

ORBITING *CHAOS*

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Chapter 1

Gabriel

Cosmic jokes come in an endless stream when I'm dreaming: Rivers open their mouths wide for me. Tidal waves ride in from the horizon like thunderous squawking birds – their marbled blue wings spread across a liquid sky. All the stars reverse their ever-expanding course just to entertain me; they are sucked back toward their birth. I can see them, newly hatched from star-eggs, sitting atop their fertile skydark nests, wavering in and out of the infinite, unsure whether or not they should exist, searching for their creator, crying out in Bb, eighty octaves below middle-C.

I was just a kid when I wrote that in my special notebook, scribbling down my crazy thoughts at any moment of the day or night. I loved images that would come to me from out of nowhere, like polka dot stars, and words like skylessness." I was content. I was happy without you.

You asked me, Laney, why not just find a happy place in the sun and sleep underneath its warm hug, tucked in by the silky stars at night – living on little, needing nothing.

I see how that would make sense for orphans like us to think that way.

There aren't a lot of material costs to living life as a spiritual day dreamer and the night watchman of unwritten songs, if one is willing to take that risk.

One thing we both know – orphans are taught to take risks early on, because in the end they have nothing to lose.

Chapter 2

Laney

I met him in a bar, of all places – an old wooden building that looked like a western saloon, overlooking the ocean, across from my apartment. I went in to give the owner of the establishment a piece of mail that was accidentally delivered to me instead of to his pub – it had gotten stuck, semi-glued, to the bottom of a bill addressed to me. Of course, the owner wasn't there. So I left it with the bartender. As I was turning to leave, my mail delivery accomplished, I saw him sitting at a corner table with an open notebook and a strangely contented smile on his face.

I found out later he would come and sit at the same small table near the front window almost every Friday night. Even though he didn't drink, he nursed a series of Perriers – his notebook always open.

I wasn't quite dressed for the occasion – it was after 7 pm, which meant I was in my after-work clothes – over-worn ripped comfortable things I had never had the heart to throw away; old museum pieces from the dark ages – thousands of miles and memories from here.

Fashionably ripped jeans would have been fine. Even an *overly*-ripped look would have been fine. But my clothes just said, "I can't afford new clothes." My beige shirt was sleeveless, my bra strap was showing. It wasn't a colored bra inviting someone's eyes to look at the softness of my shoulder. This was my white jogging bra.

As I was about to leave I saw a small bird that had accidentally found its way inside the bar and was perched high up on a wooden crossbeam.

It fluttered its wings directly above the half-smiling man at the window table, his notebook now unattended. He looked up and held out his arm straight and still, to make a perch, and waited, but the bird was apparently not trained.

I looked over at him, then stood still and put my arm out too, mocking him. He nodded, smiled, acknowledging the joke. But then to my amazement, the bird glided down and landed for a moment on my wrist, then brushed against my cheek before flying out the door. Despite being startled, my eyes followed the bird's escape, flying in a pulsing forward rhythm, out a big opened window, across the beach, out to sea.

As it disappeared into the last moments of sunset I thought to myself, "A beautiful escape...." Apparently I had said it aloud.

He had approached me right as the bird began to fly off and was standing very close to me now. He looked right into my eyes after I said it; looked right at me.

I turned and left the bar immediately.

* * *

When I was three my mother gave me a huge yellow baby chick stuffed with goose down. I carried it with me everywhere, though it was slightly bigger than I was. I called it "Amy." I sang to it constantly, long before I learned to play piano. It sang to me before I fell asleep each night.

I wondered years later where I came up with the name. “A—me... I—my...” Probably invented from the mind of a typically unconscious narcissistic three year old.

Or was it Amy, vaguely rhyming with my own name, Laney? My mother had named me after a child-hero in a novel she read by Joyce Carol Oates. I haven’t read the book. She often told me to read it when I was older.... So now I won’t.

Anyway, this chick, I still dream about it sometimes at night. It was so soft and comforting. If I held it close enough to me it created beautiful dreams. Someone should try to invent a beautiful dream-making stuffed animal these days. Everyone could use one.

Here tonight on this ocean, at the edge of an island world, dreamlessness has gone too far. Makes me feel cold. Not from a coldness in the air. The other coldness. And I want so much to break out of this malaise. I’m twenty-three! It’s time to let go. Time to hatch from the Amy egg. She could be my new mother — one that kisses me goodbye as I fly away. I could create a sweet memory of the fantasy mom who loved me, instead of remembering little Amy the day she fell apart in the washing machine, tumbling out in wet yellow feathers into my arms.

Chapter 3

Some changes are subtle, like the evolution of the cliffs on the California coast. The wind sculpts softness and circles from everything over the millennia.

Other changes are brutal. Memories remain – black dreams, like lava rocks, sharp and vicious, born out of an explosion that brought death as it gave life; they are battle tough.

Changes used to be a beautiful thing, a subtle thing for her, long ago, before her teens.

When Laney turned eleven she started improvising on the piano. She understood things about the sounds, and the *shapes* of sound the keyboard offered that no one could have known at that age.

She also played the guitar at a near professional level by songwriter's standards. Chords and rhythm came naturally to her. She figured them out by ear and memorized them almost instantly.

Her voice sang melodies that went perfectly with the chords she created; melodies no one else had ever heard before.

By the time she was thirteen she had written fifteen original songs. She sang and played all the parts in a little recording studio in the basement of a neighbor's house. This was her life.

But then something happened. She quit, cold. On the spot. A sickening thing in her stomach told her she never wanted to touch a musical instrument again.

Now in the bar – a bar no less (she didn't drink because her mother had consumed the maximum lifetime quota of alcohol for both of them during the short time she knew her) she felt something, actually saw something, that freed her from that childhood fog in some small way. A small patch of blue sky appeared.

She had never let another person enter her world on any level. Not even the girls who wanted to befriend her in high school or college. She had no interest. Not since her thirteenth birthday, when the strange thing happened.

It didn't seem as crazy to her at the time as it seemed to her now. A mother leaving. A father calling the police – she had to have been *abducted*. Phone ringing in the middle of the night – they thought she was spotted – in Michigan. Then in California. A week after that, a phone call came. Her mom pleaded with her father to stop having her followed.

Her father broke down. Hospitalized for three days. He came home in pieces. He tried to love his little girl. He had loved her. But he was never the same.

He became a ghost. Heart scattered into space. She was orphaned in two weeks' time. A screwed up mother, a broken down father.

The piano seemed dead to her now. Life was too frighteningly alive, and her soul was too frighteningly dead. Happy thirteenth birthday. A true coming of age.

But the bird just flew right out the door across the sea – easily, so easily – after perching for a moment on her arm as if to say, watch how easy this is. To escape. A wall in her mind fissured. A small crack appeared, a wisp of blue sky seen through the crack.... What had walking away from her music done for her? It certainly hadn't set her free. She was

simply mirroring her parents' sense of aloneness and desolation. She recreated desolation for herself.

The bird – there was innocence in its actions. It was trapped for different reasons than she had been, and simply waited for an opening to fly back home. She had to find a sense of direction on her own. How? Well, that was the impossible question. But at least the question had finally arrived.

* * *

The air in Maui that night was humid. It was a rare evening. Usually the trade winds came in to cool things off that time of year. She walked the beach in the dark for the very first time. She felt a bit vulnerable, a bit frightened. Not afraid of some intruder, but of the distant loneliness echoed from the stars, and the roar of unseen waves breaking.

Any second a wave could wash over her; she couldn't see them cresting.... She had to clear her head... and be careful not to wander off too deep in the wrong direction.

In a flash, *nothing* made sense. It was brilliant! It was the obliteration of an illusion. It shattered like crystal: Her job at the computer store. Her desire to buy a nice car someday. Her stubborn refusal to touch the piano that a friend had placed in her apartment before leaving for Europe – suddenly all those realities broke apart. And that man in the bar – last in her thoughts actually, was also part of the illusion she was ready to let go of -- though he was simply a catalyst, crystallizing, like the bird that flew free. She had no burning desire to see him again. But he was part of the escape dream.

Her mind became silent enough to hear a melody spinning around in the back of her head. It was nothing she had ever heard before. She allowed herself to acknowledge its beauty, rather than hating it for being there. Her mother always encouraged little Laney to sit and meander through her made-up songs on the piano to pass the time. The piano was like a babysitter, while dear mother was on the phone, her voice becoming loud sometimes with anger and frustration.

So Laney would play louder to drown her out. Emotions she didn't want to feel would strike chords within her – the way another person might have been struck by lightning, rather than soft starlight. Painful, sharp, transforming. She shut her ears *into* the music to drown out the screaming voice on the phone. She knew it was her father, silent, on the other end of the line, listening to her mother's anger on his lunch break from work. Years before the end, it had ended. She tried to love her songs instead of their craziness. But the craziness was overwhelming. When she took her hands off the keys, the craziness won.

Chapter 4

There are daily temptations we try not to succumb to. Sweets in the refrigerator -- the memory of taste usually overwhelms the fear of additives or added calories. Gossip we know could be hurtful, yet we sometimes speak the words aloud, usually for some unconscious social advantage.

We try to use our will against these things. We try to think about the ultimate negative consequences. In this way, Gabriel knew that if he succumbed to the vision of this woman in the bar he would lose so much -- far more than he could ever gain. Yet the odd thing is, when you meet someone like that, and they make you feel like that for no reason, you tend to agree to trade so much right on the spot for so very little in return: a dream -- a fantasy that leaves quickly, and leaves you emotionally weaker than before.

He looked in the mirror and saw her standing next to him: her blonde hair falling messily around her face, peach white skin, barely touched by the strength of the sun in this place; soft features -- nose, mouth -- but sharp blue eyes, eyes that saw something far more than a bird escaping. At least that's what he imagined in that moment. Her image was cloudy now, but he remembered her slender body, cute ripped jeans, a light yellow blouse that fell across her shoulders, or maybe it was white. She was standing next to him. For one moment. One quick half-smile made him feel -- too much.

Why? How could there be a connection without a word spoken? He tried to turn his mind to another subject. The

waves he surfed yesterday, ten, maybe twelve feet. The rush, like flying in a jet without the plane's body to protect him.

He was the jet, flying through a liquid explosion, using the deafening energy to propel him to safe waters. And the landing, perfect, with the ocean rushing salty clear around him, the hiss of foam applauding. What was her heritage with a face like that? American-Swedish-French-Irish-*Orphan*? He could sense another orphan sometimes. Although he couldn't know for sure. Light freckles around the nose, visible without makeup. No lipstick necessary for her, with those soft red rose lips. And the half-smile, still haunting.

He really had to stop this. His equilibrium was being affected. He wanted out of this dream. He was trampling on sacred painful ground, thinking of her. Because it brought back the images of when he was a freshman in high school twelve long years ago. Jaime Sutton, Tilden Park. There was no one around. They kissed. They touched each other, and again, further on, until their kisses built into a frenzy, unstoppable, unworldly, like wild animals eating madly, gulping, after a lifetime without food, pushing up against each other to get to the next bite of sustenance.

He melted so deeply into the feast he mistook it for holy water and swore to marry Jaime Sutton that day. But Jaime was not holy water. She turned cold and mocked him at school. Manna. Momentary, like all love he'd known. No continuum. His heart turned. His mind shut down. He realized no matter what he did, or how much he thought he was loved, he would always be turned back into an orphan. New promises arose from time to time: Hide your fractured heart. Crystallize it. Never reach out. Love, like everything

else, was just a cosmic joke. Learn to laugh at it all, or be mocked by it.

This girl he saw at the bar for some reason seemed as equally protective as he was. She never looked directly at him. Only one quick glance by mistake, after that bird took flight. Then she was gone. That strange small bird was about as keen to stick around as she was. So why should he care then? He had given up trying to capture and cage his dreams long ago.

Chapter 5

Gabriel

Another Friday night at the observatory. The most interesting person around here by far is Jimmy Hoy, the bartender. The thinnest bartender in Maui. A home boy. Not particularly talkative; not at all a father-confessor type. But not trying to ignore you either. He was an observer, like me. I often watched him watching the others, surveying the drunks who keep him busy every night, and who keep the owner of this place in business.

I gave in to my base impulses and curiosity. I described the girl to him. He is the only one in the bar that doesn't secretly seem to mind that I am not on my fourth drink. The others, seeing me with a sparkling water in my hands, think I'm a bit weird. I'm not tempted by their demanding Gods. They start feeling like they're reading *Playboy* around a priest.

Do you know her, I asked him? He doesn't know who I am talking about until I'm walking away. "Oh yeah," he says under his breath. "Wait a minute." I turn back to see if he's talking to me. "I think she come deliver a bill to Uncle."

I turn back and lean across the only empty seat at the bar. "I think she's the girl across the street, brah." Then he adds, "I think so, yeah?" – to simultaneously answer his own question, and question his own answer. A true philosopher.

The girl next door, so to speak. Next door to a bar!

So I walked outside to see if a light is on in the window across the street. The window was dark. She's out, with

someone? I feel relieved and enormously awful at the same time.

There are roads one should leave untraveled. That was what I told myself.

Chapter 6

Laney

I fell asleep at 8 pm and awoke four hours later thinking it was morning. I couldn't get back to sleep. The noise and lights at the bar across the street had nothing to do with it. I was just restless.

So I walked on the beach in the middle of the night again, as I had the night before, a strange new habit, wondering about how disjointed life had been in the last twenty four hours.

Until now I have been sleepwalking through endless work days; the same job for nearly two years. I didn't particularly hate the work, until tonight. Suddenly everything inside me is screaming "*I'm done.*"

What was tolerable before today suddenly seemed like an unbearable waste of time.... I have enough money to live for a year, maybe two if I stretch it. I can't worry about what happens after that.

As the thought rolled through me a wave broke outside the normal rhythm of the tide, almost knocking me over, soaking through my skirt up to the top of my legs. It was baptizing my decision to quit.

Chapter 7

This was a part of Laney that had surfaced many times before in her life, and would again in the near future.

She was someone who could make dramatic impulsive life changing decisions virtually on-the-spot – even though her daily demeanor was quiet, cautious, consistent.

The first time this happened she ran away from home at the age of sixteen – a decision that came to her in a dream the night before. She stayed with a girlfriend, at her parents' house, for two nights until suspicion arose from the parents. Then she moved on to the next friend's house. And the next. Then she borrowed enough money to get a fake I.D. so she could get a job in the city. Her new apartment was the size of two grand pianos. She worked long hours, living simply, wrestling with her past.

Just before she turned twenty-two, on a pure whim she decided to move to Maui. Why? Because it was an island far far away, and she had impulsively decided a few weeks before that she wanted to live on an island.

Soon after she arrived she went after a high paying job without having any experience – because she liked something about the ad in the newspaper. She was hired as a computer technician after telling them she had plenty of expertise to do the work. She showed up and began to quietly, unobtrusively, ask everyone around her what to do next, and how to learn more.

And now, she would quit that same job, using the same impulsive reasoning she used when she had decided to apply for it.

2 a.m. at the ocean – minutes after she decided to quit her job – melodies began forming in her head. A wave swept over her again, she went in deeper. Magic melodies lost from so many years ago were suddenly bursting upwards. She emerged from the water dream and ran as fast as she could. She ran past the moon, through the entrance of her apartment building. She ran to the piano she hadn't touched since the movers had put it in the far corner of an unused second bedroom long ago. She sat down out of breath, closed her eyes, and played, softly, so as not to awaken the neighbors. Tentatively, since so much had been forgotten.

Her hands were shaking. But she played for hours. Halting. Wrong chord, not the one she was hearing. No. Yes, that one. Stiff, stuttering, fingers like lead weights, haunting movements and thoughts being pried loose from a thirteen-year-old's bedroom back in Maryland.

Hours melted into an orange sliver of sunrise peeking through the window. She had never cared about these songs flowing through her, not for many years. She had heard them but turned them all away. She promised herself they were not worth capturing. Just let them go. But they wouldn't leave her.

Now she wanted to remember – not the songs themselves, but how to access the birthing of them. Slowly her fingers were finding their way further into the shapes and nuances that matched her instincts. Slowly her mind fell into the other world where these things happened. She knew it would take months, maybe even a whole year, to get all the way back to knowing the piano again, but she felt determined, unafraid, wandering wide-eyed down a long ago abandoned path.

Chapter 8

To change yourself is more than just a leap of faith. It takes more than a revelation. It takes daily acts of will. In a way it's like staying determined while peeling an onion, despite the tears and the pain, and the burning. Things have to burn themselves away inside over time, layer by layer.

Gabriel considered what it would be like to change himself into – what's the opposite of an orphan? Someone with the memory of parents? Maybe he could make them up – pick the two best parents he had met from all his friends in his childhood and secretly adopt them in his mind, an amalgam, make up vacations, and playing baseball games with the father, watching him play shortstop while he was tucked away in right field, and nights of talking about dreamy confusing things with his mom before bed.

Maybe these parents even had some kind of clue about faith, something that they might assure him has meaning.

Maybe they knew something important about life that he may not ever find without them.

Chapter 9

Gabriel

There was a row of mansions long ago – they were eventually turned into frat houses, flowing down a long wide road near the university. Blue roofs, white columns, white stucco, two or three stories. They had to be six thousand square feet inside. I never knew for sure, I never got invited in. But I dreamed of being part of that culture one day.

Any time I could escape the flat empty street we lived on the north side of town and ride my bike out of my neighborhood I found myself pedaling towards that row of mansions. Sometimes the college kids would be out and about. I envied their lives. I envied the fact that they were accepted at a school as prestigious as Berkeley. They seemed happy but serious. Arms folded, laughing at something someone said. The backpacks they carried were weighed down with books about chemistry, math, physics, all the lessons of the world they were challenged to absorb. Their life seemed free of everything else. Falling in love for a winter, partying on weekends. Friendships made for a semester. I ached for those things.

I was a loner, living in an old dreary neighborhood with old dreary adopted parents who knew that genetically they had no responsibility if things turned out wrong for me. Their attempts to tell me or teach me anything only went so far – to the point where they would throw up their hands as if to say, whatever, he's not really my kid. We have no control over the outcome. We tried to love him, long ago.

Now that he's a teen we're just feeding him so he stays alive, then he's on his own, doing whatever he does alone in his room, or going out on his bike to do whatever these kinds of out-of-control boys do. If we were his real parents we wouldn't stand for this, but there's nothing we can do with this one. There's nothing we can do. He'll be gone in a few years. Then it will be over. He knows that too.

The adopted grandparents and uncles and cousins were even worse. They made as little eye contact with me as possible at Christmas, or during a summer weekend in Lake Tahoe – a family reunion. They would reluctantly show up, smiling, hugging, shaking hands, right over the top of me, as if I were a temporary wall that would evaporate as they came closer and closer together.

My adopted mother's sister told me my real parents were two straight-edged kids from Berkeley High. "Straight-edged" is a relative term when you go to Berkeley High, but I guess that meant they weren't full-on drug addicts.

They named me Gabriel – which according to old religious texts means "messenger." Then they gave me up for adoption. Like putting a note in a bottle and tossing it into the sea. I guess they allowed themselves to get spiritual about it for a day or two. But then they came to the conclusion that the message was for someone else.

