

JOURNEY
THROUGH THE
RIOTOUS
DARK

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Chapter 1

I promised myself I wouldn't look. But, of course, I did. It was as gory as I thought it would be. The kind of thing that would give me nightmares for a long time to come. They were touching, kissing, whispering about something, maybe whispering about me.

I knew going to this party was a bad idea. But how many times do you get an opportunity to see your soon-to-be ex-girlfriend kissing your soon-to-be ex-favorite professor?

When you go to a small liberal arts university it's small enough to know everyone's business, liberal enough to have professors kissing your soon-to-be ex-girlfriend, and challenging enough to flunk out if you start thinking too much about stuff like that. It's kind of like a crash course in "Hell for Teenagers."

The truth is, I didn't think I was the type that would freak out about girlfriends, or memories of ex-girlfriends. I figured I was still too young, and the right girl probably wouldn't show up until I was thirty. I figured if I were to get upset with every girl that didn't work out I'd be committing suicide at twenty-five after writing a bunch of really crappy love poems.

The professor was married. His wife was living somewhere in California. But that's no excuse in my opinion. Maybe what he was doing with Sierra was legal in America. But could you really do these things in the third world countries he was teaching us about without the government eventually stepping in and lopping something off? And if so, where was his sense of global ethics?

Another ironic thing about it was, the day I first met Sierra we were in this professor's history class. She was sitting in a chair with her face buried in her notes from a science class that had gone way over her head.

Across campus the very day I met Sierra, was Clair Kinsley. She was sitting in a biology class dissecting a frog. A year later she'd be dissecting me.

Normally you wouldn't think there's any kind of meaningful correlation between love and dissecting frogs. But I've come to see there are meaningful correlations between just about everything if you think about it long enough. And I've had plenty of time to think about it.

Chapter 2

The history professor was a good teacher. When he spoke the words lit up right in front of you. They created little movies in your head. I could see ancient people (they were all quite small) walking around, having conversations with each other in some weird dead language.

He was a very charismatic guy. He wasn't like the typical history professor you see in movies with a little white beard and a kind smile and a secret tragic life. Not this professor. This guy was dynamic. He was strong and tall and had a nice face for a guy.

His basic message was that history is much more than just the names of leaders and dates of wars. It's ultimately about human psychology throughout time. You can't come up with a philosophy or a political structure without dissecting human psychology every step along the way. Because no matter how lofty an initial idea may be, human minds will find a way to screw it up, like putting a freshly finished oil painting into a bathtub of water.

To see who humans are today he took us back thousands of years ago to Egypt and India. That was interesting. He captured my imagination. It's not like I'd rather live in ancient times, or be an Egyptian at *any* time.

I'm not going to dress up as a Pharaoh or a Jain for Halloween. I'm not going to go around talking about this stuff when I'm on a date. But studying these two ancient cultures gave me insights about how incredibly stupid and ingenious and cruel humans are throughout time. And that's important to know. Because then you realize that trying to change people is as fruitless and naïve as fishing with a shoelace.

You need a good hook and a very delicious looking worm just to get someone to pay attention to you.

Once you feel the pull you pretty much lose all control from that point on. Clair Kinsley was the metaphorical fisherman, or fisherperson.

By the way, I'm not going to mention the name of the university we all went to because I don't want them to sue me. I don't want the history professor to sue me either, which is why I didn't mention his name, or his wife's name. Even some of the other students might want to sue me. They didn't want to get involved with what happened. They wanted to go back to not knowing anything. They were going to college for the sole purpose of getting a job. To me that's like sleeping with your girlfriend for the sole purpose of having a baby. Slow the fuck down!

I wanted to go to college to enjoy the classes. I thought all of the professors would be wildly charismatic. I was

attracted to charisma itself. I wanted to be stunned. I wanted a metamorphosis to take place. So when I told Sierra that I didn't go to classes that didn't interest me, and that I didn't care if I got an F or not in all the "required" classes I was being forced to take, she assumed I was destined to be a hobo.

A university doesn't teach you that you can't fake fun. At freshman orientation they should have started out by telling us that fun and joy are life goals. Fun and joy are hard to find, and even harder to keep around. How do you capture energy that lights up your world and have it last for more than a few minutes or hours?

And if the ending finds you nose-diving through a burnt-orange atmosphere without a parachute, are you supposed to look up at the cerulean blue sky ablaze -- just before your heart splatters -- and fondly remember everything?

What I was hoping to learn in college was how to stay in orbit. I was hoping the science classes, at least one of them, would teach us how to escape gravity.

Instead, I ended up with a history teacher stealing my girlfriend.

Chapter 3

I used to call her Lune de Clair, which means “in the moonlight,” because she emanated a moonlike strangeness even in broad daylight. She was also as hauntingly beautiful as the moon – star-touched blue eyes, swirly yellow hair, a night sky smile.

Even her ears were beautiful -- small and delicately shaped -- which is amazing because I’m not a huge ear fan. But I really did like Clair’s ears even from the very first time I saw them.

I met Clair in an electrical engineering class. I needed help. She loved the class and helped me decode the work.

I almost forgot to mention her nose. Way before it was cool to have one, Clair wore a little diamond nose ring. She had worn it since she was a little girl. It was about the size of a pinhead, maybe even a little smaller. All you could see was an occasional sparkle from the tiny diamond.

The story behind the nose ring was that even though she was pale skinned and blonde, she was born and raised in India. Her father had work of some kind over there. The nose ring happened when she was eight. When she was ten they moved to Little Italy in New York. They weren’t Italian. They just liked the neighborhood.

Clair sometimes spoke a made-up language, which, if

you listened closely enough, made sense. For instance, when she called me, or any friend on the phone, the first thing you would hear was her soft voice saying, "Hadafulahya?" It was spoken liltingly and very fast, as if it was a long Indian word.

She called me "Maestro," not because I played music, and not out of deference or respect. She called me that to make me laugh when I got too serious. Like I would say, "My psychology professor is all hung up on B.F. Skinner. Skinner and him both think we're just a bunch of fucking rats." She would say, "Maestro, compose yourself. And by the way, when comparing rats to humans -- have some sympathy for the ego of rats."

One day I was talking to her about ancient Indian religions, which being born in India I thought she might have some interest in, and when I mentioned the Upanishads she said, "I like 'Up.' Up is part of my religion."

I said, "What's your religion?"

She said, "Pranks and jokes. And I'm very serious about them. If someone tries to stop me I send my priests to torture them. We start a war if we must. So it's really just like any other religion."

She sat me down on the floor and brought out a big white candle from her closet. "I am going to show you one of my religious rituals." She lit the candle and started praying

in a language all her own.

I began laughing at her comically timed babbling incantations. I almost wanted to kiss her, but I was still with Sierra at the time.

I even admitted to Clair that I wanted to kiss her, but that I didn't want to be a jerk to Sierra. I told her Sierra would have to be a jerk first (that was my attempt at humor).

"It won't be long, Maestro," Clair said with her eyes closed, entranced under her own spell, her hands hovering close to the candle flame. "Hearts. Hormones. History."

She was a mystic, a true visionary.

Chapter 4

Sierra, even before she was kissed by our history professor, had a way about her that most guys immediately fell for. There was an L.A. confidence about her. She also liked wearing very short skirts and halter tops. This was usually accented with wrist and ankle bracelets, bejeweled necklaces, sparkly earrings, eye shadow and lipstick. I would describe her style as “post-modern California slut with an ancient Egyptian’s flair for jewelry.”

I didn’t usually think about any of that, since she looked good whether all that stuff was on or off.

She liked having a boyfriend, even if it was me. She liked to show me off to her shy nerdy friends and make them feel awful. In front of her hipper more L.A.-Egyptian jewelry-type friends she mostly teased me and made me look like her slave, because she would boss me around a lot. That made them feel jealous since they also wanted to have a boyfriend slave. This was apparently high on the post-modern-California-slut-Egyptian-jewelry *want list*.

Regardless of how chemically enriching things were between Sierra and me, every time I was with Clair I didn't want to leave.

But there was a small problem with not leaving. Clair had a boyfriend, kind of. Her kind-of-boyfriend’s name was

Norman. He had tight curly black hair and bushy eyebrows and a hooked nose and a charming face. He also lifted weights and had thick legs and hairy arms. He always carried his beat-up guitar around with him, but he couldn't play it well. No one would ask him to play. He'd just kind of strum it while he talked to people, as if he were a minstrel searching for a song while multi-tasking. But he was also a minstrel who had been cursed with a permanently out of tune guitar.

The reason I say that he was "kind of" Clair's boyfriend was that Norman came with Clair to college, almost like he was some kind of chaperone, or an extra appendage. They never officially declared themselves a couple.

They met at high school in Little Italy. Then he followed her to these hallowed halls. But unlike a typical boyfriend he was always telling Clair about which girls on campus were his type. Once in a while Sierra and Norman and Clair and I would hang out, and you could tell he was just licking Sierra all over with his eyes' tongue.

I also never got the feeling that Clair loved Norman as much as she depended on him. He was Mr. Reality, protecting her from harm's way so she could be incredibly crazy and dreamily irresponsible without paying a price for it.

She was smart enough to help Norman with his class

work. What she received in return was considerable. He would buy her food when he went shopping, and sometimes even do her laundry when he did his.

I would never be able to play the role of Mr. Reality for her. I wasn't as tall, or as strong, or as sure of myself, or as rugged-looking as Norman. I wasn't about to do anyone's laundry, including my own. And I couldn't define reality if I was staring at it in the mirror. Which is the last place I would have looked.

Little did I realize at the time, but girls' tastes in guys can be very diverse. Clair needed a protector, but she also wanted to find someone she could relate to within the altered and constantly changing realities of her world.

Once I caught Sierra with the professor's tongue in her mouth my first thought was to just be by myself for a year or two. But my second thought (about a second later) was to go to Clair's lunatic-designed dorm room – a room with a stuffed clown sitting in cross-legged meditation; and a painting of a painter painting a painting of someone throwing away a painting; and a pair of long black boots hanging from the ceiling. She told me the hanging boots were her way of "honoring life's journey in metaphor" -- boots suspended in mid-air, directionless, going nowhere.

I needed to be there!

I ran as fast as I could to her dorm room to meet her

after her sociology class. But the second I walked in I saw her crying.

Chapter 5

Late in my career as a stupid little teenage kid I found myself eating three scoops of ice cream with my poor teen-battered, teen-befuddled father at a local ice cream shop in my hometown, which shall also remain nameless, due to embarrassment because no one would ever want to come from there.

Anyway, Dad was trying to reach me. Trying to reach a fish happily swimming out to the edge of the world.

So he asked me a question. Dads have this one shot to blindside you with a question when you're least expecting it.

Beware, teenagers! This can happen to you:

He takes you out for ice cream (bringing back memories of when you were ten) and nails you when you're half-unconscious from tasting the drug of younger days. It's gliding down your throat like liquid candy snow. Your eyes are staring out into space, tasting that indefinable thing – cloudcold joycream – you're fully there in that present moment, and then dreaming deeper still, you remember all the other ice cream outings with Dad when you were a mere child -- after the little league game, or after you got straight A's on your report card for once. All the while you're smelling the sweetness of freshly baked sugar cone in your nostrils -- then wham, your dad asks you a question, and

you are too out of it to keep your mouth shut. Your guard is down, because you think maybe he's asking you "as a friend" this time. He's in that sugary-high with you, right there with you, in the dreamy sugarcloudiness of yesteryear; after all he got a cone too. But no, he's staring at you, with the bottom scoop starting to melt down the side of the cone. He's not licking it upwards with his tongue. He's just waiting for an answer. "So what kinds of things are *you* interested in, Shannon?" He feigns innocence, as if he had just thought of the question.

"Right now, ice cream," I smiled. Still high. So unsuspecting. Deer. Flowers. Deer hunting season.

"I mean, you're sixteen now. You'll be going to college in two years."

"Maybe."

"Okay, seriously. Enough with the 'maybes,' young man. I don't want to hear another word about maybe. You've got decent grades, you need to go to college. You want a decent job, don't you? Or would you like to spend the rest of your life digging ditches?"

I tried to swallow as much ice cream as I could, as fast as I could, because I realized that any second the hand of justice could be reaching over to grab the rest of it away from me, slam dunking it into the nearest garbage can.

"Well, you asked me the question," I mumbled. "I

didn't want to lie to you."

"Don't you *ever* think about the future?"

"Dad, I'm *sixteen!*" I moaned twelvishly.

Then for some reason, I decided to just tell him the damn truth, all of it: "Look, I still have another two years to be a pathetic fuck-up. This is my time to not give a shit. If you want the truth about my generation, we're in no rush to turn into whatever it is you all have in mind."

I just couldn't end it there on a relatively neutral note. "I don't want to become a rocket scientist just to discover that *all the way up* is too far to ever *ever* know about. And I don't want to be a doctor prescribing pills that are more likely to kill the patient than the disease itself. And I definitely don't want to be a teacher teaching a bunch of kids who don't give a crap about me, or care about what I'm saying, and won't even remember my name two days after their final."

"Oh, that's just great!" he wailed. He couldn't take it anymore. He tossed his cone into the garbage with half the ice cream still nestled inside. A variation of my nightmare scenario.

