He was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again.

Looking at the bright side, Sisyphus, in Greek, had nothing to do with being a sissy, which was a term created in the 19th century by the British. Sisyphus was by that time long dead. (Until 1942 when Albert Camus resurrected him in his now famous book.)

Brighter still, by all historical accounts, Sisyphus did not have a lisp. Because saying Sisyphus, or worse, The Myth of Sisyphus, would have amounted to pure torture if he'd had one. And let's face it, the guy already had enough problems.

Anyway, every time Zander tried his hand at something, he would get to a certain level of success, and then fall back.

When he was a kid he was a top teen tennis player. He played tournaments every weekend. He got better and better until he was nationally ranked in the top ten in the "Not Yet 18" class, and ranked 822 in the world, just above Santiago Fa Rodriguez Taverna. But during a match with Taverna, Zander hurt his shoulder on a wicked topspin forehand and had to have micro-surgery on his supraspinatus tendon.

The surgery didn't quite take, so he had to have the surgery again. After that he lost his power serve and the ability to comfortably hit lobs that landed at the baseline. He never fully recovered.

Years later he found a girl he fell in love with, a seventeen year-old Italian girl named Kay Sera. They spent a fortnight

together, and she agreed to marry him when she turned eighteen. But their future imploded when the entire Sera family moved to Nigeria. He tried to keep in touch but she stopped all communication.

Finding himself back down at the bottom of the mountain again, he tried his hand at learning guitar. This is why he loved to hear me play. After three years of intense practice with a world famous Flamenco master the same shoulder he'd hurt in tennis started acting up every time he put his strumming arm around the wide body of his Yamaha.

It's as if he was somehow touching a human body inappropriately, and God was forcing him to stop.

He developed tendonitis in his shoulder. It never went away. The pain forced him to give up playing the guitar, and back down the mountain he slid.

Finally he went back to school to study law. His other love. But in his senior year he couldn't keep up with the workload while holding down two jobs. He had to drop out. Once again he found himself at the foot of the mountain looking up.

He was still looking up from the bottom when we met him.

There is a name for hitting bottom around these parts. It's called being a waiter at the Seacliff Cafe.

One day he mentioned to us that the breakfast rolls were so stale they were like miniature boulders.

Looking back, it was clear he couldn't escape his fate.

Word gets around in this town. We do not live in a vacuum. I don't know who told me. I have blocked all of that out of my memory. But I did confirm the fact that Amelia, now happily ensconced on another coast with her airplane pilot lover, had a child. A daughter, in fact. Her name was Silvia, named apparently for the beautiful silver coloring of an airplane. Amelia would always be married to the sky. That was my romantic conclusion based not at all on fact, or my experience of her as a friend, girlfriend, or wife.

My reaction was slow to emerge. But after a few nights' dreaming and ruminating about the situation, I realized that I was insanely pissed. I don't know why. These are the molten lava things in us that erupt without logic or warning.

Simultaneously, or perhaps in some way because of this hideous news, Chelsea and I were not getting along. We were thinking about getting separate apartments.

The idea evolved by both of us feeling something like this: I love you. But I'm bored to death of you. I have had you over and over again, until I am nauseous from over-having you. And no amount of not having you is likely to make me want to have you again.

But what about all the sweet nights in front of the plasma TV, and texting each other from the same bed before we go to sleep?

And this town, void of history and charm as it may be, is not Rat Town. We are one of the fortunate few. Why give up all the good because we have lost the ability to be great?

Plus one apartment is so much less expensive than two. We've been saving. *Saving!*

The problem with modern day is there's too much choice. Too many decisions, too many opportunities to change one's mind.

Sisyphus might have ended up as a playboy, cynical and drunk at the back of a bar. Waiting for his one and only, his rock, to walk in sober and sweep him off his feet.

Camus might have become a stand-up comic.

Ahab's men might have taken up homes in the suburbs.

Finnegan and his river-wife, Anna, might have walked away forever from Howth Castle and never circled back around to its environs.

It's just too easy to let go of what you have, not realizing at the time how hard it might truly be to start over.

One fine sunny day, in the summer of my final moments as the old me, Chelsea and I decided to go for a picnic on the river.

We invited a number of friends, of which there were few to begin with, but the only one to show up was Zander. He usually worked on weekends at the cafe, but he'd found a sub.

We walked the shoreline and laughed about little things, then we ate enormous amounts of picnic-appropriate food packed neatly in cute picnic-appropriate straw baskets, with picnic-appropriate plasticware.

The sun was high, the water was clear, bubbling downstream with the ease of a silent slow-moving train.