Chapter 10

Laney

Music is an infinite road that widens as you travel it. The mind can never grasp the entirety of what's before it, the hands cannot do everything the mind hears. The changes are as endless as sun rays, and each beam holds a thousand songs.

The sunset over the water – orange streaks, green undertones, clouds dispersing like the smearing of a watercolor. It was Saturday evening. I had woken up only a few hours earlier – my sleep pattern had been turned upside down from the nocturnal beach wanderings. But I had made some clear decisions.

One: I was a musician, a songwriter long ago – it was obvious when I was ten, and even younger, that's what life had in store for me. My mother created a long cold parenthesis in the story. It took me until now to know that she wasn't a part of my musical life, but instead was just a rip in the dimensional fabric of who I really was. I have backspaced now, and in an instant, on an evening walk, immersed in water – poof – a baptism back into my self. She's not going to come between me and my songs anymore.

Two: Work was an annoying necessity for a few years, and will be again someday when my money runs out. But for now, I'll live on what I've saved and just work on my music. I can always get another job. I can't buy *time*, or the will to create. Since the will is here, and I can afford to let it happen,

I will. Passion, not this promise, will drive it. I don't need to make promises to myself. It just is.

Three: I want to rely on my instincts more, whether they are right or wrong. Because instincts take me into another reality. A reality far removed from clock and calendar reality. The physical world of work and money and being logical doesn't work for me. It just drains me. So it's time to give another reality a chance.

Four: If this whole evolution of myself turns into a disaster, so what? It will just be a parallel disaster to the life I created for myself before today. I have to take a leap of faith. I have nothing to lose.

Five: No more listing things like this. I am not a computer tech any more. I am a freelance songwriter now. I don't have to think in chronic-logical order. Life should be more like a diary of dreams than an outline of goals and successes and failures.

Therefore, there's no number **Six**, even though numbers can go on infinitely, my number system falls silent at the end of number Five. There's just me now.

Chapter 11

Gabriel

The sacred geometry of this planet keeps all things interconnected in a web of beautiful colors. Held together with the glue of gravity and atmosphere.

One has to pass five or six planets from here before you get to the orphans. Out there in the Kuiper belt. The distant outliers, too many to name, living in their long quiet orbits.

For a while I refused to think about her anymore. But the air got so thin and cold it almost destroyed me. That's when I started thinking about sacred geometry and interconnectedness.

Chapter 12

His adopted parents once thought their thin handsome black-haired boy with the soulful brown eyes might become a writer. His thoughts were out of the ordinary. He was quirky, funny, saw things in a lighthearted but unnervingly direct way.

Of course, growing up in Berkeley one was encouraged to seek *out of the ordinary*. And not knowing your real mother and father will also certainly pull you off the cultural grid. So he had a lot going for him in that way. Yes, when seen through the eyes of an optimist he had quite a good start as a writer, especially when it came to understanding the lonely brutal things all writers have to know before they write their first decent sentence.

While going to UC Berkeley, the school he had targeted since his freshman year in high school – he hit a crossroads. Part of him wanted to enter the world of politics – so richly complex and active at this school, and in the city itself.

But another part of him wanted to immerse himself in the study of spirituality. Not religion, which held no interest for him, but spirituality.

The obvious problem was that there were no jobs being offered in the “spirituality without religion” field. But it seemed to him that without knowing what the real game behind “being here” was, there was not much point in choosing a profession.

As always, nothing quite made sense.

Chapter 13

Gabriel

At UC Berkeley I evolved from political activist to spiritual de-activist, and then devolved further in my junior year until at last, I became a mathematician, hoping someday to become a math professor. I could get passionate about math because it was cold and safe. I could feel passionate about things that were cold and safe. I could teach it, and torture my students with thought-puzzles, like I was tortured. Make them stay up groggy-eyed for two or three days in a row chasing equations back through the deepest recesses of their minds until they fall apart like smoke rings. Coffee and drugs won't get them back. Sleep makes you forget the roads down which you found the errors, so that upon waking you're destined to travel far down those roads all over again until you fall into the same abyss as last time, or maybe a parallel one.

Astrophysics seemed to live quite a paradox: a mathematical journey to the furthest physical distances from your mind, while never being able to escape your mind. I took a number of courses in astrophysics.

I worked hard at keeping my grades up at UC, drinking just enough to get into one of those frat houses I used to bicycle to years before — they were quite messy inside. Most of the occupants were also messy inside, like me. I kept looking for real friends — the ones with the backpacks full of books about science, and how they (we) were going to change the world once we'd figured it out. But I guess times had changed. Or reality had set in, for all of us.

I certainly met my share of smart young females that were attracted to my oddness, and my natural aversion to getting involved too quickly. It was a wonderfully unique experience for a bright attractive Berkeley girl -- to get a chance to play seductress to a shy not half-bad looking spiritual-minded math geek.

I often allowed myself to play the counterpart to their fantasies. But I tried to keep my heart aligned to deeper things. No one was going to be allowed to touch the place in me that Jaime Sutton touched at Tilden Park – she created my first religious experience – a sensual church with an innocent stained glass heart smashed into kaleidoscopic fragments. I realized this was nothing unique to love. But one thing was clear to me -- I was not about to start a new religion any time soon.

I kept repeating to myself that I was not good enough, and that orphans are destined to repeat lonely disconnected nightmares over and over.

I wrote about Jaime, but only about the beauty, the silkiness of her skin as my skin touched hers, the chemical combustion, etcetera. I couldn't find it in me to be angry. But when I wasn't in control of my thoughts by writing them down the truth erupted -- devastation, desolation, the de-evolution of love, open-heart surgery with no anesthesia – this was just not going to happen to me again.

“Math can launch space ships.... Can they someday find the way to God -- that initial spark billions of universes before ours, one mysterious equation at a time?” (These are the kinds of silly questions I asked myself while trying to find a reason to stay up all night to pass a final exam in linear algebra.)

The paradox of searching for God and pondering spiritual questions without allowing myself to actually feel love for anything human didn't go unnoticed by me. At a certain point it made me smile to think that only numbers really mattered.

Chapter 14

Laney

I faxed him. I faxed my boss that I wouldn't be in on Monday, or ever again, actually. I was not giving them two weeks' notice, because if I came into the store again for even one minute the senselessness would overwhelm me.

I had hovered over little blinking boxes for two years trying to force electricity to do my bidding. I guess I half hoped a song would come out of one of them if I pressed the keyboard in a certain way. I was perversely glad when it didn't happen.

I ended my resignation letter by saying -- Have a nice virtual life.

I hereby declare that laptops, desktops, circuit boards, silicon chips, cardboard boxes, and Styrofoam shells, are forevermore extinct in my universe. Over the course of a single weekend they have become prehistoric. I want to find my natural rhythm. I have turned my technologically trapped mind into soft rain.

Chapter 15

She allowed herself to travel through inner rain. Storms with clues in the clouds. This is what Laney did each night; writing song after song.

The music framed a backdrop for the lyrics, with the lighting perfectly placed on the stage, with costumes and characters at the ready, until the script created itself. Words birthed from melodies, a story is born.

The songs were not always completed right away. Lyrics lines were changed or corrected, getting them more aligned to the mood, or the heart of the story. But the music never needed changing. It was simply available to her as a completed piece, in a way very few musicians could ever imagine. This is what was gifted to her. It never left her, even after she tried to banish it from her life.

Chapter 16

Gabriel had been going to Sunny's Bar for about a year almost every Friday night, for just a few hours. He would observe and then write about the characters coming and going. These were practice sketches.

Back home he was writing a book that had no ending and no beginning. It wasn't a diary or a journal because very little of it was true. But it wasn't a novel because he had no idea if it would ever congeal into a story. It was like a fantasy journal. Prose poems were often birthed from snippets of things he overheard strangers say.

Sunny's Bar was only three blocks from his apartment. The exterior of this friendly but dingy pub had become a familiar signpost on his walks to and from the beach. On Friday nights he entered the interior; it became his study. He liked to write amidst the hubbub and the absurdities. If some woman happened to spot him writing and was curious enough to ask him what he was working on, that would certainly not have been unwelcomed. But he was not about to introduce himself to any of the women that came in there on a typical night – mostly tourists from all over the world. Sometimes a particular woman seemed interesting to him. But he had no inviting opening line to lure anyone, nor did he have a burning interest to invent a line. This wasn't going to be the way he would meet the great love of his life. Because there wasn't going to be one. He was happy being an orphan monk living on a distant island.

But that one, the girl who lived across the street....

So this very evening he left his favorite table near the window and walked past her apartment building again – the one with windows framed in blue and green; with white stucco in need of new paint. A Spanish roofline. A place tourists passed by every day but never noticed.

Maybe she would be rushing through the front door with a bag of groceries and he could say hello, acting as if it were a chance meeting. Or she would be leaving to go for an evening beach walk.

Then something unexpected happened – the faint sound of a piano being played altered his attention. It was coming from the back of the building. He stood near the entranceway, leaning casually against a wall secretly waiting for her, grateful for the background music, which he could only hear if he strained to do so. People walking by talking to each other didn't notice the music. New silver rent-a-cars slowly gliding down the two-lane street with their windows open only heard the sound of the waves breaking on the beach at the north end of the bar.

But as the cars dissolved away and the street became empty again the sound of this beautiful music continued.

He tried to keep his focus on this chance meeting he had set up by casually standing there, but as time went by the music captured him more and more until he left his post, walked around the back, through a dirty alleyway, and got closer to the sound. Then closer still, right under the window. He heard a voice singing over the music. It was a beautiful voice, but it seemed more interested in telling a story than sounding like a trained vocalist. All the more alluring. The melodies of the songs were haunting; they moved over the chords as improbably as the threading of a

moving needle – perfectly right but constantly surprising, with something brooding that created a hole in his stomach. Everything kept moving in unexpected directions. He was listening to someone with great talent, and he knew it had to be her. It couldn't be anyone else. The song sounded like she looked; like the nearly singable beauty he had seen in her face.

Chapter 17

Laney had a dream the night before they first met. She was swimming in a natural pool. She didn't want anyone to disturb her. She took off her clothes and dove in – something she would only have done in a wild dream. It was quiet, peaceful. Her feet were touching the bottom of the water, toes touching flat rocks that kept her balanced and safe with her head above the surface.

In the distance she saw a rainbow, sourced by a huge waterfall; it was splaying out of the falls like a fan. She decided to swim a little closer. But as soon as she did she felt an undertow pulling her faster toward the falls than she would have liked. It pulled her into a second pool where the falls were dropping from an incredible height; it looked like the top of the falls ascended a mile into the air. The rainbow was far more intense now. Glowing. Brilliant. And the noise from the waterfall became almost unbearably loud.

She was pulled still closer by the undertow until she found herself right underneath the water. Sound deafening. The power of the water clawed at her naked body. But she didn't try to escape the pull, or the noise. She felt oddly free. She was at the end. She looked up in wonder at the stunning scene above her. A waterfall a mile high. But then she realized she was in danger. Survival instincts jarred her.

She tried to swim back to the calmer water but couldn't break free of the pull. She tried everything – diving under and pushing forward with her arms, then resurfacing and kicking furiously with her legs. But the undertow was too strong. She looked up at the rainbow. It was gorgeous,

frightening, blindingly bright, half solid, half mist. Half real, half illusion. She tried to breathe but couldn't now. The water was taking over – becoming her.

She woke up in a cold sweat. So glad it was a dream. So glad she was alive. She paced the floor for over an hour trying to calm down.

Then she turned on the lights and wrapped herself in her blankets as if she had the flu. Her breathing slowed but the chills continued. She searched for an answer, the message the dream was trying to tell her. But there was nothing. Just herself. Coming back to herself from far away.

She began to rock and rock, until finally she cried out: “I didn't actually drown. And it's too beautiful here for me to be afraid anymore.”

Then a strange thought came to her – one of the biggest revelations she had ever experienced – even though it would not, could not, remain a permanent understanding.

She sat still, silent, stunned: Even if you had drowned, even if you had *died*, the fact is – *there's nothing to worry about!*

Death, is *nothing*.

“It's all just a dream... there's nothing to worry about,” she quietly said out loud.

Repeating these ten words to herself over and over for a long time, she finally fell back asleep.

Chapter 18

Two days after standing underneath Laney's window he decided to take a walk on the beach in town. He thought about going to Ho'okipa that morning to surf, but he had surfed some big waves the day before. His body was still a bit beat up. Plus, of course, he held a small secret hope.... He walked past the bar, glancing over at the apartment across the way. Nothing. No one.

The entrance to the beach was next to Sunny's Bar. Two dogs were being washed off in the outdoor public shower, blocking everyone's way. The owners seemed to think it was so very cute. Everyone else looked impatient, waiting their turn to wash the sand off their feet.

He decided to avoid the scene by jumping down onto the sand from the grass above. It was only about three feet down. He found a landing spot, jumped, and landed smoothly, legs bending, then standing as if he just caught a wave on his board.

He looked around, shading his eyes a bit from the sun glaring off the white sand. She was laying down on a blanket about twenty-five yards away, reading a book. He recognized her immediately. She was wearing a dark blue bikini. A thin white blouse lay beside her. She would never remember him. He wasn't ready for this. But she would just ignore him as he walked past her, so nervousness was uncalled for.

But then he thought—here is a crossroads. What kind of life do you want? The one that walks past her, or the one that takes a leap? One good reason not to take the leap: they

had met for fifteen seconds one evening and she never said a word to him.

She looked up at him as he came closer, her hand shielding the sun from her eyes.

“Birds for sale,” he said smiling, hoping she would have some memory of the time. If not, he was going to sound quite insane.

He couldn’t read her. She had no immediate response.

“Remember me?” he said a bit more quietly.

“Oddly, yes,” she smiled. He was more handsome than she remembered. His torso was long and thin, but very strong. His legs were sturdy. Nice smile; smooth dark features, soft brown eyes, curls of dark hair uncombed. His smile seemed genuine; confident, like that night. His face looked somewhat trustable.

This is how she gauged things, by safety and trust most of all.

“I was going to take a walk to see where the beach cuts off today. Want to come?”

“The cut-off comes just past the wooden bridge,” she responded.

He nodded.

“... I walked it yesterday,” she added.

“Well, thanks for that. I guess I can just go home now,” he laughed.

“Sorry,” she smiled back. She knew what she said was distancing. A way to make him uncomfortable. “Plus I’m very busy,” she said, “I was reading an important book about Lennon – John Lennon, until a crazy bird salesman interrupted me.”

He couldn't read her. "And after that, I was scheduled to take a nap. So...."

"Well, I could sufficiently bore you to sleep if you walk with me – a walking nap. I'm like a human sedative."

"I know the type. I have the feeling you're not that type."

She brushed a bit of sand off the front of her legs, "I'll go part way with you. But I need to be back soon. I'm meeting a friend for lunch...."

Chapter 19

Gabriel

The waves came up gently over our feet as we walked. We headed north.

The sand on this beach – Keawakapu – is marble white, like cloudsalt, crushed down to the finest granular equations, which the sea then rearranges by the hour, like quarks in a liquid electron accelerator.

I was trying to think of something to say to her, but nothing came. I was nervous, as if I knew that every word could be the beginning or the end of something. An accelerator of another kind.

“So I think you might be a musician,” I said as I pulled some seawater up to my face to cool myself.

“How in the world would you know that?” she said.

“The bartender told me you lived across the street, and I heard a piano playing from an open window the other night during a walk. It sounded like you. Like what I remembered of you, anyway. Am I right?”

She just found out that I had asked the bartender about her. But she didn’t pursue it. “Your ears are quite visually perceptive,” is all she responded.

“So what do you do when you’re not selling birds?”

“For work? I teach surfing on the side. But my real work is, I guess you could say, I’m a freelance spiritual scientist.”

She laughed aloud, “Now that’s a job I’ve never heard of.”

A wave brushed over us, harder than the others, and gently buckled our knees. We stumbled a bit before it receded.

“Science breaks things down into fragments in order to understand the whole.... Spirituality searches for the unity of things in order to make sense of the details. So my career is a little oxymoronic.”

“And who pays for you to do all this unified kind of thinking, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“No one.”

“Ah, same with my music. I guess we’re actually both bums when it comes right down to it.”

“Dreamers,” I corrected her.

“Oh? What’s the difference?”

“Well, I think dreamers are addicted to their dream, and not to their pain. Dreamers want to remember, not forget.”

“Nice philosophy. I’ll try to remember more often.”

“I’ll try to forget less.” I added. “But I do make money from teaching surfing, mostly to tourists, over at The Cove. It’s fun most of the time.”

“Surfing! Sounds like fun *all* the time.”

“Do you surf?”

“Never tried.”

“Well, come down sometime. I’ll take you out.”

In front of us we could see rain falling in the distance in vertical gray bands, curved by the wind. I stole a glance at her face, soft ghostly sunlight seemed to emanate from her cheeks and the corners of her mouth. Cumulus clouds cascaded out into the ocean from Mount Haleakala. They framed her. They billowed and curled into designs of dragon

heads and gray locomotives and wild running animals as they shape-shifted across the sky.

"Okay, so what's your name?" she asked without looking at me.

"Gabe." I was feeling the effects of some spell I had put on myself. The fantasy was better without saying my name. It felt too real.

"Short for Gabriel?"

I nodded.

"Gabriel was the messenger in the Bible, you know?" she said with an impish smirk.

"Yes. But I shortened it to Gabe because I'm more of a mess than a messenger."

She laughed.

"And your name is?"

She paused for effect, or out of some similar reluctance.

"Laney."

"Short for Elaine?"

"No. I was just named Laney."

"I remember the name 'Laney,' from long ago," I was searching my brain, hard to pull up the time and place....

"Oh yeah, there was a character in a book I once read whose name was Laney."

The book is called *Childwold*. Joyce Carol Oates," she interrupted.

I nodded.

"I was named after that Laney. But I didn't read the book."

Something about the way she said it, I decided not to ask why.

As we walked further north the rain bands shifted towards us until we were caught in a downpour. Kihei's first rain in many months.

We decided to take a quick swim since we were already wet. She dove under the water, away from me. She resurfaced with the water hardly breaking around her. I wanted to swim over to where she was but I still couldn't read her. I chose caution. I kept to myself. The rain put a visual static between us like the lines on a T.V. that couldn't quite get a fix on the channel.

We walked a bit further but were forced to turn around when the beach ended prematurely at the wooden bridge, just where she said it would.

The lava rocks, the surging tides, and the wind often conspire to cut off access to the rest of the beach for weeks after strong tides.

As we walked back towards where we met the sun returned and began to dry us. We saw the rows of windmills in the distance, perched atop the West Maui mountains, standing in a bright ascending line of white, like saluting ghosts. Flag poles that needed no flags. They were their own proud anthemic statement. Birthing a kind of electrical anarchy.

The sand was gray now, rain saturated, all footprints wiped clean. To the east, the mountain was blurry from fog, like frosting smothering a tall green cake.

When we got to her blanket it was rain drenched, along with her blouse and the book she was reading. Standing on the blanket was a white sea bird, looking straight at us as we approached.

“Are you selling this one to me? Or is it a gift?” she asked.