But it was too late. I didn't care about him, or the crows dive-bombing down into the garbage fighting over the cookie dough. I was lost in the fog of truth.

"And, by the way, Dad, I don't want to ever be a dad

either, if I have to have awkward useless conversations like this one. I just want to be a clueless kid who dreams about getting invited into some girl's house when her parents are away for the weekend, or who plays basketball with his friends until the park lights go off, and then tries to shoot threes using their iPhones as flashlights. Because all we want to do at sixteen besides laying on top of a pretty girl is run and sweat and push each other around and laugh our heads off. Our hormones are killing us, Dad! Don't you remember? Why do you think I would care about the future when I'm living in a hormonal war zone? Meanwhile, I'm still being fed three nutritious meals a day for free by my parents. And an occasional ice cream cone. What's my motivation to do anything more?"

My dad shook his head and started to laugh even though he didn't want to. "You're such a smart-ass little shit. You're so much like me when I was your age, it's fucking scary. I hate you. Really."

I started to let my guard down. *He actually got it!* I thought.

But then he launched into one of his stories about the hippie days and all the great times he had. How it was a time of consciousness and life lessons. Woodstock this, and Berkeley People's Park that, and how he somehow *knew* not to go to Altamont, and how he burned his draft card after

his best friend died in Vietnam, and how all this taught him about being *personally* responsible, instead of just being responsible to an immoral government, and how personal responsibility only comes with vigilance and experience, and that I'll soon be old enough to vote, and do I know what a privilege it is to have that sacred right, and that fifty percent of registered voters don't vote so politicians only need twenty-six percent of registered voters to vote for them, and that hippies were actually defenders of democracy, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and all the rest of the original revolutionaries, and how all the drugs and sex were just perks, spoils of war so-to-speak, and that the music back then was inspirational, not conspiratorial like ours is, because it was about joy and building things up, not tearing things down and having to shock people awake out of their sleep, and that yes, there were songs with lyrics like "School's Out Forever," but they were *joking*, they weren't rapper-criminals and mindless country singers and black clad Emo bands screaming and faking like they wanted to kill themselves or cut themselves while becoming rich, because music and life meant something high and wonderful back then, and that same responsibility he learned from the great music and lyrics he grew up with – not to mention (as he always mentions) the war protests – yes, and hearing great minds speaking up, *standing up*, hand-

in-hand with King and Robert Kennedy and Pete Seeger, and Peter, and Paul, and Mary, and Woody Guthrie, and Dylan, and Phil Ochs, that *courage* to lead, that belief in goodness prevailing over evil, transferred over to the rest of his life.

And now, it was *my turn* to take the world stage along with the rest of my generation.

If I had known about history back then I might have said, "Well Dad, Greece created democracy thousands of years ago. It didn't last. It didn't work. They found Socrates guilty of *thinking*, and killed him. Then democracy disappeared for thousands of years until America was born out of chaos and war and immigrant criminals. The black slaves and Indians fought on the side of the British because we had taken away their freedom while we were writing the Declaration of Independence, so we could live free or die on the backs of slave children and indentured wives. But the French and Spanish hated the British, so they helped us defeat a mutual enemy. We were too few, and too strategically disorganized to win without their help.

"Fast-forward to the future, here and now, and yes, Dad, I'm proud of our country too. Look at all the video games it's created? And I will try to be responsible some day, but, FYI, there won't be any countries in hundreds of thousands of years. In fact, we probably won't be the

dominant species on earth in hundreds of thousands of years. So what the heck does 'reality' *actually* have to do with patriotism or democracy?"

Disoriented by my logic, his response might have been to fall back on his famous Abbie Hoffman quote, even though it would have had nothing to do with what I was talking about, by saying: "Remember son, as Abbie Hoffman once said, 'You measure a democracy by the freedom it gives its dissidents, not the freedom it gives its assimilated conformists.'"

To which I would have said, "Cool, I know, dad! I remember that quote from the last time you took me out for ice cream. That's great. You're a real inspiration. Can we go home now?"

. . . . So now, as I looked at Clair crying in her bizarre room with its post-sanity interior décor, I realized that all the beautifully aimless wandering I was doing here at college had its downside. Because there was no way to escape reality completely. Even Clair was scratched by its harsh long nails occasionally.

Siddhartha before he was the Buddha was a prince whose father kept him locked away from the desolation just beyond the palace gates.

Clair's mind was attempting to stay behind the gate.

But there was no way she could hide for all time.

"What's the matter? What happened?"

She shook her head and began to cry harder.

"Norman?"

She didn't answer me.

"He found someone else?" I whispered tentatively, secretly hopeful.

She said, "You're the last person I'd want to tell."

"Why?" I asked, stunned. "I thought we were friends."

She took a deep breath and looked at me with tears streaking down her face, like golden rivers cascading down a beautiful silky mountain. "We are friends. That's why I'm crying."

"Clair Loon, I really really don't understand what you're saying."

"Norman," she whispered. Then she said in an even quieter voice, "Sierra. . . ."

I said, "Yes, what about them?" Then I got the picture. "They're *together*?"

She turned away.

I realized she hadn't heard about the professor. Did the professor know, or care? Did anyone besides Sierra totally get what was going on?

"I'm sorry," was all I said.

"I'm sorry for *you*!"

I said, "Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?" she asked incredulously.
"Don't you want to be the one she loves?"

"No! Actually, no! Clair, I want *you* to be the one who loves me."

"Maestro," she shook her head, "beware. Don't become a star-drop in my atmosphere."

"Why? I *want* to be your star-drop."

"Why? Because star-drops tend to evaporate faster than snowflakes."

"Clair, listen to me. I'm not a crazy poet like you. I can't keep up with your beautiful insanity. But I'm glad I'm here with you. I don't care where Sierra is. I came here to tell you the truth anyway."

I kissed her for the first time – softly, on her wet warm cheeks – pretending to comfort her. It was also the first time in a long time, pitiful as this may sound, that I truly felt alive in this world. The last time was probably when my dad took me out for ice cream and didn't ask me any questions. But that was a long long time ago.

Chapter 6

Before taking history, my favorite class during my time at Unnamable U., was my philosophy class.

Philosophy might aptly be defined as people becoming famous for discovering a truth that no one cared about before the philosopher thought of it. There are also other philosophers with different truths that no one previously cared about. Then everyone argues about whose truth is more true until mercifully the bell rings and the class is over.

My famous conclusion, after studying and reading philosophy for *a whole semester*, was that truth and knowledge were entirely different.

This led to my first and only great philosophy paper, which compared, and then synergized, quotes from two famous philosophers:

One was by Friedrich Nietzsche, slightly paraphrased:

“There were eternities during which human intelligence did not exist. And when it is all over with this thing called intelligence. . . nothing will have happened.”

The second quote was written by Immanuel Kant:

“Science is organized by knowledge. Wisdom is organized by life.”

In my paper, I combined the two great masters' words by surmising that science is a form of human intellect attempting to calculate "the truth" about "reality," the sum of which will eventually be of no value.

I thought my paper was brilliant. Unfortunately, my professor thought the deduction was weak. He wrote in the margins:

"If you are going to conclude something as radical as this, where you basically take all the science discovered throughout history and reduce it to nothing more than a series of worthless temporary illusions of consciousness, you will surely be out of step with the beliefs of most 'wise' scholars, medical doctors, and rocket scientists who know more about those subjects than either you or I ever will."

His response seemed typically pompous for a philosophy professor. And the B minus I received, which he deemed "generous," got me really mad.

So I attached a note to my paper and put it back on his desk, asking him to reconsider my grade. The note said:

"The surest way to corrupt youth is to instruct them to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently." -- Friedrich Nietzsche

He gave my paper back with the B minus crossed out, reduced to a C. His note said:

“You are just another pseudo-rebel without cause and with no ability to truly reason. If you are not here to learn what an institution of higher learning has to offer, you are welcome to go live a life of blissful excess and ignorance and see where it leads. Just remember, Friedrich Nietzsche also said: “The mother of excess is not joy, but joylessness.”

To which I fearlessly replied with a second note attached to my paper thrown upon his desk:

“I hereby accept a life of excess, but not with your, or Nietzsche's definition. Please note: ‘When enough is not enough, a Hedonist is born.’ – Sukant Ratnakar.”

He didn't reply to my reply. Possibly because he didn't believe there could be anyone with the last name of “Ratnakar.” But there was!

This exchange of thoughts between my philosophy professor and me changed everything. I went from being an innocent two-bit rebel (unwilling to answer my father's questions about my future, yet willing to accept his money and go to college for reasons unknown) to becoming a secret hedonist.

I was a *secret* hedonist because I didn't want my parents to find out I had become a hedonist. Because I still wanted them to pay for my college education while I fine-tuned my hedonism by finding out more about how to be one. I obviously couldn't refine my hedonistic skills while working at a job.

I had Clair cheering me on. She was enjoying the free-spirited person I was becoming. She liked my paper, and my responses to my professor's responses.

She called what I wrote, "A new form of comedic suicide."

A part of me realized love was blinding everything. All I wanted, as a new-born hedonist, was *her*.

I decided I would allow myself to want as much of her as possible, at all times. That was about as hedonistic as I needed to be for now.

I also decided to be very selective about which Nietzsche aphorisms I would heed. One particular quote I was decidedly *not* going to ruminate over was:

"Sensuality often hastens the growth of love so much that the roots remain weak and are easily torn up."

Hedonists have to wear just as many blinders as other zealots do. Otherwise, logic corrupts their myopia.

I decided the only truths worth considering from now on were the truths I found on my own. What the hell did philosophy professors know, anyway? Or the stuffy old philosophers themselves?

My conclusion from studying philosophy for an entire semester was that philosophers were just as trapped in their own reality as I was in mine. We were all equally wrong.

Chapter 7

The night Clair and I first made love she didn't quite give herself over to the experience. She stayed very light and easygoing, as if our passionate interlude was as simple and normal as eating a meal together. Making love was just another way to have fun. It wasn't better or worse than other ways to have fun. It wasn't about losing yourself in the other, or getting all mystically connected and floating off into outer space together. I found myself floating off on my own. In wordless liquid chaos. She watched me, bemused, enjoying herself observing me. That's what it felt like. The first few times we made love it freaked me out. But I didn't say anything. And then something strange happened. After a while, not losing myself, and not making the physical act into an earth-shattering event, made sense in a way. It was just *fun*. As a hedonist, why couldn't it just be fun?

Sometimes we would laugh and laugh about things while we were making love, creating dozens of interludes within the interlude.

We would make jokes about politics. And we'd make jokes about Norman and Sierra, and how Norman still probably knew nothing about the great professor turned

love machine, who also knew nothing about him/them/it.

She now called Norman “Ab-Norman,” and called Sierra “The Deserting Dessert.”

The reason I laughed along with Claire was because, beneath it all, she wished them well. There was no malice whatsoever.

As hard as it was for a hedonist to admit, sometimes it upset me to have her be so breezy about us. There was no way Clair was about to get serious enough to have a conversation with me about love, or what I meant to her, or even if we were officially “together” to begin with.

It seemed like I was just someone she liked to hang out with, and mess around with, and hold on to on cold nights. The truth was, *she* was the true hedonist. I was her apprentice.

Maybe she saw me as a new version of Norman -- not someone who could deeply move her in any way. She didn't want to get into what she referred to as “love suicide,” where “in the present moment you talk the future to death.”

Things just got deeper and wilder for me, multiplied by her aloofness. Her silk-soft skin, I swear, tasted and smelled nothing like pure silk at all, but like peaches. I mean really, *peaches!* And her blue eyes, they were so dark sometimes I felt like I was being drugged inside them. The Clair-drug

would drag me away, moonstruck one moment, lost at the bottom of the sea the next moment. In fact, I would often find myself thrown back into the sea -- a dreamy-eyed fish that had found its way back to the hook. She was sailing away from me, laughing, forgetting.

These cycles got me so addicted, so high and anxious at the same time, that sometimes I didn't even want to eat. All I wanted to do was sink into her insanity and hide with her there.

I'm reminded specifically about Valentine's Day. I wasn't a hopeless romantic. I was *worse* -- I was a hopeful romantic. I brought her flowers and chocolates, assuming naively that she would have some small gift for me as well, even if it was a quick softly spoken "I love you," which she had never once said to me, followed by a kiss on the cheek.

That kind of gratitude from her would have just about brought me to tears. But as Valentine's Day continued ticking on my confusion grew. She acted like my gifts were nothing special. The flowers were still lying sideways on her desk. The chocolates were eaten in sixty seconds, as if I'd presented a lamb to a ravenous wolf.

Finally, after a late dinner, I cracked.

"Clair, do you know what the flowers and chocolates were for?" I said with a tinge of sarcasm.

"Sexual favors?" she asked, cocking her head slightly

like a Scottish terrier.

“Well...yeah...I guess,” I said sheepishly. I wasn’t going to lie. I gained my composure. “But it’s about something else too.”

“Something else, or something more?”

“Else.”

“*Else!* I see. Well, hmmm, I haven’t got a clue....” She starts humming the “Jeopardy” song. “Oh, wait, you mean the flowers and chocolates were for *Valentine’s Day?*”

I just stared at her, letting her know I didn’t think this was funny.