The wind was in between breaths. The clouds were thin and streaked, like jet fumes from an airshow.

After our dessert of chocolate cake, bought fresh from the Seacliff Bakery, Chelsea, wearing a thin bikini, with every intention of swimming in the afternoon, fell asleep. She lay innocent and exposed on a quilted blanket we'd brought from home.

Zander excused himself and went off for a swim downstream. He disappeared waving to me.

I wandered over to a group of children playing. One brave girl was wearing a red whale patterned swimsuit. I recall it all so clearly now.

The kids were laughing, running around like electrons, daring each other to jump in the river and swim. "Touch the bottom, touch the bottom," they yelled. No one went in. "The water's too cold," said one of the boys.

I sat down now and watched them play. After a while they saw me, and for some reason they gathered around. "Tell us a

story, mister," one girl said. They sat down in a pack, like I was a camp counselor about to start a fire and roast marshmallows.

So I told them a river story. The one about a salmon named Ella, and her boyfriend Albert Canoe.

I told them Ella tried to teach him to dance but she didn't have legs. The children began to giggle and squeal.

"In the end," I said over the ruckus, "a big rock fell and smashed Albert on the head. . ." They became quiet.

Realizing I had children listening, I changed the end of the story. ". . . but he had a very hard hat on his head, and the rock bounced away to kill somebody else."

"Yay," the children clapped.

"Tell us another story."

But I was distracted. Salmon metaphors began racing through my head. If Chelsea was Ella and I was Albert, Chelsea was sacrificing her life trying to teach me how to dance, but I just couldn't learn, and now my time was coming to an end. Or someone else's was in the revised ending I told the children.

But what if in the metaphor *I* was Ella and Chelsea was Albert? I had no ability to teach her how to dance, I had no legs. I didn't have a clue about dancing with her or anyone else. And as much as I could ever try to love her, in the end we were both doomed to fail. I was the worst salmon ever. I was afraid to even dog paddle in a river, much less fight my way upstream.

I had been away from Chelsea and Zander too long and I was starting to feel a knot in my stomach.

The children continued clapping, "Tell us another story."

"Not now. Maybe later," I smiled.

Then I added as a dare, "Who's going to swim in the river?
Who?"

"Not me, not me," yelled identical twin boys.

"I will," said the brave young girl in the red whale swimsuit, and off the others tromped to see if she really would, really could. Perhaps if she jumped in they would too.

When I returned to where Chelsea lay sleeping I noticed Zander had returned from his swim and was lying next to her.

I hid behind a large boulder.

He looked around to make sure no one was nearby, and when he thought he was alone with her, kissed her lightly on her bare stomach. Then he pulled her bathing suit bottom down to her hip bone and gently kissed her skin there. Very slowly, very gently.

Chelsea began to moan and laugh.

Did she know it was him, or think it was me?

She awoke fully and looked at him.

Her fingers slowly found the top of his head and began to caress his long curly hair.

He became excited and lifted his face to hers, to kiss her.

"Heeeeey!" I screamed, racing downhill.

They were mortified, startled.

I ran full force towards them. It felt like I might outrun my legs. Zander stood up to defend himself but I was charging too fast and when I crashed my elbows into his upper body he fell backwards, tripped over himself, stumbled over a boulder, tumbled into the river, and hit his head on a rock.

My momentum carried me past him and I splashed into the water. I thought about swimming away in anger but I couldn't swim. If I went any further out I would be getting in way over my head. So with my black sneakers soaked through to their very soles I emerged as part river.

Chelsea ran over to him.

"What did you do?" she said.

"Don't you mean to say, '*I'm sorry, Shelby?*'" I huffed indignantly.

"*What did you do?*" she screamed.

I looked closer. He wasn't breathing. His arms were spread wide open. Red rose water began to trickle downstream.

Chelsea immediately ran off to the car to use her phone to call for help.

One of my recurring dreams unfurled before me. I felt as if I had been transported far away.

Zander was dead. That much was certain. How Chelsea would describe the circumstances to the police was another story. I had already been accused of murder once. This time I was guilty.

My relationship with Chelsea was over. I was alone again. All alone.

I looked fifty yards upstream and saw the children playing, squealing with youthful delight. They were unaware of us. We were far off, far away, phantoms in another world.

They simply assumed that their grown-up futures would be as sun-bright and joyous as this day.

I watched to see what they would do next.

The brave girl in the red whale swimsuit beckoned them. She was waving from the middle of the river, shouting for everyone to come join her.

Each child who was not a sissy swam. I swam not, being long afraid of the river.