We both knew it was a strange coincidence. Stranger still, as we approached the bird it continued to hold its ground.

“Okay,” Laney quietly said to the bird, “how much do you want for the wet blanket?”

The bird finally flew off.

I found myself standing right next to her, so close we were almost touching. She seemed not to notice, or care. Her skin was flecked with rain drops. Each drop was silver clear, holding on as if fearing a great fall. Not wanting to leave her.

I carried her water-logged blanket across the street to her apartment entrance. When we got to the front steps she took it from my arms. “I liked the rain.”

“Me too.”

I began to say more, but she stepped into the archway, and with a quick wave goodbye the door closed behind her.

Chapter 20

“There is patience, and there is enthusiasm. The young usually have enthusiasm but not a lot of patience. The old usually have patience but not a lot of enthusiasm. Having both leads to....” Gabe crossed it out. There was something missing.

He looked for distractions. His writing seemed to be missing the enthusiasm and patience he was championing. He hadn't brought her into the storyline yet. He wasn't sure if she had a place there.

He didn't like this feeling of a life incomplete, *suddenly* incomplete! If this is what spending time with her left him with, why desire it?

He sat down on a mat in his sparsely furnished room and began to meditate, as he did most days. But silence was even harder to come by than usual. Reasons arose, good reasons, why he shouldn't want another meeting with her to happen. Even if it evolved into what he thought he wanted, his writing might suffer from a lack of introspection. And wasn't that more important to him? The real fear was he might get to the point where emotionally there was no turning back, and then she could just walk away, like she did after their beach walk, without reason or logic. Not even a proper ending – as if you're flying through the sky, arms spread like wings against the open air, and suddenly you awaken to the truth – the illusion of wings – and you drop through the atmosphere like a meteor.

But after all the fearful visions played themselves out in his head, the only conclusion his inner voice came up with was “Yes.”

His reverie was broken by the ring tone of his cell phone. He rarely took his cell phone outside the house. There was no need. Calls were rare. Few people knew the number.

He looked at the caller I.D. and smiled. It was his only true friend, which is one more friend than a loner technically needs. His name was Rob McClellan. They had worked together as professors at a small community college in Santa Cruz called Cabrillo, until Gabe was laid off because of a lack of funding.

They spoke about Maui, how lucky Gabe was to be living there. Rob, who taught molecular biology, began by telling Gabe about this semester’s class, the worst group of students he'd ever had. Some funny stories followed.

One was about a student who he never saw without headphones on. Even in class. Rob stopped his lecture and walked right up to his desk and stood there, but the boy was oblivious. Finally the boy looked up and slid one phone halfway off of his ear.

“What are you listening to?” Rob asked. He thought he might impress the kid, so he said, “Incubus? Nirvana? Primus?”

“No,” he muttered.

“I’m waiting. Tell me.”

“It’s my... economics lecture.”

“Well that’s great. But this is a molecular biology class.”

“I know, I’m taping it on my iPhone so I can listen to it later,” the kid says.

“Well, maybe I’m not understanding something here. But I think all it would take for you to permanently catch up would be for you to start the day without recording the first class. Just take your headphones off and actually listen to the live feed. You think?”

“Maybe,” he says, but the look in his eyes were saying that I just didn't understand his way was better.

And then Rob looked around and realized all the other kids agreed that the headphone strategy might actually work better.

Gabe said, “Maybe professors should just be hired to make YouTube videos. One video for each lecture in the semester. Maybe you're wasting your time standing there giving them 'the live feed.' In fact, maybe universities are just becoming an expensive scam outside the actual research going on there. The whole classroom and campus thing is becoming outdated.”

The subject switched to surfing lessons, and how Gabriel was surviving financially. Gabe said it was all good. He was happy, so don't worry about that. But he was secretly deeply moved that Rob cared to ask.

Actually, Rob admired the way Gabe was choosing to live his life. Rob called Gabe a “free radical,” and occasionally used other biological terms when addressing him, like, “Genome Man,” which was Rob’s way of saying he thought Gabe had his own inner set of instructions.

Rob abruptly changed the subject, focusing in on the reason for his call, “So Gabe, something really strange

happened to me. Since you are my spiritual Petri dish, and as you know I'm a proud non-believer, I want to run it by you. I was invited by a friend to see a woman who was apparently an Indian saint. Normally I would have said something cynical about it and talked about how my mother was a saint too, according to my mother, but the friend who told me about this was also quite beautiful, so I let her keep talking. She said this Indian lady had just been honored by the U.N. for starting charities around the world. Great. Nice. She's a true humanitarian. Okay, fine. I have nothing cynical to say about humanitarians, or vegetarians, or pescatarians. Everybody gets to do their thing. More meat for me but each to his own.

"But one morning at her apartment a few weeks later I asked how her Indian saint was doing lately, and she showed me a film clip and at first I was like, I hope nobody sees me watching this. But then I shut up for a second and I became a little... I can't believe I'm saying this, but... you know what this lady does every day, Gabe? *She hugs people!* She hugs people for free, every day, for like 18 hours a day, – all over the world!"

"Does she ever play Cupid when she hugs?"

"...Cupid?"

"I'm thinking she can hug this girl I met and maybe sprinkle a little fairy dust on her."

"You met a girl? Tell me."

"Half a girl."

"Oh shit...you mean?"

"No! I mean she's half fantasy. A walk on the beach was real, but the rest is in my head."

"Sounds romantic! Coming from you, that's a new feeling."

"I don't know. But go on and tell me more about the Indian lady, and the girl who told you about her."

"Okay, so she hugs people, sometimes all day and night without a break, and she's been doing this for like thirty straight years! I'm not kidding. She hardly sleeps. And then this girl tells me that in the U.S. seeing her is like attending a mini-Woodstock. A big party. Lots of music. That was a big reason why I went... hanging out with a beautiful girl with live music, letting her show me around."

"Wait a minute, did you two hook up?"

"Maybe! But that's not the point."

"Really?"

"Don't throw me off track, man! I want to stay with my petri dish experiment here. So, yes, I was definitely impressed with the saint. The hug I got was hard to describe. I kind of got that she was able to get everyone there into this calm compassionate little bubble. Ten thousand people, all hanging out in the same calm happy place."

Gabe responded, "Sounds like you may have had an actual metaphysical experience. *Congratulations!* You are no longer a spiritual virgin!"

"As a molecular biologist I can't even get to the bottom of the *observable* world, so as far as the 'other world' is concerned, I'm deaf, blind and dumb as mud, and always will be. But that's why I'm calling you – this is the wild part – one of her swamis is going to be in Maui in about a month. I met him. We only talked for a minute. But I have to say, he was a pretty impressive guy. And I thought since he'd be in your neck of the woods, you might be interested

in meeting him. Then you can report back to me — let me know if he has anything profound to say. You'd be my spiritual scout."

"I'm not much of a fan of traveling Swamis. You know, I'm more of a spiritual loner."

"Well okay, but I'm just saying, here's your chance to ask any questions you want to a *swami*! I've heard him speak. He's not your run-of-the-mill swami who wants your money and your girlfriend.... I'd join you if I wasn't teaching. But I live in the real world, hanging out with molecules and one-celled creatures, and students who are sometimes like two-celled creatures. Anyway Gabe, if I could somehow set up a one-on-one meeting with you and him, instead of you having to attend some kind of group event, would you be interested?"

Gabe laughed, "How are you going to pull that off?"

"I'm not saying I can. I'm saying *if* I can. All you have to do is sit back and ask your questions. *Any* questions!"

"Maybe, probably."

Gabe didn't like to commit to things right away. But as soon as he got off the phone a very good first question came to mind.

Chapter 21

Laney

I was a little unraveled when I got back to the apartment. I sat down at the piano but I wasn't ready to play yet. He was different. He wasn't the typical guy. I never want to be somebody's "girlfriend." My mother was angry that my dad tried to domesticate her – into a mother, a housewife, a wife in bed. She wouldn't stand for it. So she got a job that had her on the road a lot.

This is how insanely naïve my father was – my mother was having affairs. But first, as a form of foreplay, she would call him from the hotel she was staying at, after a day of boring meetings selling employee insurance to bored CEOs, and for fifteen minutes she'd complain to my father about the day, tell him about how awful her work was, yell at him for something he would say, or wouldn't say but should have, and then yawn and say goodnight.

The road was tough, she would say. She hated the cheap hotels, nothing good was ever on TV, she would say. How's the kid, she would say.

Some day she wasn't going to work anymore, as soon as the house was paid off.

And the next day he'd go to work and ask for a raise. Maybe they could pay the house off a little sooner that way.

Meanwhile, five minutes after she hangs up she gives the all-clear, perhaps by hanging her blouse out the window as a signal, or knocking on the wall of an adjacent room... her boss of five years comes back into the room with a new pack of Marlboros. He laughs. They laugh. They kiss...

As soon as I start thinking about our walk on the beach, I start thinking about *her*. As I always do whenever something fanciful and improbable happens.

I shake off the cobwebs and go back to the cold truth about people.

But this new person, Gabe, he didn't seem to be faking, I think he's not faking his life. But I can't be sure.

On the beach walk he was searching me out from the inside—I could feel that. I have no idea where he lives, or if I'll see him again—because there's no way I'd ever go to the bar just to see if he was there. It would be embarrassing if he wasn't. And more embarrassing if he was. Then again, it's kind of exciting to not know if I'll see him again.

Why should I keep shutting down? Laney, aren't you sick of this? Sick of having ghosts dead end this parallel life you could be living, if you were to try just a little? They've blinded you for so long, the memories, frightening stories cloaked in white fog from long ago, scaring you like you were still a thirteen-year-old on Halloween, trapped between two very specific ghosts, a mommy ghost and a daddy ghost. Trick or treat. And now you're screaming for help but nothing comes out of your mouth. A silent scream to be felt but not heard. The sound waves disappear as soon as they touch the sky.

They can make the sound of my voice come alive with a wave of their thin ghostly arms. But they never do.

Yet here's this guy, who is quite real, not like a ghost at all. I doubt he's a trickster, I don't think he's a pathological liar – an actual good person, maybe, who will certainly not be knocking on your door any time soon, because he's just

not like that— who might be someone who could help drag you out of the white arctic world you've live in and toss you right up into some sunshine, warmth, where you've never allowed anyone to take you.

I'm going to let fate take a hand in this. I could so easily short-circuit his interest if we met again by being cold, unreachable, like I typically am. So easy for me to be that way, cynical about the outcome before anything even begins.

If I see him again, if our paths cross again by chance, I just might leap *into* the rainbow dream— that rainbow waterfall from so long ago. Swimming, swimming in that cold water. Pulled by the undertow, scared, amazed, heart racing from the power of the water pouring down from high above me, Laney, there's no way to get to real life by pulling back. No way to get there by hiding out, or swimming back to shore.

If I see him again then we'll see. We'll see if I swim to that place where there's nothing but the waterfall and stars above me. We'll see if I have the strength to hold myself there, or if I'm just another dreamer who drowns before the dream ends.

Chapter 22

Gabriel

I decided I had nothing to lose. I called Rob and told him that if he could set up a one-on-one meeting with “The Swami,” I’d do it. I’d come up with some questions and report back to him. In the past I had some pretty lame experiences trying to get answers from traveling gurus and expert authors and religious scholars teaching at colleges. But I still wanted to believe answers might possibly exist in some form. I respected Rob’s judgment, exactly because he was always so cynical. And I did have a good opening question. If the swami couldn’t answer that one, there would be no need to go on.

After leaving a voice mail letting Rob know I was onboard I decided to go for a late afternoon walk then pick up some food for dinner. Maybe I’d take a swim first.

As I walked out the front door my eyes were bombarded with brightness – the sky was flashlight yellow as the evening sun reflected off of the water. I descended the steps of my apartment just as she was walking by carrying a small bag of groceries in her arms.

She slowed her pace when she saw me. She smiled, hesitating, looking a bit distracted.

“Hi again,” was all I could come up with.

Her features looked softer, more vulnerable than when we had walked on the beach.

“Imagine meeting *you* here,” she said finally.

“Well, I live here.”

“Oh!” she looked at the rounded alcove behind me.

“Not all of it. Just one very small room....”

“Okay. Well, were you about to go somewhere?”

I shook my head, “Not really. I was just standing here.”

She was wearing beige shorts and a dark blue button-down sleeveless shirt. The blue accentuated the color of her eyes, though she didn't seem to be the kind of dresser who would care about those kinds of things. Her eyes looked like two Earths from outer space. I was observing her from the moon. She was half-smiling, but there was also a nervousness I hadn't seen before. I thought perhaps I was making her feel uncomfortable and she was trying to find a way to say goodbye.

She hesitated for a moment longer, then she walked up to me, and past me. “Which one is yours? *That* one?”

She was looking through the glass front door that led to the hallway.

“No. A crazy lady lives in that one.”

“My room is around that dark corner and all the way to the back on the left.”

“Oh. Sounds scary.”

“Yeah, I shiver with fear every time I come home. But actually, I was going to go back inside to get my sunglasses. Wanna come in for a minute?”

“No.... Maybe....”

“Oh, well that's okay.... Maybe I'll see you....”

She shifted her grocery bag to her left hand and opened the door that led to the hall and went in.

I searched around for my key. My cargo shorts had ten pockets. She followed me in while I search for my sunnies.

She put her grocery bag down on the table then took a long deep breath and exhaled as if she'd just come up from exploring deep waters.

She went over to the old beat-up table I used for a writing desk and looked beyond it, out my window, then quickly inspected the wet suit in my closet, the surf board in the corner, papers scattered on the table. Then she said to me, "You live like you look."

"I look like a total mess?" I looked around the room then tucked in my tee-shirt.

"Yes," she said seriously.

I nodded.

"You surf, you write with notes and papers all over the place. It seems like you're able to let go of things pretty easily and just let things be."

"Not so sure about that. Not sure anyone can do that."

She understood, knowing nothing was that simple. "Well maybe that's what you're learning to do anyway," she added.

I picked up my sunglasses and was ready to leave but she sat down at the table. I offered her something to drink. We sipped cold sparkling water from plastic cups – an orphan-vagabond's version of family china. Because I felt oddly luxurious with her sitting there with me.

We talked about little things, careful not to pry too far. Not once could we look into each other's eyes without looking quickly away.

She sighed heavily again and seemed distracted. I couldn't tell if she was nervous or bored.

"Are you okay?"

She put her hands over her eyes and breathed deeply again, then again, almost hyperventilating.

I began to reach my hand toward hers out of concern, but she moved it abruptly and pushed her hair away from her face. "This is the stupidest thing I've ever done." Her voice was shaking.

"Being here?"

"No."

She pushed herself away from the table suddenly, stood up, and moved away from where I was sitting.

"What's stupid about it?" I assumed she was going to leave because she realized she shouldn't be here. The typical ending to a Gabriel story.

"It's a promise I made to myself," she said. "In fact, I'd just been thinking about it this morning. I was having quite a talk with myself. I was actually wondering how to get over this next small step in my life that I can never seem to take. And that if I happened to run into you today, I promised myself..."

I looked at her, puzzled.

"Then I did... run into you."

Then she did the most improbable thing – she began to unbutton the ten little buttons of her shirt. Her shirt fell open half way, and she froze there.

Was she was about to cry, or about to laugh? Sea blue eyes staring through me, glistening, glowing, wild with fear.

I started to walk toward her to comfort her but she put her hand out to stop me.

"I've never done this before," she said. "I've never done *anything* before, for that matter."

Her voice trailed off. "I know you don't believe me." She tried to smile but it came out a little crooked because of tears forming.

"Anything...?"

"Actually. Yes. I've never even kissed anyone, ever. Not since I was twelve. So that could put a crimp in my overall plans. Because I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing.... And I'm not sure you're too thrilled about it either."

"No, it doesn't make any difference. I just want you to be here."

I waited. My heart was pounding but I tried to stay outwardly calm. Like when you're surfing and you see a rogue wave coming at you from way out there in the loneliness. A twenty footer rising high above you, and you know you don't have time to escape. You have to relax as the thunderous thing comes closer, building itself higher, you have to take a deep breath in. And you know you have to abandon the board and dive under and stay calm to survive.

She nodded slowly, her thoughts flickering across her face. "You can come here now. But don't touch me."

I walked over to her and stood soldier-like, with my hands rigidly at my side. She laughed at me, then she put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me quickly, then stopped. I was familiar with the role of being seduced from my college days, but never quite like this.

She nervously touched my face with her eyes closed, as if in a trance. Then she pulled back, and put one hand on top of her shorts. Her other hand couldn't find the zipper at first

but then she found the grip and pulled it down slowly. Her clothes fell to the floor. Her eyes were tightly closed.

I looked at her bare hips, shaped like a small heart; her sparse blonde hair nearly disappeared, camouflaged against her skin.

She opened her eyes and looked at me, then placed my hands on her waist. I slowly lifted her up in my arms and kissed her. I laid her down on my thin bed quilt, laid beside her, keeping some space between us, and kissed her again. I gently stroked her arms. But this wasn't the way she imagined it would be. She pulled at my clothes then moved on top of me and sank down until the electricity short-circuited me.

She held my hands down onto the bed and nuzzled her nose against my neck. Shifts in our breathing – sun sweet, astronomically high. We launched into some unknown place, map-less. We lay there, still, thoughts moving so quickly. None of this squared with our core beliefs of protecting ourselves at all costs. Going slow. Never trusting. We were exploding the myth of orphans. Something we had never believed possible.

“Look,” she gasped, as we lay arm in arm.

A small bird had landed on the bedside windowsill.

“He followed us here,” I said.

Then I looked at her. “He wants you too. You’ll need to choose.”

“It’s a she.”

We both laughed. It was a different kind of laugh for me. It was free of pain. It was open to more laughter. A jester rarely laughs free of pain.

The sun was setting now. Hundreds of birds were chirping in the trees, welcoming the moon's arrival.

Then the birds stopped as if on cue. The silence was intense. I was aware of the refrigerator turning on and off every few minutes from across the room. Sounds of her breathing, calmer now, as profound and magical as star-white birds singing from outer space; welcoming a new solar system into existence.

I had always loved watching the formations of stars in the sky. But I never wanted to learn the names of constellations. I wanted the shapes and names to be mine, in some personal way. A purposely unsolved mystery.

"I'm enjoying being here with you," she said hesitantly. She was doubtful of my response.

Both of us were waiting for some inevitable abrupt ending. Energy shifting away from the core. But I was ready to go against my deepest instincts....

"Stay then. I don't want to hear your music through windows anymore."

She looked directly at me, searching, calculating, then she whispered, "Okay."

Chapter 23

Gabriel

Two people merging into a symbiotic state that expands beyond each other... every touch gets more intense than the last, every hunger is multiplied with the hours. Day after day, for months, everything created, every whisper, is simply joy expanding outward. The speed of light can't catch up. This is what we created.

Laney

I always told myself that I didn't need to have this experience, to feel the invasion of love, overwhelming, and all that. But he is a full-hearted good person -- smart; creative, funny, fully in his body. He's stronger than he looks, stronger than he comes across. There are very few people in the world like that. Most people are weaker than they look, and act stronger than they are -- they're faking it -- like me; I'm one of them.