“So you want me to buy into the ‘it’s Valentine’s Day’ board game, Maestro? Okay, how about a pair of gold cufflinks? Oh, that’s right, you only wear T-shirts. Even in the winter. But then you could always use the pin to pierce your ears I guess, and look very bohemian. I like bohemian. Or maybe you would just look like a girl. I don’t know. But that might be great, I’d get to be a lesbian. We could get married and adopt! Now *that’s* romantic!”

I said, “Okay, forget it. I hope you enjoy the last piece of chocolate! I hid it under your pillow.”

She looked under the pillow and there it was. “I will!” she nodded. “Tomorrow morning. When it doesn’t have to ‘mean’ anything.”

“Like...wow.” I was at a loss.

“You’re doing a Charlie Parker imitation?” She walked to a dimly lit corner of her room and put on a pair of goofy looking men’s sunglasses. “Like, wow, cool. Hey, where are the chicks? The Bird needs his chicks.”

She seemed cold, more mean than funny.

“You want me to give you something special?” she said more seriously, flinging the sunglasses behind her.

“Something that will transcend flowers and chocolate, right?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Okay. I’ll do it. Just for you.” She got down on all fours and crawled next to my feet. “I *bow* to thee, oh Maestro.” She nuzzled up against my leg.

“And I am *wowed* by you, Maestro.”

Her hands and arms rose up and down in a wave as she mock worshipped me from her knees. Then she began to wiggle her backside. “Or, as any good dog would say, ‘Bow...*wow!*’”

I started laughing just a little. I couldn’t help myself. Staying serious with her was impossible.

“Yes, Maestro, in dog language I have pretty much said everything you have ever wanted me to say. Or do you want me to tell you the equivalent of ‘bow wow’ in giraffe language?”

“Sure, go ahead!”

She pushed me onto the bed, put her arms around me and started licking my neck gently. The feeling was electric. Because I felt the love coming through more than the joke.

“That’s the same thing as bow-wow,” she whispered.
“But giraffes are more erotic.”

Chapter 8

That brings us to early spring, which I call “The beginning of the end of the beginning of everything else.”

We were driving in town in a Zip car. We spotted Norman and Sierra walking together. They were very animated, arms flailing, apparently screaming at each other.

I thought Clair was going to ask me to stop the car, she was staring at them so hard with her mouth agape. But no words came out of her mouth, so I just kept driving.

Clair was wearing a red sweater with a hand-sewn hand on it with the middle finger extended. She put her hands under her sweater, pressing it against the window. “And that’s what I have to say,” she said in a slightly raised voice.

When we got home she was in a strangely silent mood. She went over to a desk drawer and pulled out a photo album. “Here’s something you’ll think is funny.”

She opened it to the first page. It was a photo of her at a young age with someone I assumed was her father. He had blonde hair, a bit darker than hers. He was smiling and lifting her high up in the air. She was about seven or eight, I guessed. In the photo, she was big enough and old enough to look surprised that her father was that strong. Her eyes

were wide and shining looking down at him. But she was oddly serious.

I turned the page. More pictures of her dad, and one of her mom. Her mom looked pleasant, smiling for the camera, with her arms around her dad. "I took that shot of them," she said.

"Where do they live now?" I asked.

It was rare to catch her in this kind of mood. Normally she would have said something like, "Well, define 'live.'"

But instead she said something even stranger, "He lives in outer space, I would say."

"He's an astronaut on the space shuttle?" I assumed I was expected to play along.

She said, "No. I mean, that's hypothetically where dead people are. He's dead. He died in Iraq."

"Oh, wow, I'm so sorry!" I was shocked.

"They're all a bunch of fucks – Iraqis, Americans, all quite insane, you know."

I nodded. I didn't know what else to say.

"My mom still lives. She lives in a place called, 'Delusion.'" Then she added, "Delusion, Illinois. But that part of Illinois is so sick of being ill and annoying it moved to Texas. That's where she is now, living a few states away from her brain."

Clair started speaking in a southern accent. "Back when

ma pa died, well sah, she just went plumb crazy, which was lucky timin' 'cause it was plum season, n' well sah, she just fit right in with all the other migrant plum pickers and out of work plumbers in Wonderless-land where they all went haywire."

"Are you telling me the truth? . . . She went crazy?"

"First degree crazy, sah. Burned right on through to the middle."

I thought about it later – why she chose that moment to show me and tell me these things. It was only hours after she saw Ab-Norman and Deserter Dessert fighting it out on the street. Something got triggered.

What I didn't understand at the time was that this night was pretty much the end of us. It was getting too serious. She couldn't be pinned down any further. Commitment was out of the question.

When she told me days later that she didn't think we should sleep together anymore, I asked her bluntly if she had found another guy.

She said, "No. Actually it's quite the contrary. I've decided to become a nun. The Pope is coming to town. Monkey see, monkey do."

Chapter 9

We tried to be distant friends for a while but distance won. I decided to take a big chance, in a final attempt to win her back – I asked Norman to meet me for lunch.

We met at a run-down café outside the university where the die-hard drinkers go. Norman could be defined as die-hard. He drank a lot. Day and night. I didn't drink much but I was willing to order a beer as part of my strategy to extract information from him.

He came swaggering into the café about twenty minutes late and smiled at me, which was a relief, because I had no idea how he would react.

"Hey, dude," he said, "it's always nice to meet the progenitor of my disease."

I looked at him quizzically. "Clair?"

"Sierra."

"I am not the direct progenitor," I said. "The good professor threw himself into the gene code, just in front of you and after me, in case she didn't bother telling you."

"Of course, I knew about him," he shrugged. "The professor and I were both members of the Sierra Club."

I laughed.

He continued, ". . . the indoor version, of course. While some members of the Sierra Club hike around trails and up

mountains, our Sierra Club was only interested in hiking up Sierra's skirt. An easy mountain to climb most of the time, as you recall, and not a whole lot of exercise to get to the top."

It was like listening to the male version of The Clair Comedy Show. More profane, but similar. They'd known each other for so long, I wondered which one learned it from the other. Or were they both always like this?

We talked about a bunch of meaningless things for a few minutes until the beers came. Norman gulped down half of his in one swig.

"So what can I do for you, Mr. E-Clair?" he said, slamming down his brew on the table and burping too loudly. The remaining beer sloshed back and forth in the glass like a foamy tidal wave. "Is she driving you to drink now?"

"Worse," I admitted. "I think I love her. But she broke up with me last Saturday night."

"Yeah, Saturday nights are not her favorite nights," he said a bit mysteriously.

He had a moustache of white foam hanging on his lip. Suddenly he felt it there and swiped it off with his sleeve. "But you'll get over it. If you don't, you'll be caught in a crazy maze you won't get out of until it's too late. I know it well, matey."

"I wasn't really looking for advice about how to get

over her," I said a bit too snappily. "And trust me, it's already too late."

The waitress came by and he ordered another beer, so I knew he was going to stick around for at least another few minutes.

"Look, I want to know what happened, why she cut me off so suddenly. She saw you and Sierra fighting when we drove into town the other day. Could that have been what set her off?"

"Not us fighting." He couldn't even form a full sentence before he grabbed the glass and poured more beer down his throat. A shaft of sunlight made its way through the café window and lit the remains of his thick glass with an amber glow. "Clair and I spoke a few nights ago. I understand what's going on. She doesn't lie to me."

"What did she tell you?"

"What did she tell *you*?" his eyebrows lifted a bit sarcastically.

"Nothing! All I know is she pulled out this photo album and told me how her dad died in Iraq."

He burst out laughing. "Yeah, okay."

I looked at him silently. What was funny about that?

"And then she told me her mom went crazy," I added.

"Well, you got that part straight, man. She is fucking crazier than crazy." He went ahead and finished the last of

his beer when he saw the next one coming. Apparently the waitress had been through the drill before. A new glass was laid before him, cold and golden and white peaked. This time he took a long multi-gulp draw, as if he was dying of thirst. The waitress had barely gotten her hand out of the way.

She inquired, "Do you want a pitcher?" What a loyal employee.

"No," he said, "I only drink pitchers at night. So, see you later, eh?"

The waitress thought his response was mildly funny, but she was rockin' busy.

"I play guitar, you know?"

She quickly disappeared into the smog of tables.

"Where were we?"

"What about her dad?"

He looked at me dead seriously and said, "Her dad? He's a fucking piece of work."

"Is? Or, was?"

"Yeah, look, I can't really say any more. That's Clair's business. I don't want to get in the middle of you two lovebirds. Or ex-lovebirds. I just came for the free beer. You're paying the tab, in case you didn't know. But I'll tell you this. When she's sane she's the sanest person I know. So just leave her be."

I tried to pry more out of him but it wasn't going to happen.

He went on a rant about Sierra, though. He said she was the most toxic wasteland of a person he'd ever had the pleasure to be poisoned by. He hung around her because she inspired him to write angry anti-love songs on his guitar. He also said she helped him become more cynical, which he (and I) wouldn't have thought possible.

Just before he left me with the check he said that after spending years with Clair he had begun to forget everything he'd previously known, and came to realize the world was as absurd as she sees it to be.

"But I've protected her long enough," he muttered almost to himself.

He was quite drunk now. He scraped the metal chair back harshly across the floor and almost toppled it over as he got up to leave.

"Protected her from what?" I asked. "Why the secrets?"

"Everyone's got secrets, right?" he glared. "You too, choir boy. . . . Everyone's wearing their pretty little masks, lying about who they really are, inside and out, and what they're really thinking, and wanting."

I thought, boy, I knew New Yorkers were cynical, but Norman and Clair took cynicism to a whole new level.

Was this all I was going to be left with before Norman

swaggered out of the cafe?

I tried to bring the conversation back to Clair as I stood up to shake his big hairy hand goodbye. But Norman mumbled something about how he had needed a cold slap of reality to cope with the unreality of school, and that Sierra had been just the person for the job. But now he was done with her. It was time to tell her it was over. Tonight, in fact. At dinner. Over a pitcher of beer.

“Love, and living in reality, are two different things. It’s kind of like when you’re in a bar, not thinking about anything or anyone except your sexy girlfriend who’s about to walk in any minute, all decked out in a slinky dress, ready to turn everyone’s head. You’re dreamy in love, you’re waiting for her, right? You’re cosmically high with the image of her burned into your brain -- the two of you making love, getting toasted together in her penthouse apartment at 2 a.m., and she’s saying to you, ‘I’ve never loved anyone like this before. . . do it harder,’ when out of nowhere some massive moose dumber than mud walks by, bumps into you, spills his drink on your pants, then blows a big puff of cigarette smoke in your face, and says, ‘What are you going to do about it, you dumb fuck?’

“And suddenly you see life more clearly,” Norman said as he glared at me. “Love gets put in perspective, you see? And here's what the perspective whispers to the love

bewildered like you and me: Moment to moment, the moose wins.”

I guess Norman was now ready for the real world beyond college. He was graduating with a master’s degree in Gloomology.

Chapter 10

An alternate version of the real world blasted through me like a comet slamming to earth. The atmosphere turned black. My dad died. It's never good timing when a father dies in his fifties. But the timing of this particular passing really sucked for me.

Because I never seriously answered his questions. And I had meant to some day.

When a father is a good father part of the reason why you love him when you're young is simply because he loves you. But then you grow up and look back and you realize you love him because *you also love him*. And it's not supposed to be too late. But sometimes it is.

The funeral was dreary. Everyone was old and crying. I was too angry and numb and disgusted to cry. It was pretty unforgivable for this to happen, since the guy never hurt a flea and could have only added to the good in the world. I know it's cliché, but why people like him die when so many awful people live and continue to beget more awful people seems like clear proof that God is not paying attention. Maybe He doesn't even know where earth is anymore. Maybe around the of dawn of homo erectus He got distracted with some other planet on the other side of the

universe and never looked back to see what unraveled back here.

The church was packed. The priest pretended to know my father from Adam, but really didn't. My mom couldn't speak, she was a wreck. And I had nothing to say to the black clad gawkers who came. I didn't want to waste my breath on the priest, and my alcoholic uncle, and the neighbors, most of whom took advantage of my dad's kindness and generosity when he was alive. Some of whom still owed him money. Now their debt was cleared.

My mom was taken care of— she was moving in with my aunt in Washington, D.C.

Mom wasn't all there when I looked in her eyes. The love she had with him was real. For some reason that scared me. Where do you find love like that? I had to get out of there.

So I kissed my father's frozen stillsoft face, caked with makeup, wondering why his heart wasn't as strong physically as it was metaphorically. And then, because I felt myself getting feverishly hot and starting to cry, and because my life was ripping apart from multiple angles, I hightailed it out of there, back to my college without a name, without a father, without Clair. Nothing known now.

When Clair heard the news she came to see me. It was

the first time she'd ever come to my dorm room. I was always going to her side of the campus, to "Clair's Lair." She sat down beside me and said she was sorry. She asked me how I felt. Was that some kind of joke? I couldn't read her. I never saw her so serious or so caring. The "friendship only" rule quickly vanished. She climbed on top of me and made love to me in a passionate and honest way. She breathed on my neck to warm me. It felt like she was exorcising ghosts. She made me Chai tea afterwards, and served it like I was sick or wounded.