Time froze. I was free frozen. The wind wandered aimlessly amongst the willows.

I could hear the river in motion behind me, splashing, hissing, flowing relentlessly towards the enormity of the distant open sea, only to circle back around -- through cloud bursts and great falls down the mountainside -- to this place again.

Such a strange circular game water played. Beautiful in many ways.

Suddenly a series of revelations came to me. They were about the circular nature of, and the beauty of, existence. This circular nature is not necessarily part of reality, or time as we perceive it. But it is a part of existence nonetheless. I felt. . . something else there, too.

Realizing I had come to the very brink of decoding the meaning and purpose of all of human life, I thought *You'd better write this down*. But the moment that thought occurred to me my stream of consciousness broke. It began to shift and churn. . . *nosily*. . .

I heard a wailing sound cutting through the air, closing fast -- a police siren.

The sound slowly zigzagged up and down in pitch. Pulsing in intensity. The sound had a color as well -- red. Sound had color! Another revelation! My perceptions were at their peak.

I stood dead still, arms outstretched, waiting to be handcuffed.

A deep calm suddenly enveloped me. I was surrendering. I wasn't just surrendering to the police. This was a surrendering of everything I had ever done, thought, said, or felt. Because none of it had worked. All my calculations had turned out to be wrong.

It's as if I were awakening from a long lonely sleep.

Did I wish Zander was alive? Even if it meant he would have taken Chelsea from me? Of course.

Did I want Chelsea to be happy? Even if it meant she would have left me to be with Zander? Of course.

Zander. His name, I suddenly realized was Ander with a Z in front of it!

Both Zander and Ander were waiters. But they didn't wait. They took love away from me. . . Amelia's "*and/or*" Chelsea's.

"They took love away from me." *But is that even possible?*

No! In fact, it wasn't the loss of a future with Amelia or Chelsea that upset me and made me feel crazy. It wasn't the loss of love. It was the realization that it was *never love to begin with!*

None of us had any real understanding of such a thing.

Physical connection, sexual fulfillment, mutual agreement. Expectations. Possession. Control. We needed those things to see and comprehend a fraction of what "love" actually is. But those things are like guide dogs for the blind. They miss the true vision. Love becomes hidden with a series of howls and woofs and tail wagging. Because those things are just desires disguised as love.

I *love* desire. It's a beautiful poison. It sickens the soul with longing so that the soul has a chance to evolve -- it forces us to turn on the light and *search*. For something. But we usually search for the wrong things.

Instead of desire I now felt something else within this surrendered state, where all was lost, where the game was over. What I felt was love at another level; an awareness of the preciousness of life, the sky, the river; the world. The wonder of it. Even without me in it; or maybe especially so. Because I didn't have to compete with life and win anymore. My total surrender of everything had awakened me to *everything else*.

I always assumed experiencing this feeling of *actual love* was unattainable in my lifetime.

Yet I realized now, it was probably the only thing worthy of attaining.

Committed relationships, fulfilling our responsibilities, sensual saturation, achievements earned, art created, even knowledge itself, were all mental prisons compared to what was flowing through me.

Life as we know it, the daily walking, talking, working, lusting, failures, victories, then life ending. . . *it all meant nothing!* The universe would never care or remember any of it, or any of us.

The only thing worthy of holding onto is the deeper dream, shaped in present time, that leads to places beyond yearning. Beyond need. Beyond want.

Moreover, unless we are living in that awakened place we are not really living life at all. We are always somewhere else. In another time. We are back at the river hiding behind a rock. We are Zander, dead in the water. We are Chelsea, mourning for someone she hardly knew; wanting something she could never have. We are waiting to be handcuffed. We constantly rewind ourselves back to ignorance and regret, and circle around endlessly. We find no peace. Nothing makes sense.

Ironically, the only thing that is *truly real* turns out to be a dream we find by waking ourselves up to it. The only question is how long we can stay in it as time passes by.

In the end, I think the only value we have in this life -- *if we have any value at all*, is. . . .

Tears begin to fall.

The siren is ear-piercingly close.

I hear a car door slam.

Someone is running toward me.

At that moment all my revelations, in a massive avalanche, begin to tumble down, skipping, skittering, scattering.

"It was an accident," I said with a steady voice.

"Everything is an accident," the officer barks, asking for my name.

"Whatever, Shelby, Shelby."

The future's not ours to see.

Yet there is always so much more, hidden beneath the surface, for each of us to discover.

The patrol car door slams shut behind me.

I look out the window to the river. Everything is aglow.

In that moment I make an inner pact -- whenever my awakenings end. . .

~ GM