Chapter 24

Laney assumed any kind of relationship would compete with her music, compete with the time and commitment it takes to search inward. He would of course become jealous of the distance she needed in order to write. Time alone. Time not thinking about him. And she would feel trapped by the jealousy.

But Gabriel was not only fine with the time she needed to spend by herself, more than that, he loved his time alone too. He was also her first and only fan -- he never tired of hearing her sing and play. As a writer himself, it intrigued him how she could put such complicated stories into such little space. With the syllables restricted by the melody. She was not writing simple love songs, or childish hate songs. These lyrics were more like dreamscapes.

One night she turned the tables and asked him if she could read something he had written. He was reluctant to even talk about his writing the few other times she had brought it up.

"Nothing is finished."

She said, "*What* isn't finished?"

He said, "It. It might be a novel someday. Or just a journal too thick to burn. I don't know yet."

She said, "You're not going to let me read it until it's finished? We could be a hundred years old by then."

He shrugged.

But then he realized that she freely played unfinished pieces for him all the time, so many of which ended up being thrown away. She had already exposed her failures to him.

He pulled out a number of thick notebooks. “Start anywhere. It has no beginning.” He went off to the fridge to eat, which was one of his favorite things to do.

She read a few pages and then nodded her head. “Now I understand why you call yourself a spiritual scientist.”

She added: “We make good counterpoint, you and me – your lightheartedness despite all the unknowns, and my darkness because of the knowns. We complete an emotional circuit. We search around in our own way until the perimeters touch.”

Chapter 25

Gabriel

One morning Laney and I recycled back around to our first true meeting place, on the beach adjacent to Sunny's Bar.

After a walk and a quick swim we sat down on her blanket and ate green grapes from her little cooler.

I watched the waves which just seconds before were an integrated part of the open sea, but after their big breakaway moment, with a roar of independence, they rolled crashing to their destiny's end. Only a sigh, a hiss, could be heard when their long journey was over. Like a final breath.

Then the afterlife: The micro-remnants of ocean foam becoming absorbed back into the undertow; bubbles of souls returning home, beckoned back to join the wholeness. A water-droplet universe sparkles out towards a distant horizon. And on it goes in all directions.

The jade green islands of Lanai and Kaho'olawe sat like quiet mossy hillsides in the distance, filtered in blue mist, alive, electric.

Kisses on the beach. Creating our own ocean pulsing between us, feeling the pulse of her heart as my lips touched her neck, smelling the salt water on her skin, tasting her and the sea with the tip of my tongue, waves of loneliness being washed away with each inhale of my breath as she leans into my shoulder.

Chapter 26

Gabriel

On an island you don't live a normal life. First of all, if you drive straight for more than thirty minutes you start going in circles. Second of all, if you follow the circle long enough you get snarled up in volcanic rock that will rip a hole right through your tires. The rocks are unkind to everything they come in contact with – prickly shards of hardened black basalt magma. Some have been stubbornly grinded down by waves colliding, but most remain unchanged by the wind or sea, after seething down in a mass of steamy orange shapelessness long ago from the great fiery mountain.

Those sharp ones, living away from the sea, look stubborn and harsh like a soldier without a family. They sit out in the scorching sun, on the edge of the mountain, morosely waiting for the millenniums to change them just a little. Any chance of reincarnation is still many millions of years away.

This is the way of loneliness. It hardens and creates sharp edges in the mind, rarely worn away by time. It's like a singularity with death before the end arrives. It lies in wait, beneath laughter and love, until they've moved on, pulled back out to sea by the undertow. Loneliness lingers, sitting out in the scorching sun, waiting patiently, its face night-dark, at war with everything including itself.

* * *

To find the genesis of this lava and literally rise above it, one would have to travel all the way to the top of the highest mountain peak – ten thousand feet above the ocean, to the peak of Mt. Haleakala.

We wanted to see it. So Laney and I decided to make the journey one Saturday morning.

We had stopped in Sunny's Bar the previous night to officially thank Johnny Hoy for pointing me in the right direction – across the street. My Friday night observations had ended soon thereafter. We wanted to let him know why. We asked him if he knew who Cupid was, and he posed with his hands and arms holding an invisible bow and arrow. He beamed innocently. We were served two Perrier's with ice on the house.

We rented an open-air Jeep for our trek. I ransacked the back of my closet and found two sweat shirts. Laney borrowed a pair of my jeans and rolled them up clam digger style, since they were way too long on her, and then tightened the waist by putting a piece of rope through all the belt loops and tying a messy knot.

As we were packing up the car we bumped into an apartment neighbor of hers, a girl named Roxie, a massage therapist headed for work at one of the fancy hotels in town. "So this is *him!*" she said breathlessly.

"Him," Laney said, "Live and in person." She was embarrassed and tried to shut her up.

"He's very cute. Just like you said." Roxie was definitely cute herself. A bit clueless, but friendly.

"I picked him out myself, right out of the lobster tank," Laney quipped, all the while nervously trying to signal her to hush up.

"Where did you meet?" Roxie asked me.

"Can lobsters talk?" I asked Laney.

She nodded.

I said, "Well, actually, we met in a bar. She was drunk as hell and I saved her from a bird that went after her throat."

"Cool!" Roxie laughed. "Laney, I didn't know you could be so wild!"

"Oh yeah, wild as... the wilderness. I don't even remember being drunk."

"Yeah, been there, done that" she nodded. "Whew! Next time, teach me how to get saved by a guy like him," she winked at me, then kissed Laney aloha and disappeared.

After we got settled into our jeep Laney said, "The thing I like about Roxie is I can tell her anything, and I know she won't remember any of it except the stuff about guys."

"She seems like a person who's always looking for fun," I added, searching for the car keys in my pockets. "Then again, I mean, when isn't a person looking for fun?" I said innocently.

"I'm not looking for fun," she said.

"Okay, well I give up then, what are *you* looking for?"

"Well, fun *is* fun, but I'm *looking* for something I'll remember, something that touches me. Some connection. And some of that isn't what I'd call fun."

"Like writing songs," I offered.

"No. That's fun!"

"Having kids!" I said, letting my mind free-form.

"There's a connection for you to consider. True co-creation. But not always fun."

Always the jester, I was. Except the princess wasn't amused. What I said seemed to darken her.

I started the car and gave the accelerator a kick. It felt like it had enough power to get us up the mountain, barely. I took it out of first gear and headed toward Hana Highway.

We slowly wound our way up Haleakala in an ever decreasing spiral. At five thousand feet we found ourselves driving through, and then *above*, pockets of clouds. Some clouds were hanging in mid-air off the side of the mountain.

Below us were the green hills and grasslands of the Maui coastline, with an occasional town dotting the land, like little buttons. Each one would fit inside our thumb and forefinger.

A higher dimension past that scene, merging with the sky we were now traveling through, was the vast Planet-Earth-from-outer-space-blue waters of the Pacific, tumbling out and twisting beyond the wide curvature of the horizon.

Over the water, a hundred miles away, a few distant cumulus formations had gathered in a billowy row, one after another, motionless, as if they were in line on a runway awaiting permission from ground control.

"I've never been this high in my life!" She said it loudly so she could be heard over the straining Jeep motor. I was gunning the engine to make it up the incline.

The wind was cool and constant. Sometimes a murderous streak of it would come busting down from the summit and shake the Jeep from side to side like we were caught in a rocket launch. We were still only half-way up!

Laney put her head back and breathed in the wildness of the open sky.

At seven thousand feet we passed a sign that read:
“Turn On Headlights In Clouds.”

At nine thousand feet the air was far colder. The sky above us was blazing clear, but all around the sides of the mountain thick clouds churned like frothy egg whites. Rain skittered sideways, carried by a great cross-wind, spraying misty drizzle onto our faces and into the windshield even though the sky was still clear above us. It was like a reverse umbrella – with rain appearing from pure blue while the towns below the clouds remained dry. Laney was laughing almost to herself. She was giddy to the point of being speechless.

At ninety three hundred feet the geography dramatically changed. Laney’s mood became more reverent. The Earth was suddenly barren, with a million black lava boulders, armies of them, scattered about as if they had been blown to pieces by an atomic bomb.

The Jeep pushed its way up to the summit parking lot. It looked like we had landed on the moon. We were bundled up as warmly as our sparse gear allowed. It was fifty degrees up there with a cold crosswind.

We took a long descending path called Sliding Sands. Suddenly pastel volcanic cones appeared in the valley thousands of feet below us. The entire landscape was rainbow-like. A desert of petrified rainbow.

We walked halfway down the crater, about fifteen hundred feet from the top, and found a rock to sit on with a clear view across to the other side of the mountain. There we were, sitting together on a boulder on the edge of outer space. No clouds above us, just diamond bright sky, a small

laser-like glow of sun, with occasional wild wind gusts breaking the immense silence.

We stared at white smoke hovering above one of the cones – the mid-way birthing point in the evolution from mist to cloud, forming right above the fountainhead of this ungodly, strangely beautiful lifelessness.

This is what the world might look like ten years after a nuclear war. But the irony was this was a reverse nuclear war – a volcanic eruption spawned this land, and then life thousands of years before us. We sat in the peaceful aftermath of all the violence planet earth could amass.

Laney whispered to me, “The ‘it’ is here, it’s humming in the wind.” She felt it too. Amazing.

There were no birds, voices, engines, planes, flying insects, nothing to hear except the ever-present human ringing in the ears. Our ears were cold, pulsing. The air was very thin. There was no one else on the path. And no one in the valley of the crater. It seemed like we were the only two living things inhabiting miles of mountaintop.

Laney took my hand and nestled her face against it: “If ever I were capable of believing in God, this would be the proof.” We shivered together, synchronized, clutching at each other, not wanting the moment to leave us.

When we finally began our ascent the air was so thin we had to catch our breath with each step, as we struggled to get back up to the entranceway of the moon.

At one point we looked over the mountain and saw nothing but blue in all directions, including down. We didn’t know if what we were looking at was sky or ocean or where they merged. It was as if we were staring at a vast blue mirror turning in on itself.

Chapter 27

Laney

Our drive back down the mountain at sunset was slow and winding, and as the night took hold our mood darkened. Gabe became unusually quiet, even for him. We could feel ourselves circling back down into the Commonlanders' world, with the clouds ablaze below us, pastel colors leaping from cloud top to cloud top as the sun died.

All natural light finally abandoned us and hurled a dead blackness onto the earth. Pin drops of light dotted the valley floor – the meagerest of consolation for the lonely, looking for an artificial sun to lighten the vast emptiness.

We were up here, above it all, feeling the division, the misty threaded bridge between human minds and the pureness of endless sky. It didn't need us. Didn't need life. We were invaders.

I felt a strange, yet familiar, loneliness in me as we twirled down the mountain. I closed my eyes, sensing the centrifugal forces of the road pulling at us; the loneliness -- I hadn't felt it since Gabriel and I became a couple.

A little voice inside me knew that time worked against all things. And that there were things at work in me that did not bode well for the evolution of us.

Down there in the valley of the island, the masses huddled together, drinking in the heat, sleeping through the brilliant infinity of night sky, driving to hotel-stripped beaches, dreaming of people they can't have, goals they can't reach – mind-food for their ego to devour. No one wants to admit it: We are all lonely, even when we love.

That is a most incredible thing to me: that we can find love, and find peace from that love, and from it become so happy that we let go, and succumb to the fears that came before it. And as a distraction from those basic primal fears, we seek more. More and more.

So the buildings go up, and the TVs flicker, with visions designed to shock and entice, and we want, and the cars get fancier, and the bars get filled with crowds of loud stressed out desperate souls secretly praying for “some day.”

More.

But there is nothing, no one anywhere, to control it all. There is no master plan. We cannot stop -- *anything*, and no one will ever volunteer to stop.

We *need* love, sex, money, power. Our needs exponentialize in an attempt to escape from all pain, and to even escape the boredom of some perfect Eden we may have stumbled into, before we turn it into living hell, with fires burning.

Need pushes the flame higher. Until in every present moment the entire human race gathers around the ritual blaze, dancing, shouting, howling, crying, praying, chanting the word, “more.”

Chapter 28

Gabriel

We went back to my apartment and scarfed down the remains in the refrigerator. Then we put some music on my little portable CD player, turned it down to a low volume, and talked about “the top.” That incredible feeling we both experienced at Haleakala’s summit.

“Let’s stay at the peak, for at least tonight, Laney! Let’s just stay right there, and feel it for as long as we can.”

She misinterpreted my words and led us in another direction. She kissed me and touched my arms with her fingertips.

We melted together, sky and water, no horizon line between.

Suspended in mid-air, she whispered to me, “The ‘it’ is here too, sometimes.”

Chapter 29

Laney

Gabe arranged for me to meet a swami. How strange is that? His friend, Rob, set up the appointment months ago. Suddenly I found myself being a part of one of Gabe's spiritual science experiments.

We ended up meeting at my apartment because it was cleaner and neater than Gabe's, *by far*, as always.

The swami's arrival was quite colorful. This Indian man in an orange robe entered my apartment with a small entourage – including an attorney who was a “devotee” from New Mexico, and his wife. The man who was hosting Swami's three days in Maui, Andrew, also came. They typically helped Swami organize his travels around the world as he attended events at the request of his guru, Amma – “The Hugging Saint.”

Swami had a dark round face, a short beard, and was slightly balding. He bowed to us, then sat quietly. We brought out some chai tea we had made for the occasion. He insisted that he pour the tea for each of us rather than us serving him.

He looked around my small apartment from the couch where he was seated. Then he went over and touched the piano – which now sat in the living room. A month ago Gabe and I had moved it from the little dark room in the back, into the light, so to speak. I had decorated it with some flowers for the occasion – sweet smelling tuberose and colorful ginger stalks. He touched one of the notes with one finger and listened to the sound very intently.

Gabe told him that I played and wrote songs. Swami gently joked that I could then surely play harmonium better than he could, even though he'd been playing for ten years. He told us he was very bad at it, but Amma insisted he keep it up. He laughed at himself. "Amma says everything changes, except my harmonium playing."

The others in his group soon excused themselves to take a walk, to give us privacy. The room became very quiet with only the three of us there. He sat down in a hard chair next to us, instead of the couch, and said, "Okay, you have some questions for me?"

Gabe said, "Yes, Swami. Thank you for coming and meeting with us."

"That's fine. I'm here, it's not a problem."

"Here's my first question," Gabe said, trying to compose the words just right. "I know you've been meditating for many years, for hours a day. I've meditated a little, for a few years, and searched for truth in my own way. But my question to you is, with all the thinking we do about God, or no God, and the meaning of life, and what's really going on out there in the universe, how can you be sure there's any such thing as 'truth' outside the chemical hallucinations of the human brain?"

Swami nodded his head and smiled broadly: "That's a good question!"

I thought he might get a bit defensive about such a question, but his reaction was completely the opposite.

He bent in, as if he were about to whisper a secret: "I can see by your question that you have been searching for your own understanding of truth for some time. Searching is

a very good thing. So my answer to you is... *don't ask that question.* That's your answer."

Gabe laughed nervously for a moment, but looked as puzzled as I was.

Swami added: "Why did you ask me the question in the first place? Did you ask it to see if you could trick me? Or did you ask it because you don't want your mind to trick you?"

"I don't want my mind to trick me," Gabe said.

"Yes, I know. But you see, the question is the trick!" Swami exclaimed.

Gabe nodded slowly. A curious smile followed.

Swami became more animated. "It is tricking you into giving up! Because then your mind can say, 'Forget trying to find things like truth, or faith. It's *impossible!* It's all part of the grand illusion, just like everything else.... *Everything* is illusion, so now, where are the cookies? I'm hungry. Let's eat and watch some YouTube!' ...That's the trickster-mind at its best!"

We both laughed at his direct and simple logic. It actually made sense. Gabe was taking notes. I looked at his face and I could tell he was quickly becoming fond of this man.

Gabe said, "Okay, yes, I see. But in that case, I have to ask you more directly about 'God,' and having faith. I can't access the kind of faith you have. I don't know if God exists, or if it's a Him, or a Her, or a Rainbow, or Nothingness. Or what God expects from us, if anything, since he set the game in motion in the first place and presumably knows the ending. But why would a God even need to play? *I have no idea!* So, if I don't know any of those things, how can I ever

find the kind of faith you, and all truly spiritual people, seem to have?"

Swami looked at me thoughtfully: "What makes you think you even need to believe in God to have faith?"

A curious thing for a Swami to say.

He sat back in his chair and touched his hand on his short beard. He was very patient and his voice was soft, "The great masters of every great religion all try to teach us the exact same thing – to have love and compassion for all living beings. Love, compassion, forgiveness, and selfless service. These are the true four commandments from our teachers. Jesus said so, Buddha said so, as did Krishna, the Jains, Moses, the Torah, the Bible. It's an impressive list of masters and scriptures throughout history. But it's all the same message. All the same.

"Therefore, if your mind can find enough optimism each morning when you wake up to at least try to act with those good intentions as much as you can, even when it's very difficult to do, then *you have faith!*"

He looked at us. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," we said together.

But Gabe wasn't done. "But how do we get there?"

"You're making this too complicated. Spirituality is really quite simple. True spirituality does not require a leap of faith. It doesn't require reading or translating ancient religious texts. It's as clear and obvious as the day. We just make it more complicated than it has to be because we don't want to do the work it requires after we know the answer!

"The mind is the greatest salesman and scam artist alive in this world. Because it can sell you almost anything, it can talk you into the craziest thing, or convince you to not

do something important, just by promising you something outrageous, like happiness forever, or great riches, or true love, or revenge, or peace of mind.

“But then, once you comply, it never keeps its promise! Never! There is no lasting happiness. No peace beyond a fleeting few seconds. Because then the mind says – well, this turned out okay, but you still need *this* other thing too, to be truly happy, or we need to be with *this* one over there, or *that* dream has to be fulfilled first, that war won, or that new Guru might know the real answer. We believe our thoughts again and again, instead of saying, ‘I’ve done enough for you my whole life, and look where it’s gotten me, listening to you all these years.... *I’ve had it!*’” He clapped his hands together during his last three words, then smiled at us.

I thought about Gabe and me – our blossoming love for each other, and realized our minds were also “selling us” this type of love we shared. We had now come to expect things from each other, rather than just giving to each other. Because of the mind, our love would change in time – for better or for worse, and expand out in all directions, to become both weaker and stronger, and uglier and more beautiful. All of these things!

But there was a deeper love Swami was pointing to. If we connected to that love, what would happen?

I glanced at Gabe. He was very moved by Swami’s words. His face was somber.

Gabe remembered a question he promised he would ask for his friend Rob, who had set all this up in the first place. He asked: “Swami, do you know who Stephen Hawking is?”

“The astrophysicist, yes,” Swami said. “I have read his books. I graduated in astrophysics at a university in India before I met Amma, in fact.”

“You did?” Gabe exclaimed. “That’s amazing! Why did you quit?”