"I know how you feel," she said. "It's so hard to have a dad you love die so young, so suddenly."

I made the BIG MISTAKE of saying, "Really, Clair? Did your dad really die too?"

What compelled me to say such a *stupid-assed* thing in a tender moment like that? I was trying to get real with her. I was near tears from her true act of kindness, and I thought this might be a breakthrough for us. I thought the games might finally be over. What kind of insanity was that, to think that someone might actually transcend the core of who they are at the very moment that I was transcending mine? It was like my dad and the ice cream question. My guard was down. But so was his, in a way. He really wanted to know me, and what I was thinking. But I was just there for the ice cream. I wasn't ready. I couldn't handle it.

She looked at me after I asked the question, then suddenly grabbed her coat and stormed out.

I ran down the hall after her, naked from the waist up, but just missed her as the elevator door closed. I apologized through the thick gray door as the cables began to whirr. I screamed out to her, saying that it was the worst thing I had ever said, and I'd never ask again, but the cables behind the door kept falling.

Chapter 11

The next piece of news would shake the school to its core. Sierra was pregnant, and the father had been revealed. The timing of the pregnancy led to only one person, and he admitted it as soon as the news broke.

And the winner *was*... our ever-persistent history professor. It happened as part of a rebound affair, *post-Norman*. Sierra had decided to take a refresher course in history, and got a "+."

"BN," "Before Norman," the president of the school had heard about the professor's affair with Sierra and told him to back off or he'd have to let him go. Norman's coupe de gras made the professor's "choice" to stop seeing Sierra a *fait de compli*. The president was pleased that the professor had abided by the royal decree.

But the professor was not actually abiding. He was merely biding his time. He'd never gotten over her, and he hated that she had left him for a mindless cynical dope like Norman. How could he get dumped for a loser? I asked myself the same question back in the day. He wanted her badly. He dreamt of leaping all over her again, like in the sunny peaceful days of yester-year. More like yester-week, since their affair lasted about that long. So, of course, he gladly leaped at the chance to be her rebound man as soon

as Norman dropped her.

But now, Sierra was pregnant, the cat was out of the bag, the school was abuzz.

The president took it as a personal affront to his authority, and to the school's reputation.

The professor was nonplussed by the president's threats to fire him. He asked Sierra to move off campus with him, into his rented flat on "X Street," while he fought for his job in the courts. He would hire an attorney and fight this. He wanted her to have the baby. And he would hire a nanny when the bundle of joy arrived, so Sierra could still go to school and graduate, and throw her little square black hat in the air with her classmates, with the baby waving at her toothlessly from daddy's piss-warmed arms.

They'd get married, as soon as he could legally divorce his wife. First he'd have to track her down. But those were small details.

But Sierra would have none of that. She became depressed and withdrawn. She didn't love him. She needed to start anew. For her "anew" had always meant "a new boyfriend." Flirting while pregnant was kind of gross. Unacceptable even in the "post-modern California slut Egyptian jewelry" crowd.

Something tragic had happened. She knew in retrospect she had been a fool. Now she was determined to save her

reputation. Addition by subtraction, as they say. So she left him. And all signs of their love vanished soon thereafter.

A month later, Sierra was back to wearing a slinky skirt to and from class. And the professor was (fruitlessly as it turns out) fighting his firing in state court. By spring he was, I guess you might say, history.

During the professor's slow legal demise a nerdy computer wizard named Graham Blithers hit the scene and tried to sweep Sierra off her feet. He promised her a good life, as well as many years of free tech support. Sierra declined.

Graham was a lovable geek. He was tall and thin, and if you listened carefully, you could detect a small stutter. But he was laidback, and good-natured, and very smart.

We all thought he was playing way over his head emotionally. As good as he might be at science, we figured chemistry must not be his strong suit – because this seemed to be about as bad of a match as anyone could conjure up in love lab 101.

Still, one day I met up with Sierra as we were walking to separate classes and I suggested she give Graham a chance. She asked me why I would suggest him, of all people? I said, "Well, you've given lots of people a chance to win you over, but I'm not convinced anyone, including me, was more than just another adventure waiting to end.

Imagine how your life could change for the better if someone like him turned out to be the one, and not just another clown.

"You weren't a clown," she said. "You were a good guy."

"Maybe I was the best of the clowns. But look, I still care about you, Sierra. I *know* you, at least a little. And I think you deserve better."

"Really? Tell me more!" She seemed eager for compliments. I couldn't blame her. It had been a tough stretch.

"Well, I think your life could go either way, to be honest. You definitely know how to make wrong turns and screw up, but you also have smarts, and a good heart. You deserve to be with someone who's not just another clown. That's all I'm saying."

"Well, *stop* saying that!" She hugged me, and I think she tried to turn it into a kiss, "You're *not* a clown," she whispered.

"Try Graham."

"Okay, I'll think about it. But no more clown talk, you silly goose."

"Was I the best of the geese?"

"Absolutely."

Later that day I convinced Graham to ask Sierra

out, again, since the first time all he got from her was a curious look and a "Sorry." And the second time all he got was a laughing emphatic, "No!"

I said, "I think she's warming up to you."

He said, "Well, ice can warm up and still be ice."

I said, "Yeah, but I think she's warming up to you more than that. Maybe she's mushy snow. Possibly even winter rain. But you won't know unless you test the waters."

The third time was a charm, and amazingly they started to hang out together.

We waited for Sierra to blow him off, or to be more chemically accurate, blow him up, possibly into a ball of curly meth smoke, turning his emotional world into something resembling the equivalent Munch's "The Scream." (Google it, if you want to get the picture.)

But to the school's utter amazement, it was Sierra who seemed to change over time, not Graham. She was always quite a decent student when she put her mind to it, but now she was studying overtime and getting really good grades. She started attending all of her classes. She even took to wearing jeans and sweatshirts to class instead of wearing tight short skirts that showed off her milky inner thighs. That was a true loss. The school was in mourning. She even donated her jewelry to a salvation army store in the Egyptian part of town. Her arms and fingers and wrists were

the only naked part of her visible now to anyone except the mighty Pharaoh himself, Graham Blithers.

She wasn't drinking with her friends anymore either, which was usually her main weekend activity. This was an art form she had learned from Norman, and it had filled up most of her weekend after the breakup. But not after meeting Graham.

She wasn't flirting with me anymore either -- no more trying to kiss me as a thank you for the slightest good deed. No more messing with Norman to tempt him back, and no more flashing her big beautiful smile at the helpless innocent freshman boys, then watching them turn around helplessly to look back at her.

Graham must have re-programmed her brain or something. She was like an reverse Frankenstein.

In fact, Graham was so good with computers he was called upon to fix the administration's computers when they started acting up, and even helped professors and students with their tech needs for free.

But what crossed my mind more than once when thinking about Sierra Townsend was, despite my previous belief to the contrary, people could deeply shift and evolve.

Specifically, I reasoned, if Sierra could transform this dramatically so could a certain someone else, some day.

(And me as well.)

Chapter 12

The more days that passed, the more hung up I was on the idea of winning Clair back for good. I wanted to have with her what Graham had with Sierra. He was her solid support. He seemed to take her eccentricities in stride. He didn't pry. He didn't demand to know everything about her past. He didn't beg for her affection. He was lost in his own head, so he never needed to get lost in someone else's.

Sierra made Graham seem more hip. He became more relaxed around people. He knew Sierra in ways that I had gotten to know her, but took it to another level. He saw the sensitive, serious side, the *real* person behind the swaggery raw sexiness that helped her survive growing up in L.A.

The irony, of course, was that I now wanted a serious relationship with a person who was more averse to seriousness than anyone I'd ever met.

My heart didn't care about the obstacles. I missed Clair. When we passed each other on campus and she waved to me and smiled without stopping to say hello, it would feel like a bullet was fired right through my stomach.

She wasn't running back to me, but she wasn't looking to be with anyone else either. Norman said she was "cryogenically in love." I believed him, convincing myself he

was talking about her loving me in some deep frozen corner of herself. Of course, all of her memories of love were about *me*. “Me-me-more-mes,” as James Joyce called it.

But no matter how many texts or emails or phone messages I sent Clair’s way, all variations of messages in a bottle, the response was always short and cold at best.

I tried to bury myself in my studies. When thoughts of her invaded me I would go to study with Graham, or sometimes both Graham and Sierra.

Clair had no such problems focusing on her classes. She was especially interested in electronics. She loved putting together all sorts of various electrical gadgets and pieces of equipment. She and Norman apparently used to get together and build miniature cameras and tape recorders and televisions and radios even during their high school years.

Their endless hours of figuring out complex diagrams helped them to develop an effortless kind of banter that over time became more and more giddy and crazy, until they saw their whole world through abstract reality grids, the circuit boards of which were welded together with humor and sarcasm.

But they also learned about the electronic schematics that glued the criminal and legal world together back then. Because they had to. Because they had a master plan.

Chapter 13

I just couldn't let certain things go. For instance, why would asking Clair if her dad had actually died upset her to the point of banning me forever? Secrets were being kept from me. The truth was being hidden away.

I said goodbye to my hedonic phase, and entered into my detective phase.

The first thing I did was call 411 and ask for "Kinsley," in Little Italy, New York. They had no listing.

I asked Norman as casually as possible one day what part of Little Italy he grew up in, and he said, "The boot."

"Come on, I'm *serious*, does Little Italy have separate neighborhoods, separate area codes? I mean, how big is it?"

He said, "Thinking about buying real estate?"

"No." I started to look glum.

"Then why do you, *CLAIR*, want to, *CLAIR*, know?"
(He said "*CLAIR*" with a loud fake coughing sound.)

I shook my head and started walking away.

"Okay, okay. Come back. I can't believe it, but I actually feel pity for you. You're hopeless but you're determined. You poor dog."

He shuffled his feet, thinking. He strummed his guitar a few times, which covered his shoulders like a giant

necklace.

He stared at me for a moment. "Look, if I tell you some things, it didn't come from me, right?"

"Yes, right," I said eagerly, desperately, knowing it could be more lies, but not wanting to believe he would do that to me.

"You promise you will tell no one where this came from, especially not Clair."

"I promise."

"You're willing to lie to her if she asks you."

I hesitated. "Yeah, I won't tell her anything came from you."

He nodded, "So you're a liar, just like everyone else."

"No!"

"Admit it, or I won't tell you shit."

"Okay, okay, I admit it!"

"Admit *what?*" he smirked.

"*Come on, Norman!*"

He was laughing now, "Say it!"

"Okay, I'm a liar just like everyone else."

"Without the sarcasm please, Mr. Hedonist Philosopher. Essayists have to be precise in their use of the English language."

"What? *Fuck! Fine!* I am a *liar.*"

"Thank you. At least you're honest enough to admit it."

I waited, scowling.

He looked around to make sure no one else could hear him, then lowered his voice. “Okay, here’s the story, here’s the real deal. Clair was adopted by the people she calls her mom and dad. The minute they had her in their possession they took her to India because the father had work there. But she was just a baby, and she got really sick and almost died. Parasites. It took her about three years to fully recover.”

I was intrigued. This sounded right. She did seem frail to me sometimes. It made sense now.

“When they came back to the States her real mom freaked out and found her and wanted her back. But she was legally adopted by then, it was a done deal. So her real mom kidnapped her and took her to Mississippi until at around age nine I think, the FBI caught up with Clair’s mom and forced her to give her back to the Kinsley’s.

“By that point, of course, she wanted to stay with her real mom. But it was too late. They put her mom in jail for kidnapping. So the whole thing was a big mess. The Kinsley’s insisted on pressing charges. Clair hated them for that. So that’s why she makes up lies about them, and pretty much ignores their existence.”

I was trying to assess how all this fit together. “But in the café, that day that we first talked about her, you said, ‘Saturday nights are not her favorite nights.’ What did that

mean?"

"Well," Norman hesitated, "okay, I'll tell you that part too. I may as well. Her mom, her real mom, made a big deal of Saturday nights. They used to go to a restaurant for dinner, and then maybe do some clothes shopping. Little stuff. Mom and daughter things. Well, when she was forced to go back to the Kinsleys, Clair eventually told them about Saturday nights being a special night. But instead of trying to make Saturday nights special too, to try to win her back, they thought that would just make her wish she was back with her mom. So like morons they made her stay home every Saturday night, no matter what, until she left for college."

"Wow, that's too weird. What creeps."

"You don't know the half of it, boy," Norman added. He strummed his guitar again, angrily this time, and then looked at his watch and said he had to go. "The day she turned eighteen she legally changed her name to her real mom's last name and vowed never to see her adopted parents again."

"Is her mom back in Mississippi now?"

"Still in jail."

"*What?* Wow. But I thought she was kind of crazy?"

"Her adopted mom. That's who she was talking about. Not her real mom."

“Is her dad still alive?” I asked in a hushed voice.

“Which one? Her original dad or adopted dad?”

“I don’t know. Both.”

“Last I know. I mean, shit, it’s not like I keep tabs on either of those assholes.”

“Neither dad died in Iraq?” I was trying to get him not to speak in riddles or leave me with any more mysterious clues.

“No,” he said, flatly. But I’m sure she wishes both of them had.”

He strummed his guitar with anger, hitting a deafeningly out-of-tune chord. That meant the conversation was over.

Chapter 14

Imagine, faced with such a despicable childhood, a human mind coming up with humor as the solution, the way out. Not hatred, or anger, or fear, or revenge, but humor.

It was brilliantly sweet. But obviously there were things underneath the surface preventing her from talking seriously about anything, or committing to anything or anyone.

One day in psychology class, of all places, I began to wonder if maybe her relationship with Norman was the closest she'd ever come to real love.

If Norman was mostly just Clair's protector, but he never really loved her, how sad was that? But if it was Clair that pushed him away, like she'd pushed me away, then was she ever capable of changing?

As I was walking across the campus one morning I ran into Sierra sauntering to her next class, glowing and smiling at me, looking amazing in a pair of new jeans and a beige crop top. She was wearing glasses instead of contacts, which made her look almost as nerdy as Graham. Despite all the visual downshifting, she was still sexy as hell.

She stopped to talk to me. We didn't touch on anything

important. Gossipy stuff, classroom talk. Then out of the blue she blurted out, "You know, Clair is in my computer class. She asked how you were the other day. She seemed concerned."

"*She's concerned?*" I laughed nervously. "She won't even talk to me beyond 'hello' and 'goodbye.' You know, Sierra, I was stupid. I said something that hurt her really badly."

"What the fuck did you say?" she asked, assuming the worst, probably remembering some of the stupid things I said to her.

"I questioned something she said about her father that's a lie, but she didn't want me to question it."

She tossed her hair back with her hand, "You're an idiot, Shannon. Sometimes the past just needs to be left alone. Everyone has their own version of the truth anyway. And they don't want boyfriends digging around in their trash, you know?"

"I figured that out pretty quickly, but not soon enough."

I also understood why Sierra would feel that way.

My admission that I was an idiot softened her.

I shrugged, "The minute I said it she stormed out and she hasn't forgiven me since."

"I thought you left *her!* That's what she told me."

“Oh, right! How funny is that? But then again, Clair is nothing if not funny.”

“Well, I think you ought to call her. She misses you. I know it.”

I struggled with this idea for a few hours, but the temptation became too much for me.

She answered the phone: “Hadafugahya, Maestro?” Her tone was softer than usual.

“I’m okay, but. . . I’m missing you a lot, to be honest. How are you?”

“Couldn’t be better. You should see my room. I’ve given it a make-over. It’s been redecorated in early Lascaux. It’s like a cave. I drew animals on the wall in red pencil and made a hand print that looks quite skeletal.”

“I’d love to see it.”

“I know, but you’re not invited.”

I had been standing up, too nervous to sit, but suddenly I found myself flopping down on my bed with my arms covering my eyes. The air was going out of my balloon once again.

“Look, Shannon,” I think that was the first time she ever called me by my real name. “You don’t know me. You think you do, but you don’t. You don’t know me at all.”

“Well, if you’d spend some time filling me in, I’m all

ears. I *want* to know you! I've even. . ." Ooops. I stopped.

"Even what?"

"I even dreamt about who you were before I met you," I lied. My first lie to her. Norman was right. I was a liar.

"What did you dream?"

"I dreamt you came down from a distant star-drop atmosphere to love me and teach me about giraffes."

"Oh, gag me. What was the dream really about?"

"That's all I'm going to say. You've got your secrets, I've got mine."

She read the silence that followed and assumed the worst. "Well, if you really have secrets, and they're about me, that wouldn't be funny at all. That would be playing a hurtful mind-game."

I was the one playing a hurtful mind-game? I was tongue-tied.

"It was Norman, wasn't it?" she said laughing.

"I can't really. . . ."

"Did he make you promise not to tell? Because, Norman made me promise not to breathe once when we were kids, but I did anyway, and we still stayed friends even though I broke my promise. What did that little Ab-Norman-able Snowman say? Come on. Spit it out."

How did I get trapped into this so quickly, less than two minutes into the first conversation we'd had in months?

“Can I see you? If I can see you, I’ll talk. I’ll tell you.”

She hesitated, then said, “Have it your way, Maestro, I’ll meet you at Sam’s at 4:30.”

“Sam’s” is what she called the “Metro Café,” because this old guy Sam was always in there, day and night, getting blasted by himself in a corner table which at this point was pretty much reserved for him.

An hour before we were supposed to meet I put on my most Clair-attractable clothes. Slightly ripped jeans and a clean black shirt. I remained purposely unshaved. I thought to myself, if you can get out of this mess and get back on good terms with her everything will turn out okay. I had a big psych test early the next day, but this psych test with Clair was way more important.

I sat on my bed and tried to go through how the conversation might begin, and what I would say. But everything I said turned into a fight. If I lied, or if I told the truth, disaster seemed to await me either way.

The café was a bit worn-down-looking by 4:30. It was after the lunch crowd and just before the pre-dinner cleanup. Cups of coffee and bottles of beer were left un-bussed on many of the little round rickety tables.

Clair was already seated in a booth that had been quickly cleaned for her. It was isolated from the other tables. Across the way a few remaining stragglers nursed their

drinks while tapping at their laptops, textbooks opened beside them. Clair was sipping ice water. She wore a yellow scarf that matched her hair. It framed her pale face and blue eyes perfectly. Her hand was waving at me. Her smile seemed nervous but welcoming.

“Hi.” I kissed her on the cheek. She didn’t resist or encourage it.

“Want a soda?” she said casually. She knew I didn’t like drinking alcohol before the Vampires came out.

“I’ll probably order my usual,” I smiled.

The waitress came. Clair said, “Two root beer floats.”

She turned to me, “So, you’ve dragged me out of my cave. I don’t have a lot of time because the wall animals need feeding. So spill the beans.”

“Look, Clair, I promised the person who told me this that I wouldn’t expose their name.”

“It’s fucking, Norm-dumb. Duh! Go on.”

“I didn’t say that. You did. And you could be wrong.”

“Who the fuck else would know anything at all about me?” I had never seen her this serious before. She wasn’t in a joking mood.

“The rumor is you were adopted, kidnapped by your real mom, and then returned to your adopted parents. That’s pretty much all I heard.”

“Okay, fine. So now you know. So what?” she said

nervously. "I mean, what did that really get you? A root beer float and a hello kiss?"

I ignored her and said, "I just wanted to know if you were in touch with your real mom, now that you're not a minor anymore. Because I want *someone* to love you, Clair. You deserve that."

That might have been the second most idiotic thing I'd ever said, because if I would have just shut up after telling her what Norman told me, and not cared if it was the truth or not, maybe we'd be laughing about Sam by now, who was relentlessly slogging down one glass of red wine after another, pretending to read some thick book in his hand, even though I think he was holding it upside-down.

"You love me and care about me that much?"

"Yes."

"So he didn't tell you about the rest, eh?"

"You know what? I'm done needing to know anything you don't want to talk to me about. Here's the truth, I just want to be with you again. I don't care about the past."

"Be with who?"

"You!" I repeated, puzzled.

"And who is that?" she asked with her blue eyes turning what I thought was a bit teary. Did she mean to say I didn't know who she was? Or that *she* didn't know who she was? Or was she saying that the latter fact led to the former?

“Clair, I just want to be with the person I’ve come to know, and had such an awesome time with.”

“She’s dead.”

“*The Clair I knew is dead?*”

“My real mom.”

“Your real mom is dead?”

She looked down sadly.

“I’m so sorry. I thought she was still in jail. How. . . ?”

Shut up! Do NOT ask her *how* she died, *when* she died, *where* she died, I screamed silently to myself. I didn’t care about reality anymore. What’s the difference whether it was true or not, or whether she was just screwing with my head or not? I just wanted to feel her nose rubbing against my neck as I pushed as hard against her warm body as I could. *That was my truth!*

Hormones! Love. An odd ancient combination.

Sometimes you get lucky and those things merge. Most of the time they don't even come close.

“She couldn’t take the cold. New Hampshire was a hell of a place to try to survive when you’re poor. She died young.” Her eyes gave me a “bravely mourning an old loss” look.

Someone was still lying. Why were they trying to mess with me like this. Were they in on this together, laughing at me when the day was over?

Norman had said she lived in Mississippi.

I was so paranoid about them conspiring together to turn me into a fool, they got their wish.

Tears started forming in my eyes.

A cold stare came my way in return.

"I'm sorry Clair, can't we just *move on*? We've always had such a great time together."

"No."

"Okay. *Okay! Well, you know what?* Whatever, Clair! I tried. I really did!" I screamed.

Everyone except Sam turned to look at me. The waitress stopped in her tracks, delaying the floats that were making their way over to our table. As dramatically caloric and dark and sweet as they may have been, standing proudly on her ratty brown tray, I was sickened, sickened by the look of them, sick of everything.

"You *tried*, Shannon? Really? I told you my mom died, my real mom, and all you can say is 'can't we just move on and have things be the way they were?'"

"That's not what I meant!" I shot back. "I said I was sorry first. *Then* I said, 'let's move on.'"

There was an awkward silence. I raised my eyebrows in a funny kind of way, until she suddenly burst out laughing. The whole thing was so absurd.

She smiled, "Well, that's totally fucking different!"

“Really?”

“Yes. I didn’t hear you say you were *sorry* and *then* say let’s move on. That changes everything.”

I was hoping this wasn’t leading me into more quicksand.

“Want to come back to my cave?” she shrugged shyly.

The shift was about as abrupt as the earth putting on the breaks to make way for a passing meteor shower.

I finished my root beer float. She finished hers before me, using Norman-esque beer gulps. “Come on!” she begged. “As soon as I paid the bill she took my hand.

As we walked back to her newly decorated room-cave we became as quiet as twilight. The moon swallowed the newborn stars. We didn’t need to say another word.

Chapter 15

Lying together in her room – we were now a double entendre. The truth had collapsed into a ball of desire.

Her ceiling was now painted in antediluvian blue. There was a stone tablet in the corner filled with odd symbols she called Clair-oglyphs. There was an abstract work of art -- it looked like bulls locking horns, painted in maroon on a bed sheet hanging from the wall.

We connected silently with a kiss. As I gently pulled her clothes to the floor and breathed in the peachy yellow softness of her, my life hit rewind. All my internal confusion, all my lingering frustration and anger melted in a sudden explosion of pure joy. Nothing else mattered but the joy. Here and now. That's the lesson I learned that night and hoped to remember.

Her physical love turned all the lies and tricks into laughable incidentals. I couldn't even be angry at Norman, if he was the one who was lying. Or was *she the one*. . . ? Or *both*? I promised not to care anymore. Unintentionally or not, Norman helped get me get Clair back. I was carried downstream, somewhere just east of Eden -- until early the next morning when I realized I was about to miss my psych test.

I kissed her goodbye quickly just as she was waking, and ran out of her room with my shoes half-tied. I poured myself into the orange sunrise, giddy, blissfully insane.

I proceeded to fail the test with flying colors. Mostly pastels, with a smattering of cobalt. My present understanding of psychology was far different than the professor's course. None of my answers made sense to him. None of his questions made sense to me.

When I got back to my dorm room later that morning my eyes stung from a lack of sleep, and despite my assumption that Clair and I were back together, I began to feel strangely depressed. It was probably because I was flunking out of college. I had been spending so much time trying to find out "the truth" about who Clair was and what was "really" going on, I had stopped studying, even for the courses I was interested in.

Then there was the teenage fantasy I secretly harbored that there was actually such a thing as known truths – and that when you were a couple you were supposed to *know* each other. What I knew of Clair's past was either a mosaic of honest facts zigzagging around in the wind like individual snowflakes, waiting to be packed together into a nice round snowball. Or, white lies wrapped inside a massively cold practical joke. Or pure black deception.

The world itself, as I was quickly learning, wasn't exactly solid either. Maybe random snowflakes, or humans acting as randomly as the movements of snowflakes, was all anyone could expect out of life. Even with the love my mom felt for my dad, he eventually melted away from her. And from me. What was clear or solid about that? Where did he end up? What was the point?

Having had a only a few hours' sleep my thoughts turned into a weird dream around noon, but I was soon awoken by my cell phone's jagged ring tone. The number on the caller ID did not exactly make me jump for joy.

Chapter 16

“Norman, dude, what’s up?” I said groggily. My insides began to curdle.

“I don’t know, liar, what’s up with you?”

I knew it.

“Oh, come on, Norman,” I said, almost in a whisper, “who’s lying to who?”

“Are *you* calling *me* a liar? You think what I told you in confidence the other day was a lie? You think that I just sit around trying to figure out ways to fuck with you? Is that what you think? I got you closer to Clair, didn’t I? And what did you do to return the favor? You told her that I said...”

“I did *not* tell her that you said *anything*, Norman. I was just trying to figure out who the fuck Clair really is, beyond being one of the world’s strangest and most beautiful clowns.”

“A clown? Is that who you think she is? She’s not a clown, dude.” His voice was stern.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean I don’t like getting yanked around, not knowing what to believe, when all I’m doing is trying to love her. Look, Sierra lied to me, and suddenly she was fucking our history professor, then you. I don’t feel like living in a circus of chaos anymore, okay? I want to know what the hell is going on! Unless the

truth is too much to expect from anyone around here.”