“Well, I was spending all my time looking at all these computer images of the heavens. I started to wonder what would happen if we found what we were all looking for, other life forms on distant planets. Ants or little froggies jumping around in sulfur gas or methane lakes. And then maybe we found out exactly how and why the Big Bang happened. And that maybe there are other universes forming when you go to the other side of black holes. All that stuff must be proven by math, you know? And I realized finding out the truth about these things and having the math make sense wouldn’t make me truly happy, and wouldn’t change anything. I needed to find out something else. I needed to find *connection*. And I realized you can’t find connection out there. Even if we had a telescope in outer space a thousand times the size of a galaxy, we would just become more and more distracted. The more we see, the more blind we become.

“So I decided to explore a place that is the opposite of astrophysics. The inner galaxy, the inner connections, with as few distractions as possible.”

“I see. Yes. But, well, I still have to ask this question for my friend!” Gabe smiled. “And now I’m even more curious to hear your answer. Swami, in Stephen Hawking’s book, *The Universe in a Nutshell*, he says he believes that we are living in multiple time dimensions simultaneously, with multiple potential outcomes. The past, present, and future

are all happening at the same time. Our consciousness falsely believes in the linear passing of time, and a single history of ourselves in each moment, 'this moment,' so that we can survive physically on this planet. But he says in reality we are multi-temporal, multidimensional beings. Do you think any of that could be true?"

Swami thought about it for a moment and said: "I think it's true in the mind of Stephen Hawking."

A moment skipped by as we replayed his answer in our minds. Suddenly we burst out laughing.

He nodded his head approvingly. "I see you are both trying very hard," he said. "I see that. And that's a very good thing."

There came a knock on the door. It was one of the people who had accompanied him. "Swami, I'm sorry, but we have to go to your event now. It's going to take a while to drive upcountry."

He stood up and took both of our hands into his one big hand. "May you both treat each other with extreme kindness. Namaste: peace be with you. I hope to see you both again."

He turned to leave, and the door was shut softly behind him.

There was so much left unsaid.

Chapter 30

Gabriel

A tsunami wave began to form. It crashed onto the shore and created shifting sands directly beneath my feet. Quicksand? Earthquake? Rabbit hole? Trap door? I tried to make sense of this crazy new feeling.

I'll probably never say this aloud to her. I've never even allowed myself to think it before. So let me practice it first by writing it down in my notebook:

Laney, I'm not an orphan when you're with me. I actually feel part of the world. The truth is, I want to stay with you. I want to have a child with you and make us in a different form and then set it free someday! I want to be part of a real family, not an adopted one. Every night when we're together the stars come down closer to where we live. They whisper all sorts of crazy things like this to me.

* * *

How long are you supposed to wait to tell someone something like that?

The risk: everything we created could die in an instant. A crash of two realities that don't fit together.

Just be quiet and love her.

Close your notebook.

The wind is kicking up. The real waves are calling.

Chapter 31

Laney

Gabriel is a wild man at times. The reason he came to Maui was to surf. The reason I came to Maui was to escape to a distant island. There is the difference between us in a nutshell!

There are big waves here. Over on the wild side of the island there are waves so big they'd be considered tidal waves in most places – at a beach called Jaws. At Jaws the waves rise as high as fifty feet before they slowly begin to curl and fall, exploding in slow motion like the detonation of a tall building. The only way to ride these megatons of raging water is with a loyal experienced crew – including a jet-ski ace, and a helicopter pilot. Only super stars like Laird Hamilton can ride these deadly giants.

Gabe is not that much of a wild man, thank God. He only takes me there to watch the masters. He wants me to feel what it might feel like -- the rush of putting your life on the line at the top of a million pound waterfall, danger lurking with every blink of an eye.

Gabe usually surfs at a beach called Ho'okipa, where the waves typically break in ten to twelve foot swells. These are big tough waves only excellent surfers can survive. He goes out in these waves once or twice a week and tries to tame something in them, and something in him, that I don't much understand no matter how many times he takes me to watch monster waves explode.

One day he came to my apartment unannounced. I almost didn't recognize him. He looked stunned, as if he'd

been beaten up in an alleyway – the pupils of his eyes were dilated, his hair was full of sand, thick curls drooping around his eyes. He would get the shakes from time to time when he tried to speak. He was in physical shock. The story came out slowly over the course of hours.

He was surfing at Ho’okipa, it was rainy that morning, the wind was kicking up. That meant the rides would be good ones. He paddled out a long way, as one must do at that beach, and began catching twelve and fourteen footers, which were a little beyond his comfort zone.

After his second wave of the day he paddled back out again, feeling the power of the ocean bucking against him, with his arms pumping hard. Then he waited, watching some big swells form in the distance.

He began to sense a really big wave rising behind him – it looked like a twenty-foot wave forming. “A rogue,” he said to himself. He knew he couldn’t surf it, it was way too big, so he took a deep breath and went under it, right at the perfect moment.

It takes about thirty seconds for someone to come back up to the surface after going under a twenty footer. Fins can get torn loose. Clothes can get ripped off. Wrist bands can break. Boards can disappear, or get split in half, and can end up a quarter mile away. Rising back up to the surface you can become severely disoriented.

Sure enough, his board was ripped away from his rubber arm strap. He was hyperventilating from having been underwater for so long.

He was done for the day, and started to swim to shore. But when he looked behind him he realized another twenty footer was forming. He had to go under again. He almost

lost his breath underwater as the wave created a powerful undercurrent he fought to escape from. He finally surfaced and saw the sun swirling. He tried to focus on not passing out.

I asked him, "What were you thinking at that point?"

He said to me: "I was thinking to myself: 'You know, I'm not sure I'm having fun anymore.'"

I shook my head in disbelief and started to laugh.

Meanwhile, as he was trying to figure out how not to die without having 'fun,' he sees a jet ski coming from the beach, angling *away* from him. He recognized it as an official lifeguard boat.

He said to me, "So I was thinking, wow, somebody must be in trouble out there. Maybe I can hitch a ride if he happens to come toward me."

Seriously! He thought *someone else* was in trouble!

The boat steered all the way around another twenty-foot wave until the lifeguard saw an opening and sped directly to where Gabe was. Gabe was scooped up and delivered onto the beach five wild bumpy minutes later. A few people watching from the beach start to applaud. Gabe wondered what he did to deserve the admiration of the crowd. Then he realized as reality set in that they were applauding the lifeguard.

He replayed the scene over and over in his head trying to make sense of what just happened. He looked out to the ocean while still laying on the beach where they deposited him, and saw another twenty footer exploding like a thousand pounds of dynamite. It smashed loudly onto the cliffs in the distance, He was out there in... *that!* Or was he

still out there? Was this the way people died -- rising out of their body watching the ending from safe place?

He had the shakes as drove himself home. His old junker car gave everyone the shakes, being that it had no shocks left and the roads he often traveled were not well-maintained. But these shakes originated from inside of him. He'd almost died. And he knew it. He could feel it. Death was still right there beside him.

A few days later I asked him, "Did you even, for one second, think about God when you were out there dying? You are a spiritual scientist, after all."

He said, "Yeah. I found 'the answer.' It was clear. It was obvious: Twenty footers are God. And when I came face to face with God I heard a booming voice in my head say, 'Your surfboard is a toothpick. You are an ant's antennae. Deny my existence right now and you'll be vaporized into sea foam. If you make it to shore alive, make sure you tell all your ant-sized friends that it won't be because I cared one way or the other. *I am the wildness beyond knowing*, Now GO! *Get out of here!* Go home, I'm not joking around."

Chapter 32

Gabriel

Laney was not interested in getting her songs “out in the world.” She insisted the demographics don't exist for a twenty-four-year-old singer-songwriter who won't dance, won't strip (except for that one magical time in front of me), doesn't like to play live concerts, doesn't put up with corporate BS, and has no following. Living on an island three thousand miles from LA also didn't help.

I couldn't argue with her logic. Besides, it meant I got to have both her songs and her love all to myself.

I *did* want her to record her songs someday. I promised myself I'd help make that happen. Because the songs needed permanency. They needed a completion point. These songs belonged in the world. It had to happen one day.

I used to go to her apartment to hear her play. I'd bring a book, convincing myself that I'd lay on her couch and read while she played and sang. But I would always end up glued to a chair next to her, listening to her voice, without a microphone interfering with its soft tones. I would follow the lyrics carefully, mesmerized by the uniqueness of her writing and progressions of the chords she chose. She *did* sound exactly like she looked – beautiful, quirky, reluctantly sexy, a hidden passion behind those cool rogue wave blue eyes – too deep to ever fully penetrate

Later we'd fall asleep in her bed – I remember those sweet nights in her room – a maze of wild dreams, images set to her music in my head, cascading through so many midnight illusions of "us."

* * *

I was at home, writing in my notebook when I heard a soft knock at the door.

I knew it was Laney because no one else I knew knocked softly like that. It was like a secret little code.

She presented me with a turkey sandwich she had picked up from “Joy’s Place.”

Her face and shoulders were a little pink and coated with specks of sand. Her yellow hair, growing out slightly from the pixy cut she had when we first met, was tucked under a bandana after a morning swim.

She began to undress for her shower. She pulled her sleeveless shirt off, then peeled away her wet shorts, revealing her dark blue bikini bottom. The same one she wore the day we met at the beach. The only one she owned.

Then she untied the strings of her bikini on both sides and let her bikini fall to the floor. She knew I loved to see her do this – so she made no attempt to hide herself from me. She came closer to me after untying her swim top.

She kissed my neck and said, “After...” Then headed off to the shower.

I sighed and waited out the minutes the way one would wait for a five star meal to arrive. My world was simultaneously starving and utterly at peace.

Neither of us owned a TV. We didn’t have most of the things modern twenty-somethings have for daily distractions. We didn’t own laptops (especially not her... computers were vampiric – she had devolved back to the swirly light brown and white world of pencil and paper). No iPods, no iPads. No iWatches. I owned an old flip phone, she

had no phone at all. This was Maui, after all. A tropical island. We were Bohemian freaks living a secluded fantasy life together. Why would we want any contact with the outside world anyway?

So when my phone rang I was pretty sure I wasn't going to answer it. Everyone I wanted to talk to, or had the slightest interest in, was in my apartment at this very moment washing off in my shower. I wanted nothing about the scene to change. But so few people knew the number... and she would be in there a while longer. My curiosity won.

I heard Rob's voice on the other end of the line. I had told him about our great meeting with Swami, and had given him the details of our conversation, as promised, and told him that we were contemplating a way to gather up enough money to maybe see Amma and Swami in California the next time she came to the U.S. Laney in particular was excited to go.

Now he was calling to tell me that the next California stop was officially scheduled to be around Thanksgiving. He added he was willing to treat us to the airfare, and that we could sleep on the floor of his hotel room – that way he could meet Laney, and we could meet Amma.

It was a very generous offer since the money was the main thing hanging us up. Teaching surfing was not exactly making me rich. I was lucky to be paying my rent and filling my fridge. I thanked him and told him I'd talk to Laney about it.

When Laney got out of the shower she was dripping wet, not having bothered to towel off. She covered me with her cool silky wetness. It was like being under a human sponge; her hair was a waterfall. Her face was the rainbow.

Our time together that day felt more intense than usual. The sun was hidden behind clouds and the grayness in the room made things feel a bit stark and brooding; a bit lonely.

We needed each other. We swam far out into each other until we slowly drifted back to shore, riding a warm wave home.

Pulsing stars arrived. White snowlight covered us as we fell asleep entangled.

Chapter 33

Laney

Gabe is such a physical person. He loves to run, swim, surf, dive off of cliffs into the ocean, anything that challenges him. One day we were shopping in Paia and he got roped into a playing a basketball game with a bunch of raggedy kids. I sat in the shade and watched for an hour as he played full court in the heat with baskets that had no nets, with elbows flying, and curses uttered after every missed shot and every bad pass. He played until he won their respect.

He's just as intense with his sensual passion. It overwhelms me sometimes. I love being with him, but I usually think more practically than he does. What if I get pregnant? We use protection. But still, things can happen. And I would never want to have a baby. Not ever.

Really, I have never been a body-focused person. I worked in the computer world in a dark back office. I played guitar and piano in a shadowy back room that no one but Gabe ever saw until we dragged the piano into the light of day one morning. I can sit for hours on end without needing anyone. I read alone. I think and write alone. I never cared about soccer or volleyball or kissing or dating. I live in my head.

Gabe hungers for things. I admire him for that. He says he's a recluse, but I don't see him like that.

I hunger for things too. I hunger to break through the dark thoughts that constantly remind me who I truly really am - the entire mess.

I'm not as messed up as my mother. At least that's true. I know I would never have had an affair for seven and a half years. I would never have lived a life of lies, and spewed out pain everywhere I went, like octopus ink, like she did.

I would never drink like a fish, scream at the world, and then sneak around like a thief.

I have tried to be the opposite of all that I remember her to be.

I wish I could remember what her favorite color was. I would delete it from the palette of my visual universe. But instead it got mixed in with me – blended into the watercolors of me.

Psychotherapy deals with the genesis of things – how, why, and when the soul-diluting events occurred. We become aware of why we act, and why we think the way we do. But I needed answers to the bigger questions. Like *why* did God allow those things to happen in the first place? What was the point? What's the message? He likes to watch us play, and win and lose, get wounded, shot, bludgeoned, suffer and die. If God is the holy father, he should be arrested for child abuse.

Swami had a lot of good answers to Gabe's very good questions. And because of that meeting I have been meditating a bit; trying to. It's hard. All the dark things surface quickly. Silence is nowhere to be found. I'm just supposed to watch the thoughts without judging. Eventually peace will come. But that wave of peace is a continent away. I live in the murky still pool of myself.

Here's a question we didn't ask Swami – what is a concentration camp prisoner supposed to “learn” as he watches his wife taken away by the guards?

Can he meditate and find peace behind the barbed wire? Forgive the torture?

What do we learn from that kind of evil? Where is God when the atrocities are taking place? Why shouldn't God be put in jail for the war crimes He Himself created?

Now here's the strangest part. Gabe will be here in ten minutes. I will be happy to see him. I can be bubbly and happy when I tunnel under to the other side of the wall to escape with him; travel off to the other planet with him, away from myself.

He'll show up with friends, unannounced surfer buddies that bring in bags of warm enchiladas and chips and hot spiced salsa and cold beer.

Or he'll come alone with a flower and a kiss, and we'll race out to the beach for a sunset swim and watch the green water slowly darken to navy blue, as the clouds turn electric red and the sun glows under the sea.

I will have fun, his kind of fun, and regret nothing about those precious hours together.

But eventually I will have to go back to 'the mother planet,' and deal with the mess I've made there.

His loud four knock rhythm came earlier than expected, and the door opened. He was with Roxie and her new boyfriend.

"Hey, what's up, piano girl?" he croons, with his moon eyes and his quick smile.

"All good," I sighed, "Ready to rock."

Chapter 34

Gabriel

The present moment is actually a separate dimension from space *or* time. Maybe a fifth dimension.

I remember times when I would look at Laney while she was lying in bed, and I would try to burn the image of her face and her body, and the shape of how she was lying there, into my memory forever. I hoped to re-live that moment's vision, and the feelings it evoked in me, any time I wanted to, or needed it in the future.

But it's not possible. They are memories of illusions.

Some essential clarity evaporates. Like trying to remember a touch. No amount of emotional attachment, or closing of the eyes to block out the world, or meditation on the past, can bring back the fullness, the brightness, of pure reality.

Knowing this, sometimes I would intentionally stare at her overly long, trying somehow to drink in the vision here and now, even after my senses were saturated with it.

But then sometimes the emotions deaden themselves, even in the present, especially if you try too hard to stay there. The attempt to capture something beautiful kills it on the spot. There is nothing we can do but free the lightning from the bottle and behold the instant as it speeds away incomprehensibly fast.

* * *

Back to the starkest reality -- Laney and I were both diminishing our finances far too quickly. Her savings came

from her computer tech days, mine from my one year as a math professor and then teaching surfing lessons to kids and spunky grandmas on vacation at The Cove.

We had accepted Rob's generous offer to fly us to California to see Amma the Hugging Saint – and hopefully to see Swami again. We didn't know if he'd remember us but it didn't matter. I had meanwhile come up with more questions.

Back to the ground war – I valiantly began to combat the possibility of having to share a cardboard box with Laney someday by starting to work extra hours.

Laney, feeling the same money drain in her bank account, and inspired by my new capitalist mind-set, began occasionally subbing for a friend as a waitress at a high-end Wailea restaurant.

She worked less hours than me but made a lot more money, mostly in tips. Kids don't tip surfing teachers very much. Nor do the grandmas. But of course, I don't look like Laney either. Maybe if I were a slim blonde with a face that could be on the cover of Vanity Fair Magazine, and eyes that looked like God just painted them with sky-colored paint, with sunlight shining right through them, and a smile that could make a baby stop crying with one quick glance, then I'd get tipped for teaching surfing. Until then... no.

One day as I was finishing up teaching my last surfing lesson of the day, Laney showed up at the beach wearing her swim suit. She held out three twenty dollar bills and asked me if I was the guy everyone kept telling her was the best surfing instructor on the island. She called me "sir." I took the money with a "Thank you ma'am." I played along

without breaking the role. It seemed to be what she wanted. I got her a beginner's board from the shop, laid it on the grass, and taught her how to balance herself, how to paddle out, how to get back on the board when she was in the water.

The Cove is perfect for beginners. You can stand up in the ocean two hundred feet out and your head will still be above the water. The waves are like bathtub ripples. They come in like clockwork, then break gently onto shore hundreds of feet later. I helped her catch a few beginning waves by pushing her board forward at just the right moment. She was getting frustrated, falling less than a second after she stood up, over and over again. I told her not to worry, it was really hard to learn to balance on the first day. But she was getting flustered, losing confidence.

The sun was getting lower and the weather had cooled a bit. All the other teachers and students were headed home. The waves got slightly bigger as the wind kicked up. So I got on top of her while she was lying face down on her board and told her we'd try to catch a wave together. I felt her body pressed against mine with a thin layer of sea water coming between us. It was a fantasy of mine, this moment.

"How am I supposed to get up with you on top of me?" she laughed.

I kissed the top of her ear and said, "Why would you want to get up if I'm on top of you?"

She started laughing so hard she swallowed a little sea water, which only made her laugh harder.

"Do you help all your hot female students learn to surf like this?"

“Only the ones that can’t stand up after thirty straight minutes of trying. After that I have to lay on top of them until I boost their confidence.”

I saw a decent wave coming and slipped off the board. “Okay, come on now! I’ve sprinkled you with surfer magic. Get up! *Go, girl!*” I gave her a perfectly timed push.

She stood up quickly, expecting to fall right away, but accidentally nailed it, standing too stiffly, knees locked, arms straight out like a scarecrow, but amazingly she rode the wave all the way in.

“Bend your knees and use your arms for balance!” I called out. But she was too ecstatic to listen.

She rode that wave on and on until about fifty yards later when she fell backwards off the board. She came up shouting, “Wooooooooooooo!” Her arms were raised in victory.

I swam to where she was but she had gone back under the water – I lost sight of her. She swam underneath my legs like a dolphin and came around behind me. She held me from behind and said, “I could never have done it without a such big brave teacher like you, Mr...?”

“Smith...Brah Smith.”

“Well, Brah,” she crooned. “You’re very good!”

“You were a very responsive student,” I said, as I grabbed her, picked her up over my head and threw her five feet forward. She sank like a rock.