This was what was bugging me and bringing me down after being with Clair last night. It wasn't just the fear of flunking out of college. It was trying to love through lies.

It wasn't enough to just make love and laugh at the world and have fun anymore. I was flunking Fun, after lying to myself all this time that it was all I ever wanted.

I wanted to believe passion and joy was all I would ever need from Clair, from life. But actually, I didn't want to be loving a ghost anymore. Fun as it may be for a while, eventually there's nothing there to hold onto. Just an empty sheet with eye holes.

“Then I can tell you, my friend, you don't know the half of it. You have no idea. And you probably never will.”

“Great, that's terrific,” I moaned. “So everything you said a lie just to hide something else. Well fuck you.”

I decided to hang up. I searched for the red button to end the call, but it was too late. “I know everything she told you last night Shannon, mister sleepyhead, I was just with Clair before I called you, fucking her all morning while you were taking your psych test. That's the kind of things that can happen to liars, Mr. Liar!”

Would she really do that? Could she? And how would I ever know if *that* was true or not? Was I supposed to ask her? Mistrust and verify? Obviously, even bringing it up to

her would be a no-win situation. She'd either say yes, or no. Either of which could be more trickery. So I realized in that second of everlasting time, the following things:

I was now officially dead inside. Love had assassinated me.

Or maybe the lies had assassinated me.

Or maybe the truth had assassinated me. Or maybe it would, if I ever came to know what the truth was.

I would never know for sure. That was for sure.

And one more thing I began to realize: Hedonism sucked.

I finally hung up on Norman.

I laid back down on my pillow.

I hadn't eaten in twenty four hours, but all I felt was nausea. Like I'd eaten a thousand crows. But who was counting?

They crows were still squawking, sticking in my craw, eating me alive from the inside. Like all lies do.

I was also seeing images of Clair in my mind, remembering making love to her, but at the same time I was now completely repulsed by it, because of him. Did he get up afterwards and strum his guitar with a victorious major chord? Could she hear how out of tune it was?

I was tired, like an insomniac is tired – tired of being

awake. Tired o my thoughts slowly killing me. And I was tired of her, but not tired enough to turn her into a distant dream.

A few minutes later I was also tired of living.

They had succeeded in completely crucifying me to their crisscross of chaos. But I couldn't die. Not yet.

Chapter 17

I wandered the campus that night like a shadowy figure. I threw my cell phone in the first garbage can I saw. I decided I was going to drop out of school. I didn't want to know or remember anyone here. I didn't want to see any of these people ever again.

I went outside the safety of the college campus and walked around the city hour after hour without stopping. I was walking quickly, trying to walk quicker than I could think, to stop my thoughts from haunting me, or at least make them mumbly and senseless, until I found myself falling down on the sidewalk, exhausted, asleep at last. But no such luck. My feet and legs were little speedy motor wheels heading precisely nowhere, unable to stop moving along the narrow tracks of crosswalks and alleyways. My thoughts were the power grid.

Snow began to fall hesitantly, intermittently. It left the sidewalks icy wet. The cement turned a shade darker before my eyes. My thoughts turned a shade darker than each previous dark thought. I was becoming wet and frozen, falling into ice black.

Stiff leafless tree branches became coated in soft white. My heart was frozen shut, turning bloodless and pale. I

dared to allow hope to drift down from the sky. I begged it to fall and fall harder. Until hope-snow swirled against the doorway. I couldn't get inside. There was no way to ever reach her.

Around six a.m., I found myself floating unconsciously back through the campus gates. The parking lots were ghostly empty. Early morning classes hadn't yet begun. The few cars resting in stalls were probably stalled-out wrecks abandoned by their student-owners nights or weeks before.

I was thinking about all this when my eyes started to blur. I began to stumble occasionally from a combination of hunger, nausea, cold, and exhaustion.

Then a figure came into my vision that looked familiar. Not just one of the thousands of lost souls I had passed by in my nocturnal journey. It looked like Graham. In fact, as he came closer I realized, it *was* Graham. He was taking his early morning run. He looked like Zeus. I squinted at him like a weak confused mortal, hunched over and withering. He was untouched by the wearing down of the flesh and mind, clean shaven and bright, wearing only a T-shirt and cargo shorts as if to mock the cold drizzly morning. His fresh nurse-white sneakers were blurring by. He looked more muscular than I remembered, glowing in love, stronger than muscular. Sierra was rubbing off on him, literally. He smiled a broad smile, just like her, as he passed

by.

I wasn't going to acknowledge him, but he stopped and retraced his steps, running back toward me. "Hey, Shannon, what are you doing up at this hour? I thought you usually didn't get up until ten, or noon?" he joked. But then he looked at me and realized something was wrong.

"I couldn't sleep."

"School troubles?"

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"Clair?"

"Yeah."

He was breathing hard, smoke was rising from his breath.

I was going under. I couldn't hide the pain and panic. I was too tired to try.

"Hey, can I buy you lunch later?" he asked kindly.

"Maybe I can help." He meant it. There was no sarcasm, no more lies were about to happen.

"Why would you want to do that?" I asked warily.

"I owe you. Remember, you were the one that told me to ask Sierra out one more time? I don't know how you knew she would say yes, but, well, you changed my life."

I smiled, "Yeah, all good."

"So lunch?"

"Okay, sure. Where?"

“How about noon at The Metro?”

“Noon, Metro,” I mumbled. Where else but The Metro? Of course. The scene of all my most memorable and miserable conversations.

I tried to lift my arm to wave goodbye. But by the time my brain located the right command circuit it was too late. He was already speeding up his pace, heading to his finish line, which was straight into Sierra’s room, no doubt.

I felt like a lost child compared to him. He seemed so confident, so full of. . . a direction home.

It reminded me bitterly of the time Clair and I walked past the rotund and hated chemistry professor, Dr. Shrivley, who was all of five foot one. As soon as he was out of earshot Clair whispered, “Honey, I Shrunk the Moron.”

I was the moron now.

Chapter 18

Somehow buoyed by a single moment of human decency - Graham's generous and charitable offer to meet for lunch -- I headed back to my dorm room and washed up, preparing to join him at the stroke of noon.

No sleep or food for thirty-six hours will definitely create interesting physical sensations. Eyes heavy and achy. Dizziness. Stomach burning. I could have easily fainted onto my bed, falling into a comatose sleep, but instead I was going to have a lunch date with a computer geek who "owed me" because I helped convince my ex to go out with him.

Why couldn't I get someone to love me like Sierra loved Graham? Was it me? Was it my fault? Or was I only attracted to girls who weren't ready to love anyone yet?

To carry out the task of staying awake until noon I tried studying. I thought it would make me feel better. I pretended I still had time not to flunk out. But my mind was far too gone for reading. I kept pacing around my room, trying to think up reasons to let Clair go and move on. Maybe Graham would offer me one.

I arrived at the Metro a few minutes early and chose a table in a dark corner behind the bar so the sun wouldn't hit my stinging eyes. It felt like the lids had blown away.

When Graham arrived he was wearing Dockers that looked brand new, Doc Martins that seemed polished, and a clean beige shirt that would have looked great with a formal dress jacket. His black rimmed glasses, which used to make him look like a dork, now made him look like a magazine model -- the "Harvard Intellectual" look. (And no, we weren't going to Harvard.)

The only thing that didn't look perfectly in place was his black curly hair, which he had allowed to grow out quite a bit. Not a hint of nerdiness remained anywhere.

He sat down and shook my hand with a smile that seemed reserved for funerals. No teeth showing, the corners of the mouth only slightly raised up. Lips pursed.

"Man I'm thirsty, ever try the lemonade?"

"No, not really," I grumbled.

"Yeah, well, it sucks. I'll just get ice water. You?"

"Sure."

The waitress came, slapped some sticky menus in front of us. She took our drink order and walked away overtly disappointed. Ice waters were not a harbinger of good things.

"So tell me what's going on, Shannon. You looked really out of it this morning."

"I look better now?"

A reserved laugh, "No, not really."

I said, "First tell me about you and Sierra. I want some good news. How are you guys?"

He seemed to hesitate, sensing the raw state I was in and not wanting to one-up me, but then he admitted, "We're really good. . . to tell the truth, I think we're going to get engaged. Maybe after finals."

"Wow, that's great! That's amazing. You two are a good fit."

"Well, thanks. You knew before anyone else. And, Sierra still has a soft spot for you, Shannon. She thinks you're a really good guy. Not just good looking, but a good person. Someone she can trust."

"Really?" I said. I couldn't imagine anyone caring about me at this point. I didn't.

"You're honest. You never lied to her. You accepted what she did to you and never once tried to get back at her, or make her feel cheap, or bring her down. Even in the worst of times, you never became petty or mean."

It was interesting to see myself that way. Maybe I wasn't just some wasted loser strung out on an irrational yearning for a lying ghost. Although that was most of who I was at the moment.

The waitress arrived and slid the ice waters across the Formica table with a somber look on her face. I ordered a fruit salad and a cup of chicken soup. I had to go easy on my

stomach. Graham ordered a roast beef sandwich with extra mustard and a Coke. The waitress must have thought I was a very popular guy. Everyone wanted to have lunch at the Metro with good ol' Shannon -- Norman, Clair, and now my ex-girlfriend's boyfriend. Wait until she found out I wasn't even the one paying the bill this time.

"Well, guess why I was out there walking around before dawn today?"

"Bird watching?" he offered.

He smiled that half-smile again. He would make a good shrink with a relaxed smile like that.

"Bird watching after playing my bit part in Cirque De Hell. I've been destroyed by two evil clowns. I was bird watching for vultures to come and pick me clean and put an end to all this."

"Vultures don't eat guys like you," he said.

"Why not? I might just stick my head in one of their mouths and push their jaws down on me if they're not hungry."

I rubbed my achy eyes with my hands. "Norman said I would never know the truth. He's sure right about that. I think she's been screwing him all along, while I've been thinking she was some angelic funny-girl saving her secrets just for me.

Graham was getting the story piecemeal but he was

smart enough to connect the dots.

“You know, Shannon, I’m not the goody-goody nerd you make me out to be. I was doing some computer repair work in the admin office last week and I stumbled upon something interesting. Well, actually I decided to check something out, and when I saw it I snooped a little further. And then I snooped a lot further.”

I looked at him with dimly lit curiosity.

“Clair’s last name isn’t Kinsley. It’s Colebrook. And her name, Clair, is actually spelled C-l-a-r-e.”

My ears perked up, even though I wanted to be done with her and never think about her again. Why would she have changed her name?

“You probably never heard of Austin Colebrook.”

I shook my head, perplexed. But from the sound of it I imagined Clair being a debutante, maybe a famous politician’s daughter. “Let me guess. He’s some rich guy living half the year on his yacht,” I muttered.

“Pretty close. He was the CEO of a women’s shoe company. A philanthropist, gave millions to charities every year, and according to the press reports I think he actually did own a yacht,” Graham said. “There are quite a few articles about him on the net. No wonder she registered under a different name. I bet the school even allowed her to, if they knew.”

The food came. A fist-sized amount of fruit salad stared up at me from a little glass dish. Canned fruit. The red food dye from the maraschino cherry was bleeding into the sugar water. The soup came at the same time. It looked a little better. Nothing red in it.

Graham's roast beef sandwich looked messy and too big for anyone but Zeus to finish. Mustard bleeding from the edges.

"I don't get it," I said, my voice beaten. I wanted him to come to the point before I fell asleep in my soup.

"Clair's father was a real. . . well, he got what he deserved." He put his sandwich down before biting into it. He leaned closer to me and whispered. "Austin Colebrook was a child molester, Shannon. In-house. He sexually abused Clair, every Saturday night apparently, from the time she was three years old."

"*What?*" I was stunned and suddenly sickened further. My head began to spin. "Wait a minute, Graham, are you sure? I've heard so many versions of Clair's childhood. I know I was being lied to, but this is just totally. . ."

"According to the New York Post and Google, he's in jail now. He's in a penitentiary in California, and he'll probably never get out."

Graham had no reason to screw with me. And he was smart enough not to be tricked by the two of them. There's

no way they could have put a crazy story like this on the Internet, or hacked the New York Post website. And Graham knew I could search for these things on my own to verify what he was saying.

“So they were both lying to me to hide all this? To protect her from being seen as the victim of her famous sick father? Is that it? She wanted to come to school and get a fresh start, with Norman here to protect her. . . .” I said these things almost to myself. Things were beginning to make some sense. Maybe.

“Well, she wasn’t just a victim,” Graham added.

“What do you mean?”

“The way her father got convicted,” he said in a low voice, “was that Clair and Norman built a hidden camera into the wall of her bedroom and caught him on tape. That’s how he was finally caught.”

So Clair was both the victim and the hero, and the prosecutor.

“Norman secretly turned over copies of the tape to an attorney and to the police, and hid Clair in the basement of his house until her dad was taken into custody.”

“What about Clair’s mom? Clair mentioned her mom was crazy. Then another time she said she was dead.”

“According to the story I read online when she saw the tape she still didn’t believe Clair’s story. I guess she was

either super crazy, or all she could see was that her life was about to fall completely apart. The Post article said she testified that Clair and Norman were doctoring the tape, making the whole thing up.