We swam around like eels, chasing each other from wave to wave until the sun was almost gone. We emerged, alone on the beach, and dried off.

We were lucky that night. Sometimes sunsets are just a blinding yellow ball falling below a straight blue horizon –

like a lone king reminding his subjects from his royal balcony that he'll be back to overpower the world again tomorrow. But this night a few streaky cirrus clouds drifted across the West Maui mountains and reflected luminescent orange streaks as the sun bowed beneath the horizon like a beloved queen.

A moment later, as a grand farewell, the sun's shimmering corona emitted a teal green light that burst from the sea like a photo flash.

The air and waves became silent, like a theater audience quieting down just after the lights dim.

Colored lights will sometimes streak across the water. Colors that could only be replicated in Minoan cave drawings. Colors like these turn the world surreal and giddy.

Night then fell sharply, like the sudden pouring of ink over the sky's canvas.

Laney was shivering. We held on to each other tightly, not as lovers, but as two siblings might hold on to each other to keep their bodies warm.

"And now, ma'am, may I assist you to my sun-warmed chariot to get you home for your bath?" I whispered.

"Please, Jester, straight away."

The "chariot" was the flatbed truck that I'd bought for \$700 a few months ago – days after the previous \$700 chariot fell apart.... As with all junkers it had its quirks that all riders had to resign themselves to. The passenger door didn't open, for instance. So Laney had to climb across from the driver's side. The passenger side window was also cracked, well, smashed actually. I was constantly looking over at Laney's profile, backlit in a halo of fractured glass. It

looked a bit like a silvery spider web. She was the beautiful golden butterfly.

The heat and air conditioning had both died the same night I bought the truck, about three hours apart, like some mechanized version of Romeo and Juliet.

The engine sounded like it was doing the Mambo. I kept a few crude tools in the glove box just in case the motor died altogether. But currently the glove box was jammed closed. I would have needed a screw driver to pry it open. And of course, the screw driver was in the glove box.

"This truck reminds me of people in general," she said, still shivering, arms folded to keep herself warm.

"Okay..." I sighed. I knew some Laney-ism was coming.

"Broken down, smashed up, unreliable, flying through the world without stopping at lights because there are no brakes, all of its insides about to crack apart and die... but somehow we all keep adventuring on, stumbling on until the road ends."

"And what exactly happens when the road ends?"

"We'll see."

We usually had to decide whose apartment to go back to. We both had a change of clothes and a toothbrush at each place. But my place was where we went to make love and sleep in late. It was closer to the shops for breakfast, and near a small local store to replenish our groceries. Her place was where we would both write, usually in separate rooms. She would practice piano. We would read separately. Sometimes try to meditate together. Tonight she wanted to go to her place. She felt "something odd" coming on. Often that meant a new song was brewing. If she started to write, I

would sometimes think up a reason to go back to my place to give her space. She would rarely ask me to leave. But when I offered she would rarely ask me to stay.

We dined on a small bowl of salad and a piece of thick Italian bread for dinner. Then she went to her piano and played a few dark chords. An infectious rhythm fell into her hands, and she began to hum a melody that had never before landed on earth.

She began scribbling down some words in her notepad. I took my leave.

Chapter 35

Laney

My music has taken on another dimension of power lately. I've been getting more technically proficient at the piano, and my intuitive knowledge on the guitar has been coming back to me, even though I don't play it as much as I'd like. Gabriel bought the guitar for me at a pawnshop a few months ago. It's not bad. I keep getting stronger rhythmically and my left hand knows where to go. I'm exploring open tunings.

This song I'm writing – it has an underlying theme that's moving me. It's called, "Orbiting Chaos." It's about finding a clear voice inside yourself – high above the day-to-day realities of this world; coming from another place in us, a place that moves slower, like an orbiting satellite, while our daily thoughts stumble through the madness below. I am learning about this place in myself through meditating, even though I still suck at it.

I also wrote a piano song a few days ago called: "The Messenger." *It's not about Gabe!* It's about a beautiful black bird that came to warn a town of imminent danger. The only way to save the town was to teach everyone who lived there how to fly. But it took faith for humans to believe they could fly. The townsfolk gathered to discuss why they should try to fly. And why they should listen to a bird. They were sure they'd all die trying. By the time they decided to vote on the idea the mountain above the town began to vibrate and shake and all their debating and arguing was washed out to sea while the bird flew away.

Chapter 36

Gabriel

That day we met with Swami at Laney's apartment he said to us, "Religion can sometimes be a poison disguised as a medicine. Not because a particular religion is the wrong religion. But because the congregation or the devotees misread the instructions on the medicine label. They poison themselves with the thing that was supposed to heal them."

Now the time was approaching for us to go to California to meet Swami's master teacher, Amma. I was excited to hear what she would have to say. And whether she could prevent those who listened to her from misreading the instructions on the medicine label.

Laney and I were picked up at the Oakland airport by Rob and his girlfriend, Avery. The conversation between us was lighthearted from the start, Rob made sure of that. I could tell Laney liked them both.

The Oakland freeway was a blur of asphalt and blinding car lights. The road was slowly ingesting the tire rubber of a million impatient drivers; heavy trucks were rattling by us at eighty miles an hour.

Forty-five minutes later we began to drive past hilly open land, then horse ranches. Then a small white sign which said, "M.A. Center."

We pulled into a huge dirt parking lot. Then we hiked down a narrow path about a quarter mile until we came to a large structure where singing and Indian music was taking place.

Amma's central meeting place, the ashram, was a huge wooden building with a lower level and a balcony. A banner over the ashram entrance said: "Embracing The World."

I had been a bit skeptical about this kind of thing – a traveling guru – devotees wearing white to honor her presence. I assumed we were going to have to pay for parking, and that we would see devotees standing everywhere collecting "donations." But my fears were unfounded. Parking was free. Shuttles to the ashram were free. And no one suggested a donation as we entered. In fact, we were handed little numbered tickets, "tokens," to get a free hug. All we had to do was wait our turn.

The first thing Laney and I did was to go up to the balcony level and watch the scene from above. There were musicians behind where Amma was seated, playing and chanting while she hugged one person after another. Laney loved the virtuosity of the woman tabla player, and some of the chants, which were joyous and at times completely mesmerizing.

Amma cast her own hypnotic spell on everyone. She was a small round dark-skinned Indian woman in her mid-fifties dressed in a simple white sari. The sari was getting dark and smudged from hugging thousands of people, one at a time. She didn't look like a "star." She didn't command respect by her clothes or her jewelry. There was no jewelry. And no formalities. She seemed like a humble woman sacrificing herself for reasons completely unknown.

We noticed that after each person got their hug Amma would give something to them, putting it in their hand lovingly. I found out when I was hugged, it was a Hershey's Kiss!

We made our way downstairs from the balcony, walking past dancing hippies and travelers from all over the world talking in foreign languages, and stepping over others dozing mid-day in sleeping bags on the floor.

As we came closer to Amma we began to feel something strangely powerful, despite the skepticism I tried to maintain. We both remarked about it in a whisper. I suppose it was just so unusual to see so many people being hugged by this woman, without any apparent ulterior motive from the hugger, it struck a nerve. Why would a human do this every day of her life for thirty years?

When it was our turn Amma's helpers led us into Amma's arms. I went first. She pulled me to her and whispered something in my ear – a phrase repeated over and over again, from a voice that seemed far away, "My son, my son, my son." She looked straight into my eyes when the hug was over and smiled a star-bright smile. I couldn't help but smile back. My initial reaction to the hug and the meeting of our eyes was that it was "fun." Some kind of deep fun. I don't know why my mind chose that word to describe it. It's just what came to me.

I noticed her cheek was black and blue. She had been sitting in this one spot hugging people for at least twelve hours without getting up once. Her bruised face looked radiant somehow; she seemed completely unburdened by it.

She hugged Laney for a longer time than me, rubbing her back with her small dark hands, rocking her ever so slightly, whispering, "My darling, my darling, my darling." She smiled at Laney but it was a different kind of smile. Tears were forming in Amma's eyes. As if she were seeing

an old friend, as if she hadn't seen Laney for a hundred years.

Then she called me back to her and took us both in her arms and hugged us together. When she let go of us we looked at her and she started to laugh. She turned and said something in her native language of Malayalam to one of the swamis standing behind her. Then she threw a handful of rose pedals onto our heads.

Laney was in tears.

Amma put our hands together and kissed them, almost as if she were marrying us. Before we were led away she put a Hershey Kiss in each of our hands. She also gave me an apple.

When we got to the side of the hall I shook my head in amazement and started to laugh, but Laney continued crying. The crying got more intense as the minutes passed. We sat down near the side of the stage to watch Amma hug others. One of Amma's helpers saw Laney crying and brought her closer to Amma to watch. Laney cried on and off for hours as we saw a thousand people, then a thousand more, get hugged, and whispered to, and given a chocolate kiss before leaving her arms.

Chapter 37

That night a swami – a different one than the one that came to Maui – gave a talk to open the evening program. He said the title of the story would be a good headline for an American newspaper:

Breaking News: Truck Driver Performs Heart Surgery on Doctor

Laughs came from the audience. He started his story with a bellowing sonorous voice:

“Once there was a woman doctor who lived and worked in a big city. She had saved many lives over the years, but still her life felt empty somehow. Her heart was cold. She was filled with worry, and mistrusted almost everyone she knew.

“One night she was driving down the highway to work when her car broke down. She pulled over to the side of the highway just as it began to rain. This was before the invention of cell phones, so she sat in her car considering what to do next. At that moment an old beat-up truck pulled up next to her car and a very large unshaven man dressed in old tattered clothing walked toward her. He offered his help. She tried to quickly assess the situation. She did not trust his look, or his demeanor. He looked like a bum, or maybe a thief. She realized he might be after her money, or worse.

“He told her to get in his truck so she could stay warm while he tried to fix her car. She resisted but he pleaded with her while he got his box of tools from the back of the truck. Once again, he said, ‘It’s too cold for you to stay in your car. I don’t know how long this will take. Go get warm inside my

truck.' Feeling like she had no choice she got in the front of the truck where the heater was blowing and he closed the door behind her. She then watched him work for over half an hour in the rain until to her surprise he got her car to start. When she got out of the truck to thank him he shrugged. She offered him all of the money in her wallet, three hundred dollars, insisting that he take it, saying it was the least she could do. But he refused any of it, saying he did not help her expecting money. 'I was given the opportunity to act with compassion,' he said. 'Accepting money would ruin the intention.'

"He then shook her hand, said goodbye, and drove away.

"Many months later the doctor was sitting in a breakfast café before work when she saw that the waitress serving her coffee was near tears. She was 'with child.' When the doctor asked the woman what was wrong she said her baby was due any time and she was feeling it was going to be soon, but her husband was at a bank a few towns away trying to get a loan to pay for the hospital costs. She had faith he would be back soon, but she wished he hadn't gone so far today. The waitress smiled through her tears and said, 'But everything will turn out fine. The child will be such a blessing to us.'

"But the doctor could see the waitress was going into labor. She insisted that she get in her car, and taking her by the hand, she put her carefully in the passenger seat and drove her to the hospital. There she helped another doctor deliver the baby. After the baby and mother were safe she quietly paid all the hospital bills for her, and then came back to be by the new mother's side to look after her.

“When the woman asked why the doctor did all this for her she told her the story of the truck driver who had helped her one rainy night just a few days before, and confided in the new mother that her heart had burst open in some way from the man’s good deed. She could no longer sit by and watch anyone suffer for any reason.

“While the doctor went out of the room to get the woman some food, the husband rushed into the room having come straight from the bank and came to his wife’s side. She told her husband the story of this amazingly kind doctor who had possibly saved her life, and the life of their baby, and who then paid all the hospital bills without asking for anything in return. The husband was amazed.

“When the doctor came back into the room the husband and doctor looked at each other in utter disbelief. The husband was the truck driver. The truck driver recognized her as the owner of the car he repaired.

“They all looked at each other in stunned silence and tears formed in their eyes. The doctor’s heart opened in a way it never had before, and her life was forever changed. She knew this ‘coincidence’ held a deep message for her about how to live the rest of her life and find true peace and happiness.”

The swami finished by saying, “Opening one’s heart is a choice. It’s a difficult choice much of the time. But in the end, the doctor realized acting with love and compassion is the only way life would ever make sense.”

Chapter 38

Laney

It seems my recent songs were a foreshadowing of what was to happen to me.

Black birds warning of danger unless we all learn how to fly. Trying to steer my soul far above the madness of the world.

The foreshadow was about my time with Amma. Being around this person felt like a re-merging with my *real* mother – not my blood mother. My real mother. I can't even explain what that means. But I wanted to be near her. Even after we got home I wanted to be near her. I had been missing her too long, without even knowing she existed.

And now I am faced with a heavy choice.

One I would never wish to make.

Because I have a dark secret I have never told Gabe. A terrible truth that would crush his spirit and quite probably ruin his love for me.

The woman doctor: she is me, in many ways, because she had a heart she could not trust. Perhaps she even had similar reasons for having such a cynical view of the world. I just know that I have experienced my heart being closed like hers for most of my life.

I hear that doctor story echoing in my head again and again, and I think of the mother giving birth, and my first thought is: I never want children. Never. I can't even take care of myself, my own thoughts, my own needs.

And I don't want to live a "normal" life – I don't want to be a wife – what's the point of that? I don't want to start a

family. Families are a joke. I didn't even want to be anyone's lover, but I just couldn't resist him. I wanted to see if I could fly *just that one time*, but he captured my heart in the most unexpected way, and I wanted to fly like that again and again. I know how lucky I've been to experience love, with him.

But imagine me being a *mother*! Right after the birth I would want to hide away. Because I know I would find a way to wreck this child's life, poison its brain, fill it with suffering and loneliness beyond their wildest wild-eyed imagination.

My mother unplugged me from the evolutionary grid of birth and death. I've wandered so far off that trail it would take me a lifetime just to get back to the beginning. I don't want to create another lonely motherless voice in the world. Another orphan.

Gabe and I have been living on a shooting star. We never speak of the future. I never want to. Because I don't need the things he wants, or want the things he needs. And on some level I think he knows that. He must by now.

He needs to find someone someday who has his future in mind. Who wants the whole thing – *everything* that sane people want. He's too good to live futureless. Childless.

He doesn't know this about himself. But I do.

I feel something swirling around in my stomach. I feel me slipping away from this time-bubble I've been in with him – all the beautiful memories the mind can only take *still-pictures* of to understand – that's all that is left.

Something has been hatched, killed, birthed, deep inside me, begging me to find some other way home.

Chapter 39

Gabriel

On the plane ride back to Maui we were both feeling pretty wiped out. We tried to sleep but were woken up intermittently – on purpose, it seemed – by stewardesses asking us if we wanted pretzels, then guava juice, then fasten your seat belt please, we’re hitting turbulence. REM sleep was not in the cards. I opened my eyes after one brief interval of sleep and saw Laney looking out the window. She seemed upset. Was that a tear?

“What’s up? I asked groggily.

“I don't know. A lot of things happened back there for me.”

“For me too. Tell me about how you felt first.”

“I don’t know how to.”

“Water?” a stewardess interrupted.

“No thanks.”

“Yes,” Laney said. “Please.”

Laney reached her hand over my seat as the stewardess passed her an over-filled plastic cup of water. Some of it spilled on my lap.

“I’m *so* sorry!” exclaimed the stewardess as she handed me a napkin far too small for me to clean it up with.

As the dampness seeped further into my jeans Laney continued -- she was talking almost as if to herself.

“The past is not the problem, really... I have to let go of all that. It’s connecting to the future that’s the problem.”

I waited for her to continue, not quite sure where this was heading.

“Amma’s hug moved me. There were no strings attached. Even a mother or a father hugging their son or daughter – there are always hopes, expectations, strings attached.”

I stared at her blankly.

“So,” she looked at me for the first time, “I’m saying to myself, what does that have to do with anything? So what? Right?” Her eyes teared up again.

I said something very disjointed, like, “No, no, I understand. Amma impressed me like that too.”

“Okay,” she said half-heartedly. “All good.”

She put her hand in mine. She closed her eyes and we both dozed off.

Chapter 40

Gabriel

There is a need that is unique to the human species – no other animals have the drive to know *why* they have been born, and what is going on beyond the planet they're living on. The bigger question is, who is better off? The humans or the animals?

Other living things are concerned about life too – therefore they eat, and procreate, and stay close to each other, in families or flocks or pods, for protection.

But people are aware of some vague disconnection, even when they're inside the pod. Inside themselves.

We feel this intense desire to connect to something that *we are sure* got disconnected long ago. But we don't know what it is, or if we'll ever understand it.

Spirituality, or psychoanalysis, can help glue certain threads together. But whether this disconnection is even real in the first place is – as Swami would say – a “very good question!”

Maybe the only reason we feel disconnected is because we're human and not dolphins, or seagulls. Either they don't get how bad things are, or we're making life more difficult than it has to be.

We landed. I dropped Laney off at her apartment at 4 pm. She was tired, but I had gotten a second wind and headed straight to the beach. I walked up to the first wave I saw, jumped in, and began to swim... I swam out, and farther out, until I was beyond the waves breaking. It was silent there. Peaceful.

I dog paddled for a while and looked up at the sun with my eyes closed and inhaled deeply. It was good to be back in this place.... More dog paddling, wiping strands of hair out of my face... and then I felt something odd happen.

I thought of Laney and felt very lonely. For her. What was she going through? I wanted to help her work it out. Because I didn't feel disconnected from the world anymore. Laney was my connection... to everything. I could never be pulled away from her. The only thing that could pull us apart would be some unexpected twist of fate. I'd have to drown in a twenty foot wave. Destiny would have to come raging in like a tidal wave and blow everything out of the water. I was determined to get to the bottom of her discontent, and get us back to wave riding -- living inside this cool algorithmless dream that was washing over us.

Chapter 41

Laney

I can't tell him, not yet. I can't break him. I make love to him every day as if it were for the last time. He doesn't catch on. He enjoys it and thinks everything is great. He's like a puppy, I swear he is.

During my first week back I met up with the man who hosted Swami's visit. He connected me to a woman who had been to Amma's ashram in India and lived there for a time. The woman said the ashram is located in a province of India called Kerala, on the Malabar Coast.

I wanted to know who ran the ashram when Amma was on tour? What was a typical day like? What kind of work or service do the people living there perform each day? How often do they meditate, and sing, and chant? What are the people like who live there?

Why are you asking all these details, the woman wanted to know?

"I'm just curious," I replied.

* * *

Gabriel is the sweetest person imaginable. I know he doesn't feel like an orphan anymore, not when I'm with him. He is blissful with me, and content when he's by himself knowing he's with me. I see that.

I, on the other hand, am still writing dark songs with characters that can't commit, and endings that toss the

listener out to sea. He hears them. He reads over the lyrics when the song is over. *He must know!*

The genesis of the black cloud I live under comes from that long ago time, obviously. But it's about much more than that now. This current black cloud is something very specific. It's a lie that's come between us.

I don't want children. And I know he does.

I accidentally read it in his notebook one night. He wanted me to read something he'd just written. He handed me his journal and the page just fell open by chance in front of me: "I want to have a child with you, start a family...."