“Her father's attorneys tried to make Clair and Norman the villains by saying that Norman and Clair were secret lovers, underage at thirteen, and wanted to be together against her parents' wishes. So Clair was lying about her father to get back at him for trying to keep her away from Norman. Colebrook apparently threatened Norman and tried to get Norman's parents to put him in a mental institution. In the end, though, Norman was unstoppable, and too believable. He wouldn't back down. And they couldn't find an expert to agree the tape was doctored, because it obviously wasn't.”

I was wide awake now. My heart was racing. I was stunned into silence.

He finally took the first bite of his sandwich, shaking his head at how sick the whole thing was.

I was processing all of this through a profound lack of sleep. I also became aware, for some odd reason, that at this very moment I was missing another class. I couldn't even remember which one. But everything else seemed inconsequential now, especially compared to what Clair had gone through. And Norman too.

But I still couldn't let go of the remaining missing pieces to the puzzle. I wanted the whole truth now that I had most of it. "Did any of the news reports say if they had ever lived in India, or was that part of their lie too?"

"Yeah, I think it did mention that they lived there when Clair was born. He was some kind of an international clothing distributor before starting his shoe company. But they were only there until she was ten or eleven, if I recall."

"Well, that's amazing. She actually did tell me the truth about something."

I think Graham's reaction to what I was saying was that I was being cold and selfish, thinking only about whether Clair had been truthful with me or not, when it was obvious why she hadn't been.

But I was still processing the fact that she slept with Norman an hour after I had left her room. Did he control her in some way? Did she think she owed her life to him, and that was one way to repay him?

The cold truth was the only thing left to me. A wave of anger come over me, how could anyone have done that to her? Was Norman taking advantage of her now?

"Sorry I sound so unsympathetic," I mumbled. "It's just that, well, I thought we had gotten back together, but then I found out Norman slept with her the minute I left her room yesterday morning. I guess I shouldn't blame either of

them. . .”

“Yesterday morning?”

“Yes, after I giddily stumbled off to fail my eight a.m. psyche test.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think what? *I passed?*”

“I don’t think Norman could have been with her yesterday morning.”

“How could you know that, Graham? Norman called me yesterday afternoon just to let me know what a good time they had. That’s what sent me into my nocturnal tailspin.”

“Well, I was in Chem class with Clair yesterday morning at eight thirty. Half an hour after your class started. And she had to walk at least fifteen minutes to get across campus, right? And she had to get washed and dressed before that, right? Because she looked pretty good! And then I played basketball with Norman in the gym for an hour or so, starting around half past ten. In fact, I met him right after Chem class. Clair even came by the gym about the time we were done playing and said something about Norman ‘smelling bad, as always.’ He said something kind of mean back. They both kind of glared at each other, then started to laugh. She was like, ‘How’s your life going lately, sailor?’ He shrugged. Then he seemed disinterested and took a half-

court shot and missed. I mean, it didn't seem to me as if they'd seen each other lately. Certainly not that morning. Then he sat with her in the corner and they talked for a while. Then, I remember something she said got him pissed. He kind of stormed off.

I casually asked Clair what was up with Norman, and she said nothing, that he had to go un-tune his guitar because if it's un-tuned enough it eventually coincidentally ends up tuned. That's what she learned from a statistics class. Typical Clair answer. I didn't want to get into it any further. Except later yesterday afternoon, when I was in the admin office fixing their computer, the wheels in my head started turning."

"Wait. He left the court a little before noon?" I interrupted.

"Yeah. I ate lunch with Sierra right after. . . ."

"He called me just after noon."

If Clair hadn't slept with Norman, if she was just going to class and having a normal day, then she was innocent of my worst accusations, and would have probably tried to call me on my cell phone after class. We were back together as far as she knew. Even right at this moment. That would be her assumption. Could she think I was ignoring her now, after getting what I wanted? But I'd thrown my cell phone into the garbage, and. . . . the last thing I wanted to do was

hurt her now that I knew what she'd been through. She needed to know that I wasn't just another creep trying to pry, or invade her in any way. Or someone who would love her and then walk away. Maybe *eventually* I could help her move on from the pain, the insanity she'd been through. Find love. *Feel it*. If she was capable of ever knowing it. And if I was.

"Thanks Graham. Really, man, thank you *so* much for telling me all this. But I gotta go. I just remembered, there's something I have to do."

"What's that?"

"I need to pull my life out of the garbage can. I hope you understand." I almost knocked over the plastic glasses of half-consumed ice water as I climbed out of my seat.

"Sure, yeah," Graham half-smiled. He stood up to say goodbye formally. "Obviously this is all confidential."

I nodded. "Of course."

Then he said, "Shannon, I think love can survive a lot of chaos and pain. Sierra had plenty of things in her past both of us had to overcome, you maybe being the one exception. But if love is there, if it's *really* there, then the past doesn't matter, only the future matters. There's an old saying my father used to repeat to me at least a few time a year when I was younger -- whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Chapter 19

Of course, the trash container I threw my cell phone into was now filled to the brim with Styrofoam cups and used food containers, paper plates covered with ketchup, plastic wrappers streaked with soda, and an entire alien world of large greenish blue ants.

It sure was a swell feeling driving my hand deep down into food hell and stirring around in the gunk, with my heart racing, feeling wet things push themselves under my nails. I had to hold my nose with my other hand, until I came up with a brilliant idea. I pushed the can over and spilled out everything until an entire museum of discarded junk was lying on the grass. Each item now was wet and free, ready to fly away in the wind, except a small steely box half-hidden under a sandwich wrapper and covered in mustard.

Lunch meat and yogurt ice cream dripped from my shirt sleeve as I bent over in victory. A few winter flies braved the cold, ready to eat like kings (well, Fly Kings anyway) whizzing around me, calling out to the rest of the fly kingdom to come share the bounty.

I wiped away the gunk from the phone and checked for incoming calls. My hands were shaking. There was one voice message. Sure enough it was from Clair. I put the glistening wet phone up to my ear to hear her voice:

“Hey there, Goober! Hadafugahya? Just checking in to make sure you haven’t gone to Barcelona without me. By the way, Maestro, there’s a local rock band playing tomorrow tonight at the pub downtown. They’re supposed to be quite deafening. I’m going with Doreen and Dana. Cometh with if you wish. Try to say *that* five times fast! Bring your earplugs.”

Graham was telling the truth. I knew that now. She would never have been that cheery if she had slept with him. She would never have called me if she had slept with him. She would have been hiding from me. That much I knew about her.

I desperately wanted to get some sleep. But first I had to see Clair. I had to let her know everything was okay between us. Her next class wasn’t over for another hour. So I veered over to the library, which I sadly acknowledged to myself I hadn’t visited for weeks. I needed to do some long-delayed research for a class. I went to a computer and started typing in my student code. But then another part of me just had to do it. I Googled “Austin Colebrook.”

And there it was. A whole Google page of tagged articles and news reports. One article after another told the truth with a different slant, varied details. But everything Graham told me was dead-on accurate.

I raced over to meet Clair just as she got out of class.

She was walking down the steps, putting a book in her backpack, talking to a classmate I didn't recognize. Clair had her laughing hard about something, of course. When she saw me she bid her friend goodbye and bounced over to me.

"Hi stranger!" I said. I tried to hide my sleepy eyes from her, and my garbage-smudged shirt.

"Too busy to call me back yesterday! Wow, you're actually becoming cool."

I understood so much more now. I felt like crying, knowing what she had been through. How brave she had been. How strong she had become from it. And for her to access a place of constant joy from such a dark helpless hell, *how could she possibly have done that?* I was in awe.

"Let's go get some food," she said, pulling me gently by the collar.

"I already had lunch. I ate at the Metro with Graham."

"Oh? How's ol' Sam today? Perky as ever? Did you help turn his book right-side up?"

I smiled but was too tired to think up a response.

"Man, Shannon, your eyes are all red. Worse than bloodshot! You look like you just collided head-on with a Twizzler. Are you on something?"

"I didn't sleep last night."

"How come? One night stand?"

"Yeah. With myself. I fucked around with myself all

night long.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that. Maybe I should call you ‘Shattered’ instead of Shannon. You’re always panicked about something. Man, you gotta learn to relax!”

I hesitated, “Actually, Norman had his hand in it. Surprise! But I’ll be fine.”

She raised her blonde eyebrows comically. “What did that schmuck-face do to you now? Let me guess, he told you the truth. We’re from the Ionian Galaxy, here for a quick visit, trying our best to have Ionian earth babies with y’all.”

“No, not quite. He told me you and he slept together yesterday morning after I left.”

“*What a cow!*” she frowned. “I hope you realized he was joshing with you. I haven’t even kissed him since, I don’t know, since we were on the Ionian mothership thousands of light-years ago. I’ve got to work on his fucking sense of humor, it’s been a bit over the top lately.”

Despite all the lies that had come out of her beautiful mouth in days and months past, I believed everything she was saying now. It was suddenly obvious when she was telling the truth and when she was going off the grid. And why. All the pieces were fitting in place.

Chapter 20

Sleep was descending like a foggy-winged army. Images of thick white blankets appeared before my bloodshot eyes. I reached into the air to catch their feathery warmth. My insides were no longer churning. My stomach felt calm, as if I had ingested a warm cloud. Everything in the world finally made sense. I was sobered and saddened and disgusted by the truth, but the truth was finally clear to me. No more mysteries to unravel. I knew I could trust her, maybe even help her overcome her impossibly horrific past in some way. Everything was warm and falling, with gravity pouring heaviness into my legs and feet. I wanted to sleep right there on the sidewalk for days, right at Clair's beautiful feet.

But just then, two of Clair's friends appeared from out of nowhere. It looked to me like they just fizzled together in front of us, as if they'd been beamed in from a transporter. Maybe the Ionian Galaxy thing was also true. Why not?

One more thing I was realizing now that the puzzle had been decoded: she had definitely lied to me in the past. But, not entirely. Only when I probed, and only when I wouldn't let go. All this mistrust was mostly my fault, not hers. She didn't have a choice -- she had to lie, to protect herself. I

should have trusted the privacy she was insisting on and stayed present with her. That was the key. No more probing.

Gray sand was covering my brain, sifting into my eyes. Her friends gathered around her. Yak, yak, yak. . . . They went on and on. You could tell they adored Clair and her humor. They complained about school, certain professors, parents that don't understand them, clueless boyfriends, bad menstrual cycles, *right in front me*, while I swooned with narcoleptic dizziness in the background.

Clair turned all their negativity into a stand-up comedy routine, of course. They roared with laughter.

I realized that normally this would have been an entertaining fifteen minutes. But I was so wasted, flying swirlingly downward. I was far away from voices and the lingering smell of garbage.

I fell onto my knees on the cold grass. Clair came running over to me. What's wrong?"

"Tired," I managed to mumble.

"More like run over by a tire," Clair laughed. She kind of enjoyed seeing me this way. I wasn't so uptight. I wasn't asking questions. I was ready to follow her anywhere, do anything. As long as I could sleep.

We headed back to her room instead of going to the concert with her friends. My eyes were sewing themselves shut. It was close to six p.m. I was using Clair's shoulders to

steady myself while she unlocked her door. My quick but blurry math calculated I had now been without sleep for almost forty straight hours with no stimulants other than my own paranoia.

But Clair was in a merry mood. She laughed at me being all wobbly and dreamy. She found it sexy. She put some music on by clicking a button on her cheap portable CD player and then began to kiss me roughly as I remained motionless on her bed. She pulled me closer by grabbing my dirty shirt collar with one hand. I was motionless like a rag doll. She responded passionately to my non-responsiveness.

Just as she started unbuttoning my shirt a knock came at the door. It was a hard loud knock, not a friendly knock.

Clair started buttoning me back up and asked who it was.

"It's Norman."

"Come back later!"

"No. Let me in or I'll start playing my guitar. . . .

Seriously Clair!"

She remained motionless and didn't respond.

"Clair!"

"Go away."

"Clair, this is code red. Open the fuck up."

"Shit," she said. She opened the door a crack and he came flying in.

“Well, imagine finding you here,” he snarled at me. “I thought you’d be in the library spying on the rest of the university.”

Uh, oh.

He walked into the middle of the room, turned off the CD player, and stood there, looking very large. “Clair, do you know what this asshole was doing this afternoon?”

Clair looked stunned but stayed silent. She was sitting in her cave-chair, shoulders caving in like a child, looking a bit afraid.

“He was Googling things he shouldn’t have ever seen. Ever.”

She looked at me with her eyes turning teary. “Is that true, Shannon? Were you spying on me?”

“I wasn’t spying. I found out from someone what the truth was, and I was just making sure that. . . .”

“Who?” Norman hissed.

“None of your business,” I countered. “He’s a friend. And the truth is safe with him. He won’t tell anyone.”

“How the fuck do you know that? He told *you*, didn’t he? Or is it a she? Is it Sierra? I’ll find out who it was, I swear. . . .”

“No, it wasn’t Sierra!”

He searched my eyes. I held my gaze. Sleepy as I had been, I was wide awake now.

“Norman, obviously, I know why you would want to keep things a secret. And I’ll keep the secret. I get it now. That’s not the point anymore. The point is, I love her. That’s the only truth I care about.”