It stunned me, frightened me. Because I love him, but I don't love the fairytale he loves. I can't supply that for him. I can't make that sacrifice.

When he is a father someday, with somebody else, he will no longer be an orphan in this life; not ever again. That's what he needs to be complete. I can see that. But that isn't what will make me complete.

So I have hit a wave as tall as a ten thousand foot mountain. It's about to curl and explode over both of us. I have already hit it head-on at a hundred miles an hour, with him only a short distance behind me; and it's tearing at every cell in my body.

I stand between the grave and the rainbow, where crossroads live, where the pretty games end and the choices become all too clear; where *over there* lovers kiss and laugh and surf, and over here, after the wave has crashed and receded, living things crawl away just barely alive. Living things crawl away in opposite directions.

If I were away from here, at the ashram in India, with space and time to think, to learn about myself... if I could

just find a way to purge this lonely brooding, this heavy glacier I have at the core of me – purge it – which is what happened for a moment, for one instant, when Amma hugged me... that was the very first time my mind was clear and happy, teary with uncontrolled joy, because suddenly, *there was nothing to worry about.*

Amma was not a God, not an angel, not a good fairy, or a medicine woman. She wasn't trying to redirect, or change anyone. She was a mirror. She showed me in her ten second embrace where love existed in me. It felt like one quick tearful explosion of joy. She hugged me without trying to make me a better person, without trying to make me happier, without trying to change my future. She hugged me for no reason, without reason! That's what made it so intense. The irrationality in that moment scrambled my cynicism and coldness. I couldn't help but feel it.

I think I can find that kind of love again inside me. But not here. Not while loving him the way I do. My love for Gabe most of the time is more physical, it's about fun and distraction: endless surfing under a golden sky. Basking within that big sun he shines on me. Aphrodisiac, or Armageddon? I couldn't know.

At the ashram, time could slow down. Maybe until it vanished altogether. I would have to face myself, but this time without fear. I might learn how to finally forgive there. Forgive my past, forgive myself for the way I am.

If I stay here I can't love him any more than I have so far. I don't have it in me.... And that's not enough for him. He wants more, though he won't say it to me directly.

Gabriel *is* the sweetest person imaginable. And that's why I must not change my mind.

He has a future. I know he does. He deserves a future, where he gets to become whole.

And so do I.

Chapter 42

Laney

Another story was told at the ashram that weekend.

A man went up to a great spiritual master and said, "Swami, thank you for making all the sacrifices you make, renouncing the physical world to devote yourself to God, so that you can teach us God's way."

The master said, "In fact, I should bow down to you, for your sacrifices are greater than mine."

The man said, "Swami, how can you possibly mean that? I have a family that I love, and a big house, and all the material things I could ever desire."

Swami said, "I renounced the pleasures of this world for the sake of obtaining my inner peace, whereas you have willingly sacrificed your inner peace in exchange for all the problems of worldly life, and are even now battling the wars that rage in that world every day. You come to me to help you with your mind. You are aching to find inner peace, are you not? So whose sacrifice then is the greater one?"

Gabriel, you brought me your wisdom, and set me free for a time. You fed me with your passion.

But now I have to take it a step further. I have to be that bird flying home, free, even though staying forever on your window sill tempts me to the very core of who I am, until I ache with missing you before I even leave.

Chapter 43

Gabriel

“Wonderful! Sounds great, Laney. *India!* With no idea of when, or if, you might come back!”

... I really lost it. I continued shouting at her, “Hey, maybe you’ll stay forever and become a Swamini! Maybe you’ll learn how to love *everybody* and nobody all at the same time! Maybe you’ll live for a thousand years and become the ‘Saint of Perpetual Confusion’ ... Or maybe after ten short years you’ll find your true calling, decide to become an American again, and start a school for the heartless and eternally fucked-up. Teach them how to really take it to the next level!”

Despite her poetic explanations I wasn’t persuaded to simply let go of her, buy her a sari, drive her to the airport and wave goodbye. I felt pure anger. *Rage!* Unreal. I felt like she had just given me a hand grenade, pulled the pin, and walked away.

And a jester was reborn, as a jester often is, amidst the darkness and chaos. I laughed all the way down to the bottom, as the waves crushed me. I became so disoriented I had no idea which way was up or down. All I knew was I didn’t want to live on the surface anymore.

Then I cried, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. And never had before. “Going to India to meditate and study scriptures and serve the poor. Okay, these sound like very noble things on the surface. Yes. But I will tell you what this is really about, Laney, whether you want to hear it or not. This is about repeating the nightmare your mother

injected into you. *You're repeating it, not changing it...* Now you are *her*. You are doing it to *me!* *Leaving me*. The only person on earth who loves you. Just like she left him, and then left you. Your mother has won! You're running away from life at jet speed...."

She shot back, "My mother ran away for her own selfish reasons. She was living too many lies and got sick of it. She was a coward."

"Your mother fed her darkness to everyone she touched – a death sentence for you and for your father. It tore you both apart like a bullet to the head. And now you're aiming the same gun at me."

"Gabriel, you have always been honest with me. If we stayed together, where was this going? Where was this leading? Engagement? Marriage? Children?"

"Yes! Yes! I wanted to have *everything* with you! *Is that what you want to hear?*"

"Well *I don't want that!* I love you. But I don't want that with you. Because I don't want that with *anyone*. I have no capacity to even consider it."

"You're chickening out, Laney! You're destroying what you helped create with me, what we became together. You're running from yourself, in the name of what? Self-healing? Compassion? You think compassion and peace of mind is out there, in India, isolated and controlled – like some cold theory that your mind can actually handle and evolve into? In isolation? You think you can use meditation to build a wall to keep the world at arm's length? When you finally help someone who is hurt or homeless, make sure it's no one you know! Or you might actually feel something."

"I understand what you're saying, Gabe. But love is something that comes more naturally to you. When we met you at least understood it in theory. But I...."

"Love isn't a theory, Laney. It's HERE. Right now! You feel it. I know you do. The feeling is *real*. There's nothing more to understand about it."

She looked down at the ground, shaking. "You're right, Gabe. You *are* right. In a way, I am doing to you exactly what my mother did to me."

She said it stoically, but then she started to cry. "I see it. And I'm sorry. But I have to do this. *Please* forgive me. You are the last person in the world I would want to hurt. When you're near me I live in the sunlight. But when I'm alone, my mind goes to all the other places you can't see. You have the potential to become a whole person someday. Me, I don't think so, not now, not yet, there are just too many disconnected pieces."

Chapter 44

Laney

He stormed out of my apartment. When I tried to call him later in the day he didn't answer his phone. So I went to his place to find him.

I knocked on his door softly, like I always do. It's my secret code to let him know it's me.

There was no response. So I stepped away, ready to leave.

But then I decided to try to turn the knob, and the door opened.

The room was empty. He had moved out. Within a few hours he had completely unplugged his life from this place, and from me.

The only thing he left behind was his cell phone. He left this world behind with no connection back. There was no way to contact him.

He left me with the memory of his tears. But over time I would remember the rest. I had to move on now. He would have been pulling at my heart from three blocks away. I'm not sure I would have had the strength to do what I needed to do for myself if he had stayed. Gabriel had been kind enough to make it easy for me.

I left for India the following week.

Chapter 45

Gabriel

Words by definition are ambiguous. The mind can travel through them in any one of a thousand directions, stringing thoughts together, tumbling right past the truth until everything crashes into confusion.

Was it me who was misinterpreting things – lying to myself about the value of love in the physical world? Putting too much emphasis on love lasting through time? Was I being tricked into letting my senses and my desire define love? Was I simply afraid of falling back into my self and finding nothing of value there? Yes, of course. Of course.

Time and time again I tried to persuade myself to get on a plane to India and join her. She was there at Amma's ashram at this very instant. But the only reason I would go would be to beg her to come back with me. It wasn't my fate to be there. I knew that clearly.

I was too trapped in the physical, sensual world. Now that I'd had a taste of her – her salty ocean skin, and her mouth, it had the literal taste of honey and milk, cherries, orange? Some combination of these things at different moments, different times when I kissed her, in my taste-memory – but *from* that taste I had been ecstatically *destroyed* and reincarnated by her, into “us.”

I fantasized about us having a child – with *her* eyes, growing up, and Laney and I growing old together, the three of us, or four, or five – I could smell the holy perfume of two souls merging, like the smell of a beautiful family meal

cooking on the stove on a holiday night. So many things I had yet to experience with her, or anyone.

I breathed in our time together, all in one breath, like breathing in redwood mist thousands of years in the making. I touched her, falling into the bottomless cloud of her – touching Chinese silk, hair bathed in yellow from the sun. And I heard her songs which ripped brooding holes in my brain. And I heard her stories, as she pried her memories loose. Which in turn moved me to hold her tighter, which in turn moved me to breathe in the subtle fragrance of the golden strands of hair that fell over my arm when she turned and moaned in her sleep lying next to me.

Now that I had tasted and felt all of that – the thought of giving it up, never having her again, never finding that perfect merging -- two orphaned ghosts swimming in fractured light, birthing themselves into a stained glass window in a church we built together -- never again *feeling* all of that, was, truly, death defying. I needed to find a way to stay alive.

Chapter 46

Laney's journey to Kerala was difficult. Much of the India she saw on the way there was not pretty, not loving, not as she had imagined, but filled with desolate people, poorer than she had ever understood poverty to be.

But Kerala itself was beautiful. Amma's pink ashram was nestled against the edge of the Indian Ocean, buzzing with activity, all ultimately aimed at serving others. Her instincts about Amma were right. There was nothing fake or dark here.

Amma did not believe in changing anyone's religion — she wanted each person to find their own way to God through whatever religion or guru or heart-opening way they chose. But the chants that were sung at the ashram were hardly non-denominational. Amma was Hindu, and she sang those songs, and quoted stories about Krishna, Shiva, and the other Hindu deities often. Very few chants were ever sung in English.

Laney felt lost at first. She was accepted and honored for coming, given shelter, and then put right to work helping Amma's charities. She felt the loneliness of not having an identity anymore. Her music and songs made no sense at all here. There was no piano to play. She put her voice away, reserving only the broken edges of it for chanting.

As much as everyone seemed to care for her as a human being, and fed her, and made sure she knew where the meditation hall was, she had no one anywhere, not even a casual friend like Roxie, or an acquaintance like the people she had met at work back in her computer days, that knew

her at all, or cared if she stayed, or left. Staying or leaving was her personal choice, and no concern of anyone else's.

As difficult as the transition was, however, when Amma was there – which was not often the case due to her demanding tour schedule – it was a powerful experience. The hugs Laney received, and the talks Amma and the swamis gave, were worth a hundred nights of Amma being gone.

After months of doubt and restlessness she felt a strange inner joy slowly growing in her – the world had slowed down for her. Time was altered. She was able to understand with a clarity never experienced before that people hardly ever do anything *to you*, they just do what they do. There was nothing personal about it.

More importantly, she began to understand through Amma's teachings that karma is not what happens to you, but is instead your reaction to the things that happen to you. Your *reaction* is what kept the karmic wheel turning.

Laney's meditations became deeper and quieter. She understood how her mind could become peaceful, at least for short periods of time.

One day she fell into a deep reverie, fully awake, meditating on the darkness and sorrows of the world. She let all the darkness spill over her – the nightmares of war and betrayals, the Nazis, the ugliness of the Iraq war, the mean-spiritedness of so many world leaders. Then she thought of all the people who had wronged her in her life, her mother, her father... and with great effort, with a tremendous leap of inner faith, she forgave them all. Because there was no other sane choice to make *except* to forgive and let go. She learned the art of surrendering back into the present moment. By the

end of her meditation she even forgave herself. She forgave her anxiety and fear, and what it did to her. Then she forgave darkness and evil itself.

After that epiphany, which perhaps only lasted a few hours, the word “forgiveness” began to disappear, and the *act* of forgiveness took up some small residence inside of her.

More days and months passed. The heat was devastating, searing, relentless. Daily living was difficult, and the work never ended – mundane jobs, and long hours of meditating and chanting and prayers.

The next time Amma was there, with all the people at the ashram gathered before her, Amma said something that moved Laney profoundly.

“God did not make the way hard. Love does not have to be hard. Nor does God intend for you to fail. It is as if you leave home and on the path you leave sharp stones behind you, and you throw paper wrappers on the ground from the food you eat, and then as you are going back home you get angry because you are stepping on all the sharp stones and you are very saddened by the food wrappers that make the path in the forest so ugly. God did not put those things there. *You did!*”

“Everything that has happened to you is a signpost that can either lead you deeper into the war inside your own mind and your ego, or lead you deeper to compassion and love and inner peace. Your interpretation of the events you experience is the only reality you can ever know.”

Laney understood what Amma meant by this. Her many hours of meditation had run her up against these very things – obstacles that should have been sign posts.

She found herself crying, but not out of sadness. For the first time she was able to erase all previous mental entrapments, promises, resentments, and assumptions that her mind had made her a prisoner of: hating her mother, disrespecting her father for the choices he made, not believing she could love anyone forever, feeling the world was doomed to sunsets, and that starlight was just a reminder of how distant she felt from everything, how far away she was from truly knowing anything.

She had been cynically destroying herself by seeing life through a looking glass supplied to her as a young teenager. Warped and cracked into pieces from being abandoned. not by her mother, but by the one person that really loved her. Her father! He abandoned her even though he loved her more than anyone in the world. He was too simply weak to give to the world anymore, or care.

It was a familiar story. She wasn't like her mother in Gabe's condemning metaphor. She was like her father!

For a moment she felt what it was like to be free of *everything*. And then she was pulled back down to earth again by becoming aware of her own breathing. Back home, alone with herself.

Chapter 47

Laney

One evening, as I listened to Amma speak from a balcony, a bird landed in the courtyard right next to where I was sitting.

It startled me. I stood up abruptly. It sensed my fright and catapulted itself upward, wings fluttering. Up and up it flew, until it came to the top balcony of the ashram where Amma stood dressed in her simple white sari. The bird stopped in mid-flight, and landed right on Amma's shoulder.

Amma looked down into the courtyard. She looked directly at me, smiled, and put her hand to her heart.

Chapter 48

Gabriel

Rob and Avery liked Laney. They thought we were perfect for each other. They told me that just before we flew back to Maui. They didn't have what we had, they sighed; they could see the love in our eyes, flowing through our skin, oozing right through our clothes. They laughed about it.

Now I had to make a painful call from a pay phone and tell him – his little idea of bringing Amma into my life had backfired.

He gave me the address of the ashram in India and suggested I write to her. I wasn't sure it was a good idea.

"Does she even know where you are?" he asked.

"No."

"Do I know where you are?" he chuckled.

"Obviously not, if you have to ask."

He waited for me to say something more. So I told him. First I had gone back to Berkeley to see my adopted parents, who I found out after ringing their doorbell, had moved without letting me know where they went.

"Like father, like son," he intoned.

"Yes, very funny. The irony is not lost on me."

"Gabe, I think you should try to contact her, just once, just to see if maybe her thinking has changed. It's not easy being there. The work is hard. Constant service. Kerala is the hub of all her charitable work. The heat is endless. The rooms are like mouse holes. Mats for beds. And Gabe, people do couple up there, with Amma's blessing. Amma is not telling people to live a life of celibacy. Only she and the

swamis are bound as renunciates. I am telling you this not to make you think she would ever want to get involved with someone else, but to say that she will see that being with Amma and being with you are not mutually exclusive. Amma loves children and honors family life. If Laney sees Amma accepting couples and family life as part of the world Amma surrounds herself with, maybe she'll change her mind about what she really wants. The ashram eventually finds a way to kick out all but the most ferocious devotees."

"I understand what you're saying, Rob, but she is my emotional assassin at the moment. Why invite her back to kill me all over again?"

"Because moments change. How do you know she would kill you again, Gabe?"

When I got off the phone I realized I was now at a true jester's crossroads. Unlike Rob, I assumed all directions led to the same preposterously senseless dead end.

Chapter 49

Gabriel

I made the decision to go to the San Ramon ashram to see Amma during her next visit there. This was the time of year for her to be there as part of her annual U.S. summer tour. San Ramon was only a 45 minute drive from Berkeley. I found someone to give me a ride.

I had a fearfully ecstatic feeling that Laney might be there as part of the staff.

But I also wanted to seek out the swami we had met in Maui. I really had nothing specific to talk to him about. He was just the best choice available to me at the time. He was the wisest person I knew.

This was also my goodbye.

My plan was to go to Amma's event, then hop on a plane (with the money I had made from a few odd jobs over the last six months) and go back to live in Maui. Friday nights at Jimmy Hoy's bar was not in the offing. But I missed the beaches. I wanted to surf the waves again. Plus, the thought of living through a rainy winter in California was not appealing in my present state of mind.

As I walked up the sloping path to the big wooden ashram my footsteps slowed. I saw Swami in his orange robe, talking to a few people who surrounded him. He smiled at me as if he recognized me and then excused himself.

"Maui, yes?" he smiled.

I nodded and smiled back politely, amazed at his ability to recognize me after so long.

“Laney’s friend. The Laney at the ashram in Kerala now?”

He knew her by name now.

I didn’t say anything in response. He saw through my silence to the pain. He nodded. “Would you like to take a walk with me? I have to be back in the hall in an hour but I need to stretch my legs.”

We walked up a grassy knoll, then cut across a structure they used only for the staff until we came to an opening. Rolling hills lay before us.

It became clear to me at some point that he did not intend to say anything to me. He was just walking and had invited me along. Out of sympathy? Or did he know I would ask him questions?

He was walking with his hands folded together behind his back. He seemed to be humming or chanting to himself.

“So what’s it like at the ashram in India?” I heard myself ask. I hoped I wasn’t interrupting him. It sounded like a stupid question the moment I said it.

“It’s not an easy life there. It’s not for everyone.”

He said no more. I had the feeling I shouldn’t say anything more relating to Laney. It didn’t seem appropriate or fruitful to try to pry information out of him. Moreover, he was based in the U.S. and visited the Kerala ashram infrequently. It was doubtful he knew much about her in any personal kind of way.

I said, “Swami, during all your years of meditation, have you ever experienced enlightenment?”

“No!” he chuckled.

“Even for just a few seconds?”

He laughed harder. “No!”

He slowed his pace and looked at me: "But that's not the point for me! It's not a goal of mine. Amma is an enlightened being, but she is not anything to aspire to. Believe me. She was born like that. She is not someone anyone else can be like. She just is."

"I've been meditating for only a few years, Swami, but more than ever this summer. And although it's a good practice, and I get a glimpse of what it can do for me, nothing extraordinary ever seems to come of it."

"The fact that you are meditating despite what you just said is in itself extraordinary!" Swami exclaimed. "Good for you! But you must know it is good for something or you wouldn't do it anymore."

"One would think!" I laughed. "But I really don't know why I keep doing it, other than it being a promise I made to myself."

"Amma says, 'Never underestimate the progress you are making.' But you know, it's almost always very subtle. It's like being aware of the air we breathe, and then asking it 'what now?'"

I laughed. That was exactly what it felt like sometimes. He nodded at my laughter, then said. "You loved the girl."

"Yes," I thought it was an odd but perceptive segue. "She's in my thoughts all the time. I can't let go of her."

"That's good," he said. "Let her lead the way then."

I absolutely *didn't* get his point.

He realized that, then added, "If you forgive her, and allow her to be a part of you, she can show you deeper places."

"I can't do that. I'm not there yet," I admitted.

“The girl, she is your teacher. I mean actually, that your thoughts and memories of the girl are your inner teacher. You choose how to frame the images. You can use your sense of longing for her to go deeper into yourself, because the love you had with her was real. Or you can become darkened from it for no logical reason. One is true love, and one is just attachment. People can be attached to money, or a car. But that's the opposite of love. And, if you don't allow her to teach you the difference then you will be carried further out into the darkness, because love will become as mundane as your desire for the car. You want it. You need it. And you're angry if you can't have it. And that kind of thinking would be *your* fault, not hers. So which is it? Love, or ego attachment?”

“I still love her....”

“What did you learn from her? Did you learn to love? Or did you learn to mistrust everything even more than before?”

“Both. Because I loved her too much.”

“Or, I might suggest, not fully enough.”

“I can never love the way you are describing it. Maybe sometimes when I look up at the stars, every once in a while I get this magical feeling of.... “

“Way out there where Stephen Hawking lives. But that love is just observing molecules held together by mathematical equations. You felt something deeper after meeting her. What was that? The choices we make each second in our own minds teach us all we can ever know about connecting with God and the universe and love in this lifetime. They are inseparable.”

Chapter 50

Laney

I remember the first time I entered the main courtyard of Amma's Kerala ashram, hot and sweaty, with my backpack pulling at my hips, I felt a warm buzzing feeling. I have experienced this a number of times since. It's not really explainable. So I won't try to reason it out. Words make it sound quite insane, actually. Let's just say I felt I had come to a place that was unworldly.

Amma lived directly upstairs from the courtyard when she wasn't touring – in a small room adjacent to the temple. The colors of the ashram were various hues of washed out pink. But the stairs leading to her room were red, with flowers painted on each step.

At first blush, ashram living seemed very quiet. 4:30 a.m. meditation, followed by charitable work -- seva -- until nightfall, interspersed with private meditation throughout the day. But as the days went on I was put to work more and more, and given more serious responsibilities, becoming an integral part of Amma's version of Santa's Workshop.

People all over the world would be helped by what we were doing. Amma's charities included orphanages, housing for the poor, planting trees to replace ones that have been cut down, soup kitchens in a hundred cities, free hospitals for those who couldn't afford them, and a free university.

During those times when she was actually at the ashram she would give darshan (hugs) to everyone there.

Some of my favorite moments were my hugs. I would start to laugh and cry at the same time while shivering for no

comprehensible reason. Very strange. She would rub my back and whisper things in my ear, often times in a language I couldn't understand.

One job I had every Saturday was taking care of the ashram's children. The irony was not lost on me. I was very resistant at first and tried to get out of it, but they insisted I would be good at it, and after all it would only be for two hours a week. I taught them English and led them in simple chants.

Children's emotions are always so transparent. (A refreshing break from my own propensity for the opaque.) There was lots of laughter and rebellious chaos, which Amma always encouraged. I found the work to be fun sometimes. But after I was done I was always relieved to get back to my meditations and the quietness of the evenings.

I was living in a small room the size of a jail cell with three other women. The floors were tiled. Everyone had a thin mat to sleep on. We had one small window in the room. No fan. It was way too hot almost twenty-four hours a day.

One of the girls I lived with was a westerner who had taken on a name that Amma had given her. She introduced herself as Nadasri. We spoke of why we came here in psychological terms. And sometimes we shared what kinds of things we (inadvertently) thought about during our meditations.

Something about Nadasri's constant gentleness moved me. She mentioned to me in a neutral tone that she'd had a painful childhood. Her parents were divorced when she was nine. She lived with her disinterested aunt for a while. No siblings.

I didn't share the specifics of my past with her, or with anyone else. I didn't want to be judged or second guessed or psychoanalyzed. I didn't want to talk about Gabriel either. Or my music. I didn't want to be roped into being one of the musicians here during the Satsangs. I just wanted to be left in peace.

Nadasri didn't pry or probe. She only talked about the things I was willing to.

Sometimes I thought to myself, if her childhood was as bad as mine, how did she end up so happy? She seemed to have an undefeatable spirit along with a deep passion to serve others. Was she just born that way?

She and I would sometimes find time during a break from work to go to a shady place on the grounds and talk.

We usually spoke about things going on in the office—things that needed to get done by morning. This day I said to her: "So what do you like best about being here?"

She thought about it for a while, then laughed for a moment. "I like the songs and the chanting. And the dinners afterwards!"

I said, "Yes, the food is spicier at the California ashram. I like it better that way."

She said, "I've never been to California. What's the ashram like there?"

"It's great! Big crowds when Amma shows up!"

Nadasri was silent for a while, then she whispered: "And I like the smell of the incense here, it's everywhere you go." She looked straight at me, "But I also like you, Laney. I'm glad to have met you. I feel a special spirit connection with you. I think we were meant to meet for some reason. That sounds a bit crazy when I say it out loud. I'm sorry."

“No, not at all. But what do you think the reason might be?” I felt a sudden chill come over me.

“I think I know. But I’m not sure I should say it.”

“Please do!” I pleaded. “I won’t judge you in any way no matter what you say.”

“Okay, alright. Well, honestly, I just have a sense I should tell you that there’s somewhere else you need to be; something else you need to do.”

“Really? What’s that?”

“Oh, I don’t know....”

I thought about Gabriel, but then another thought came to me. I had abandoned my music and my songwriting twice.

I don’t know why I asked her at that very moment, but at the ashram these things happen sometimes:

“. . .What does your Indian name mean? Does Nadasri have an English translation?”

“Yes,” she replied. “One who brings auspiciousness through sound.”

I was a bit stunned. “Do you play music?”

“No,” she laughed, I never have! That’s just the name Amma gave me. I have no idea why.”

Chapter 51

Laney

I used to think whatever I thought was obviously “me.”

Then, after meditating at the ashram every day for many months, I came to believe that none of the thoughts I think are me. I found peace and clarity by discovering a deeper wordless me.

But now I think *all thoughts, including wordless thoughts, are me*, which gives me another added perspective. Basically, all thoughts, and all wordless perceptions are just mind confetti.

Even the “coincidences” that seem to happen at the ashram all the time, I try to just let them come and go. I have no way of knowing what is really going on here. It’s like I’m being tossed around in a dreamy non-dream. The first non-dream of my life.

Without being tied into my mental fables I’m free – like the music I hear in my head is free. Nothing to capture or organize or enshrine. Nothing to play out. No reason to find the underlying chords.

Sometimes when I’m walking back to my room after my morning meditation at six a.m., one bird singing, the sun just beginning to erase the blackness with a hint of gray, I think back to my early morning hours in Maui. The other side of the planet from here. There were always birds singing outside his window. Early morning and at sunset. They were like a choir – singing a hundred different verses of the same song all at once. Like prayerful chants echoing out from the trees.

Chapter 52

Laney

My six month anniversary of coming to the ashram was a watershed time. I had been meditating, chanting for hours every night... always waiting to find another magical opening, another key to set me free. Again.

Hoping to become even freer.

But now I was simply exhausted, mentally and physically. I'd hit a wall.

Many wonderful things had happened to me here. Great things. Mystical things. But a deeper reality had set in, and it wasn't simply running it's course and melting me into a more peaceful place.

I was searching for a home, outside and inside, but I began to think it would never exist anywhere. I began to think in Gabe-isms:

"Delete finding a home from the desire gameboard. Obliterate it. Let it go! Hey, I never had one either, Laney. So what? I could hear him crowing so loudly right inside my brain, "Pick a place on a world map, zoom in closer, down through the clouds, past the hills and trees and telephone lines and look at all the people there walking down the streets of their town. Who are they? Orphans! Every one of them. Just like me. Just like you."

I know that, Gabe. I know.

With the guidance of a great guru, I came to realize something maybe Gabe had alluded to from the start with his orphaned mind-set -- We are all searching for something

elusive, our “selves,” but that may not exist in any dimension.

Yet through my inner searching here, something positive had changed in me. I felt like I had no special wound to heal anymore. I had exhausted it. Memories were simply my chosen interpretation of an old dead story, with grayed-out characters who have gone their own way long ago. The stories had become boring, meaningless.

I had become many times reincarnated from the little girl of my childhood. That little girl wanted out, I got her out.

But today I’m left with this other me. It feels different than any me before. I am searching for what can replace all the anger and sadness and pain that had previously taken up *so much inner space!*

There seems to only be a Great Maze leading to endless trap doors, until they too, one at a time, turn to mind-dust and tumble away. True emptiness. And not all good.

I turn my face to the sun only to find more mazes in each beam of light, temporary answers that come to reveal more trap doors.

Notes scribbled in pencil on a small notepad to remember the maze I just made it through, they are like little poems about traps leading to more traps. That then became word traps. Ego traps. I will throw the notes into a fire each night.

But the ego is so omnipresent, even towering over this new imaginary ritual, laughing at me: “Why do you write anything down in the first place? For *ME!* Yes, for *Me!*”

Something bad was happening. A new darkness.

Why not see thoughts for what they are once and for all? Child sculptures. Clay worms. We think we are Rodin, or Camille Claudel. No. Clay worms is all we ever create.

But the illusions keep circling around me like vultures. Swami warned me not to look for meaning when I meditate. Just *live the meaning*. Day by day.

But what does that mean *exactly*? Why don't these people just write an instruction manual?

A voice eerily like my mother's starts to scream at me,

"Meaning is not here! You can't 'live the meaning' either, because it doesn't exist. It's a ghost in a haunted house!"

"You are looking for perfect endings that complete the circle of you, little girl? That's not going to happen! Ever. There is no circle. There is no completion. Didn't I teach that to you before I left you? You are like a slave hoping to find freedom, until you become even more of a slave to the idea of finding freedom! You're like a deaf person trying to hum the songs that sparrows sing."

"Did you ever notice that 'meaning' has the word 'mean' in it? There is a very good reason for that. The reason is, the fact is, well, I'll let you find out in time, like I did. And you will find out. You can't hide in this place forever, little daughter. And you can't hide the me in you forever either. I'm still here. STILL HERE!"

My response to my mother's words:

You are just as much of an illusion as freedom is.

You can no longer touch me, or enslave me.

You have lost the power to even get me to respond.

As soon as I thought that thought, and knew it to be true, her voice fell screaming down through one of the trap doors we were standing next to.

Trap doors are not all bad.

Her words turned into a puff of smoke as she disappeared.

I slept well that night.

And in the morning, after meditation, the sun rose again over the ashram gates.

Chapter 53

Laney and Nadasri were having a conversation at their favorite shade-cooled wall near the entrance. They were eating a small lunch they had packed. It was mid-June. Amma was away – in San Ramon on this day, in fact.

Suddenly Laney spotted a child in the courtyard. He was a western boy – awkward, geeky looking, with thick glasses and very short almost fully shaved red hair. He was walking with his mother.

Nadasri watched Laney observing the boy.

“That boy is very sick,” Nadasri offered. “They came for Amma’s prayers a few months ago. Now they come here sometimes to meditate together.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Laney asked.

“I don’t know. But I don't think he will be alive much longer unless some miracle happens.”

Laney was wearing a white sari, her golden hair falling across one side of her face. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She tried to wipe them away before Nadasri observed them. Laney sat still in the shadows. She looked like an angel sculpted in silhouette.

The boy noticed her for some reason and stared intently for a moment. He became curious about the look on her face. He came directly over to where she sat:

“Are you a friend of Amma’s?” he asked happily.

“Yes,” she laughed.

Laney hesitated while the boy remained silent, he was still staring at her with his wide sunken eyes. “Are you a hug maker too?”

“Yes, I can be... Do you want a hug?” Laney asked.
He walked into her arms immediately, no hesitation.
She noticed his muscle tone was soft and spongy. He was thin and cold to the touch.

Laney closed her eyes and tried to hug the boy the way Amma would have.

She pulled him close to her body and waited in the silence, not knowing what to do or say next.

His voice was muffled in the fabric of her shoulder. He whispered, “I’ve been a little scared... about dying.”

Laney rocked him and held him closer. She felt a sudden jolt, an electric current of pure love pulsing through her body. She began shaking from the power of it. She thought of saying, “Everyone is scared of dying.” But that wasn’t right. *That wasn’t the answer! That’s not what he needed from her.*

She felt him begin to cry. His face turned hot.

She silently screamed out to God, “Please *please* help me! *Please tell me what to do!*”

In a moment of supreme clarity and calm, she knew.

She felt a stillness come over her, as if she were now soaking peacefully in a warm bath. She let out a long sigh and kissed the top of his head over and over again. Then she held his face in her hands until they were staring into each other’s eyes inches away.

“Do you want to know a secret about dying?” she asked.

“Mmm hmmm,” he nodded his head.

Laney whispered softly, “*There’s nothing to worry about!*”

This is what she knew in that moment.

Chapter 54

The boy looked up at her with his brown eyes brightening into a wet glimmer. He cocked his head slightly and smiled a crooked-toothed smile.

Laney started to cry. It turned into sobbing, although it was the last thing she wanted him to see. She held him tightly against her chest so he wouldn't see the tears, but he felt her weeping.

"Why are *you* crying now?" he asked.

"Children make me cry sometimes," she said, wiping her tears with her hand.

"Want some?" he said.

"Some *what? Children?*" she was still crying, but laughing at the same time.

"Yep," he said indifferently. "Want some? We're pretty nice!"

"That's true," she said. Then she whispered, "Anything's possible."

Chapter 55

Gabriel

I remember a beautiful walk Laney and I took in Hana.

We decided to try to speak only about what we saw right at the moment we experienced it. No words or thoughts about the past or future. Or about us.

We wanted to experience “the top” again – the state we were in at the edge of the sky atop Mt. Haleakala. A place where thoughts stopped, where understanding the present moment became an internalized thing.

We began to point out the beautifully strange angle of a tree limb, or the sounds of gravel mixed with sand crunching beneath our shoes, and how small, yet complete, each piece of gravel was unto itself. We stopped for far longer than we normally might have so we could take the time to look at all the amazing details -- the flowing of the stream, watching the ripples momentarily alter the image of the shapes of the stones beneath it, and the leaves being carried like boats downstream. Stream sailing.

We listened to the water, how it changed sound when parted by a boulder in the middle of its path. We stopped to marvel at the strange but brilliant activities of insects, working hard in organized lines between two shadowed rocks. The entirety of the mini-ecosystem we were observing seemed like a universe of coordinated activity.

Then, without saying a word to each other, suddenly knowing speech itself was pulling us away from the direct experience, we both dropped into a state of pure unobstructed wordless observation of everything around

us – the colors, river and rock, atmosphere, whipped cloud, the smell of salt and seaweed as we passed the entrance to a black sand beach.

Then we came to a bamboo forest, a thousand thin white poles alive and clacking together intermittently from each passing breeze. Tree limb tongues, wind breath.

At the end of the trail there was a waterfall crashing off a cliff hundreds of feet high. The water had been travelling down a new river, happily, lazily, unknowingly, passing boulders and tree-lined banks, being pushed along aimlessly, only to find itself, without warning, falling off the edge of the world, releasing into a death and re-birth.

It had not known this is what it wanted until it happened. But now it knew. Now it was free to fall. To fly. To crash home into a still pool at the bottom of heaven. A place where a rainbow glittered above. Just like in Laney's dream.

The memory of the waterfall was vivid. Memories of Laney were endless, like a stream that had become my lifeblood. Laney lived inside of me. She was home inside my thoughts. Her existence made me feel more alive. This is what Swami meant. This is what I knew had to happen, the merging, otherwise I would eventually drown under the weight of trying to forget.

Chapter 56

Dear Laney,

I hope your internal adventure is taking you to beautiful places and keeping you safe. I am here, back in my old apartment in Maui. I surf during the day. I hold you here with me each night.

I want to tell you what I've learned as a "spiritual scientist" since you've been gone:

There's more going on in the human mind than love and fear, and greed and hatred, and joy. There is a force pushing all things forward. So that we become something more than the thoughts in our heads.

I've been trying to work with this revelation lately by allowing your love to lead me to new places. And I've come to a single conclusion, finally.

Something amazing is going on. Something amazing. Far bigger than this world. Despite the meaninglessness that has haunted all of us, and surely haunts all the orphans that have come to be known as the human race – we have all inherited something beautiful.

Scientifically, the high probability is that in the end, the earth will wander off and blow away. But, if there is one thing that I ABSOLUTELY DON'T CARE ABOUT, and refuse to worry about in this lifetime, it's that. Or what happens after that. "Don't ask that question!"

*Here is my message to you, as I watch the sun rising this morning,
and I think of another day without you; and at the same time feel
you here with me, whispering things to me. I whisper this back to
you:*

*The sunrise isn't just atmosphere.
The sunset isn't just the end of light.
No one understands beginnings.
Not all endings end.*

Chapter 57

Gabriel held out no hope of a reply to his letter. Sending it was just something he had to do.

Sure enough weeks passed, no response came.

Silver stars, intensely bright, shown out his open window each night, sparkling like beacons over the ocean.

His bed was next to the window, the same bed she slept in for so many nights.

A childhood memory flashed by of a young boy lost at a carnival that was closing down and getting ready to move on to the next town.

Tents were being dismantled. Rides were being folded into their banged up metal beds. Night was coming; the breeze was turning into a chilled wind.

The boy was looking for his adopted parents. They were caught up in a conversation with a couple they knew, and he had wandered off unnoticed. He half hoped they would forget him there, cold and lonely as he may have been. He was ready to break away even then, with no mother to connect him within, no father to teach him about the world outside.

He would have to teach himself those things.

As he returned from this reverie, back in his room, his eyes refocused. He looked out and upwards and felt the immensity of a million blazing stars that seemed to have crept closer to his window ledge.

He took a deep breath. A long sigh. His mind slowed down. He felt Laney's presence deepen his mood, a glow warmed him beneath his skin, he saw her face so clearly

now before him, and felt all the love they shared. They were connected perfectly together through time, all the way to this place where he was.

He felt compassion for her life, her choices – she was his orphaned other.

She so easily overwhelmed his heart when he thought of her, which he then urged himself to keep open even further. He didn't want to regress all the way back to where he'd been – alone, scared, angry, while faking some semblance of normalcy.

He forced himself to keep his heart connected to her image now, seeking beyond the pain and irreconcilable emptiness. What unfolded was a surety – that the love was real. She loved him. Even now. All the memories then turned bright. He knew he was not an orphan anymore.

How did he get to this starlit place from the empty run-down carnival's end where he'd existed for so long?

Through her.

He imagined seeing into space far beyond his present vision: a universe of stars appeared, shaped like a bird with its wings spread. It was flying away, uncaged at last, expanding at the speed of light.

Chapter 58

Just before midnight Gabriel imagined a small bird landing on his window ledge. A visitor, he thought. Maybe it's brought me a message; or a memory.

As he held his arm out straight, like a perch, and waited quietly, his reverie was broken by someone softly knocking at the door.

The End

- GM