I looked over to her but her eyes were staring at the floor.

“It’s not the point?” Norman sneered.

I ignored him. “Clair, listen to me, I just want to be who we are when we’re together, here and now, and not go back into the past ever again. I just want a future with you.”

Norman continued, “I checked the viewing history on the computer after you left. You seemed to think it was pretty important to know every single detail, and read every single article about it. Not just one.”

“I just wanted to separate the lies from the truth!” I said. “I’ve been lied to for a very long time. Mostly by you, Norman. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Norman, leave him alone,” Clair said finally. “What’s done is done. It’s not like he’s going to spread it all around campus. I’ll be fine. You’ll be fine. And shit, what if everyone knows now anyway? So what? I’m okay. I can handle it.”

Clair looked at me and abruptly smiled. It was an odd smile that didn’t quite match the situation.

“Which Clair can handle it? Which one?” Norman was

treating her almost as if he were a surrogate parent now.

“Clarisse? Chloé? Cathy? Which one of you is going to take care of the others if the past gets pushed in your face? Which one of you is going to soothe the others when they’re freaking out remembering things you shouldn’t remember?”

“*Norman, don’t!*” she pleaded. She was crumbling right in front of me.

There was a thick silence.

“Norman, leave her alone,” I pleaded.

“Leave him alone,” she whispered in reply.

She looked at me and repeated, “Leave him alone.”

My mind skipped a beat, I couldn’t quite read her. Was she telling me to leave *Norman* alone, or telling him to leave me alone while looking directly at me? It was a look I’d not seen before. Why was she staring at me like that?

“Of course not,” Clair said, almost to herself. “How could you?” She looked down at her hands, hardly breathing.

“What’s going on?” I said suddenly.

“The story’s done,” Norman said. “You should leave.”

“Shannon,” Clair said hesitantly. It was as if she wasn’t even hearing what Norman had just said. “I’m extraterrestrially compli-kidded, as you know. Certain kinds of stress, or meanness compli-kid me interactively. Sometimes I don’t remember things, when, because, in the

past, back on the mothership, I guess I was mis-treasoned on different planetary channels. . . .”

Her normal spot-on humor was fragmenting into coded metaphors.

Norman was like a big brother trying to talk his little sister out of running away. “Clair. Come back. You don’t need to do this. You got yourself into this. And you insisted he was trustable.”

She said, “Ah ha, yes.”

“Look, I’m just going to tell him, if you want me to. Okay? Do you want him to know everything? All of it? You shouldn’t have to explain this yourself.”

She folded her arms around her knees and buried her head like a painfully shy little girl. I’d never seen her like this. She was acting like a three year old. She was teary. Then it dawned on me almost before he said it.

“Clair has been diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder. Otherwise known as Dissociative Identity Disorder. Whatever the shrinks want to call it, who the hell cares? Her dad messed her up really bad, Shannon. *Really* bad. . . for a very long time. As you now know. You’ve been trying to find out the truth? Well, you can know it on some level, but I don’t think you will ever understand it. You will never know enough to reach all of her, even if you tried. No one can. Not even me. *That’s* the truth.

I stared at him blankly, unable to move a muscle.

"I tried to protect her from you. I was also trying to protect *you* from her, so you wouldn't fall off the edge trying to reach her. It's a long way down. Believe me."

"It's been worth it so far. I love her."

He shook his head. "I know. I understand. I've been there. She's half genius, half crazy, half saintly, half dead, half angel, all rolled into one whole that's more than anyone else's whole, but less than any sum of her parts."

"Yay," Clair laughed. "Write that one down!"

"Shannon, look at her now. What do you see? *Whichever* Clair decides to be here, in the world, becomes one hundred percent of her, but she leaves all the other parts in the dark. In a way, she's more fully conscious than any person I've ever known because she has to learn to make peace with so many different parts of herself, including parts she doesn't want to know about. Unlike normal morons like us, who ignore those parts of ourselves and let them destroy us silently, she's willing to work through the darkness. I've had to show Clair parts of herself on video that she would never have known about. And then she learns, and creates a relationship, sometimes the two personalities find a way to permanently merge together. But there are so many others. Do you know there is a Clair that was made up by her just for you? But that Clair is just a fraction of who she is. Can

you understand what I'm saying? Or do you think I'm making this up too?"

"No, I believe you," I said. Tears were forming without my consent. They literally hurt my eyes. They stung my cheeks as they gushed forward. I began to cry.

Reality, truth, was shifting again. I was driving down a road towards her, but the road was crumbling before my eyes – the future was folding in on itself. I was floating off the edge with the steering wheel disconnected.

Norman was about to say something more about her, but then he just shook his head and switched gears. His voice sounded oddly kind, "You want to love her, Shannon? I mean really *love* her?" He looked directly into my eyes. "Because I know what kind of love you want. You want her all to yourself. It's only natural, right? She's your girl. But she *needs me*. I'm her brother-in-arms. I'm more than a blood-related brother ever could be. The difference between you and me is that you love her because you want her. You need her. I love her for who she is. All of who she is. Not just who she pretends to be. Because I care about her enough to give myself to her without asking for anything back. You always want something back! But she can never fully give it. Look Shannon, what you want is natural. It's reasonable. But it's not going to be enough for your love to survive this. Trust me."

Clair suddenly began laughing like a little girl.
“Norman, you crack me up! You want him to trust you?”
She was laughing out of control, pounding her fists into the cave-chair gasping for breath.

I might have wondered, are they pulling another joke on me? Would they really go this far? Is this all an act? But now I saw things through a new filter. I realized her responses didn't really quite make sense. She wasn't laughing at some practical joke Norman was playing. She was laughing at something that wasn't quite there. It was clear to me in that moment that this was not “her.” Not anyone I knew before. They weren't tricking me. And it frightened me, it brought me to a depth of fear I'd never experienced in my life. Not even when I found out my father had died.

I could feel something inside me, some part of my heart and mind falling into a dark vastness. The truth was slowly killing everything.

I went unconscious. I fell onto the floor face first.

They thought I'd fainted from what Norman had told me. But sleep had finally caught up with me. And life had finally caught up with me. I just needed to leave this dimension for a while.

Chapter 21

She was like air -- life giving, yet filled with things I couldn't see. She colored the atmosphere with a color not found on earth.

She'd been ripped apart piece by piece long ago. As much as she tried to put herself back together with Norman's help, and with the help of doctors and therapists, there would always be rips in her soul's fabric, ghosts in her cell membranes, haunting her for life, while on the outside she made jokes about the world and skipped lightly through the dark edges.

Her father had forced her to hide away from herself. Eventually she couldn't see, or feel, or believe what was happening to some distant part of her, while he took her life away. He forced her to find a tunnel beyond herself, into a strange place where she could find safety.

The genius in her refused to be defeated. She found a way to escape through the tunnel. But she found there were many more tunnels to crawl through before she could get back to the light of day. All of them with unknown characters and images appearing to protect her, and each tunnel's exit filled with unknown consequences.

In that world, I was just one of a thousand dreams trying to drag her out of the nightmare.

Chapter 22

I spent time with Clair every free hour I could for a long time afterwards. She had a two-man team of protectors now. She loved me as much as she could dare love anyone. Although it became more and more clear to me that love for her was only a passing emotion, before some other emotion arose to take her fully away from me, to a safer more distant place.

Love was never steady. Never real. Never necessary. Never needed. Never allowed to be spoken aloud. Never threaded all the way through a time continuum. There was an odd silence replacing any possible long-term peace of mind. Like a deaf person trying to listen to the ocean.

Norman was the only truly steady thing in her life. As always, her confidant, her chosen big brother, and the co-host in The Clair Comedy Drama that was broadcast daily out into the world.

Clair once suggested she should star in the world's first "Unreality Show."

It would have been something to behold.

Despite all the obvious difficulties, I still wanted our relationship to work. I really did. I loved the part of her that was "Clair." I loved the part of her that loved me back. That

saw me. That met me almost half way. And I had an undefeatable optimism about our future for a long time. I thought eventually we might create a new kind of love, with new rules. A love no one else would ever be able to understand. Only us.

But, here's the thing about time – very slowly I was forced to understand that the changes were never going to end. I know that's true about all things. All things, in all time. But it's not quite what I mean.

What I mean is, the labyrinth inside her, and the one slowly forming in me, was so thick it would entangle everything. It twisted itself into ever deeper layers. It would come from out of nowhere to ensnare her sometimes, and then it would spill over into me, until I questioned whether or not I truly could reach her anymore. I questioned whether I could try anymore, even if I wanted to. Or whether I *should* try, even if I wanted to. Was it really fair to her? Was I really making her happy? Or was the effort just making her crazier over time?

It was hard to know. Each experience would lead me further away from the last place we started. Closer and farther away all at the same time.

One day she was the moon. Then the sun. Then Neptune, cold and distant. Then galaxies distant. Then home again, but in a new form, a new atmosphere, with never

ending shifts. Never quite seeing all the way through to me.
Because she couldn't see all the way through to herself.

Or, maybe the right way to put it is, she couldn't find
the one self within the many selves.

Maybe that's true for all of us on some level. But after a
while, I felt as if we were both being spun around in a never-
ending wheel.

Chapter 23

Then the inevitable happened.

I flunked out of school.

Scholar's Note: This is something that can easily happen when you stop attending most of your classes.

In a way, I felt okay about having sacrificed my future life for her. But I also knew I had ruined my chance of graduating, and getting a degree, and living some semblance of a sane life by normal social standards. I had been so busy trying to find her, I lost my way.

Did I care? Sometimes. I admit it. Yes.

This was my personal flaw. It wasn't at all her fault. I got so hung up trying to *find the truth*, I ended up swimming around in a river of lies searching for it. I was swimming around in my *own* self-made illusions, not hers, not theirs -- all the while believing the truth was still possible to unscramble.

Then, slowly, ever so slowly, I learned that finding the truth wasn't the answer. It's never the answer. In fact, it usually just destroys the beauty of the world's illusions, while taking you on a parallel journey to nowhere.

The truth is a journey through the riotous dark, where you can sense it, touch it, stand firmly for it, scream it out

from a podium in a lecture hall, or write it down in a book, and know with all the power of your human intellect that *forever "it" would be true!* But love and beauty and wonder existed someplace else, dancing in the sun, while you groveled around on your hands and knees looking for that one true thing.

Chapter 24

I had a very interesting experience spending a few weeks in a psych hospital after the university kicked me out.

I just kind of collapsed one day. It wasn't like collapsing from a lack of sleep. It was more like being caught in an avalanche and buried under it. I wasn't able to get out. My hand was sticking out of the snow waving goodbye, while the rest of me was buried and cold and not able to move.

So these guys at the hospital, they helped me get out. They are kind of like human Saint Bernards.

One day my dad came to visit me. I knew he was dead, but when you're in a psych hospital strange things like that can happen, and can pass for being somewhat "normal." So I didn't have to feel weird about it.

The first thing I asked him was why he didn't bring me any ice cream? (Because I knew he had so many questions to ask me, right there on the tip of his tongue; I was trying to distract him with humor.)

But oddly enough, he didn't ask me anything this time. He just cried. I'd never seen him cry before. He kissed me before he left. He also whispered that he believed in me. I'm pretty sure that's what he whispered. It might have been something else.

Chapter 25

The other news of note is, they're going to release me tomorrow. They've declared me cured of my nervous breakdown.

I still sink into a bottomless place every time I think of her, I'm not going to lie to you, or anyone, about that. I'm not sure I can ever be cured of going into that wordless place where she exists when she's not with me.

But everyone, including Clair, has told me I have to let go now. I have to move on or I'll find myself dead someday. Probably soon.

I'm supposed to find control *beyond* the constant sinking – *mental control* is the cure, they say. They don't think I need drugs to do it. They think I'm just going through a rough patch, like lots of teenagers do when a "first love" vanishes into the never was. I'm supposed to focus on easily achievable personal goals every day, stay in the present, and move on with life.

They helped me come up with goals to focus on – in fact, they had a whole list of personal goals for me to choose from. That's always very helpful for those who can't think of any.

They told me there's no reason I can't have a happy life. Well, fine. Maybe. Maybe that's true.

But what will happen to Clair?

One thing I can say for sure, she will graduate. She focuses hard on her studies. She'll probably help Norman graduate too.

After that. . . .

Clair is like a prayer that's impossible to have answered. She will probably continue to race through the days and nights, alluring to all, visually breathtaking to star-struck souls like me, eclipsing reality. Moonlike:

Warm and space-cold.

Whole. Not whole. Invisible.

Shining. Lonely. Bound by gravity.

Freed from it too, somehow, as she chases life through its orbits.

I stretch my hand up into the air to touch her now. I can see through the roof, past the fluorescent lights above me.

No. It would take a rocket's strength, and a lifetime of fuel to truly reach her.

Epilogue

When I get out tomorrow I'm going to stuff a few things in my backpack and head west.

I'm hoping, because hope is all anyone has, that it will be a step in the right direction.

Tonight I'm thinking about some valuable things I've learned during my stay here. I've had a chance to meet a few people staying in this place, who, like Clair, were so totally incapable of being normal, they actually evolved into amazing human beings.

I hope to become one myself someday.

THE END

GM