

Somewhere Beautiful

Gary Marks



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~ *Gary Marks*

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Chapter 1

I found myself alone with van Gogh. I was staring at several suns swirling through a tornado of star-fog in a cobalt blue night. The colors seemed to be reaching right out of the painting, searching beyond sanity, when suddenly I heard the muted vibration of a double kick drum that sounded like a deck of cards being shuffled.

I turned around to find Ruth staring at me. She had her headphones on with the volume turned up loud, as she leaned casually against the entranceway of the exhibit.

I know Ruth is usually the name of an old person. I thought about changing her name for the book, but I'm afraid something might get lost that's essential. One small white lie easily leads to another until the picture you're trying to paint devolves into disconnected dots.

Actually, she was wearing a pair of white Vans with black disconnected dots on them. Her jeans were rolled up to the top of her ankles. A thin gold bracelet dangled around the top of her right foot. My eyes gladly traded van Gogh's stars for one more look at her.

She pulled the headphones off and said, "Hey, Mayor."

Now this was amazing really, because even though my real name was Mayor, hardly anyone called me that. Even my parents called me by a nickname unless we were having a very serious talk. Usually people would just say, "Hi," to avoid calling me anything at all, which made me feel kind of invisible. In fact, that was a pretty common feeling I had growing up. But not today. Not now. Now was a moment I could have never dreamed up -- standing in front of van Gogh's *Starry Night*, about to go on a date with a beautiful girl I'd just met the night before whose name sounded like someone's aunt.

We had decided to meet on the fifth floor of the *Musée d'Orsay* because she loved that floor, which was entirely dedicated to Impressionism. I thought it was ironic, since obviously impressionism is what first dates are all about.

My parents brought me to Paris as a “just before you go off to college” bonding thing. Of course, being a teenager in Paris, I wasn’t seeing too much of them. But then again, by them feeling okay about that, it was a bonding thing.

Ruth was in Paris because her parents had rented an apartment near the Eiffel Tower for a month. We all met by chance at a restaurant during her last week there, and, well, you know, two American families on vacation, both from California, one with a teenage boy, one with a teenage girl, in a cozy local restaurant where the meal takes all night... eventually we merged our tables together.

There wasn’t much to do but talk in between courses. I mean, it’s not like the waiters come over and sing or anything. They were all pretty stiff. Ruth and I were seated next to each other – which we both knew was planned by the Board of Parents.

I thought she was going to be very straight and stuck up because she was wearing “out-to-dinner-in-Paris-with-your-parents” clothes. I didn’t know how totally cool she was until we started talking about music. She liked heavy metal, but she wasn’t a total insane freak about it. She liked Paramour, but only when Zac Farro was the drummer. Incubus and Primus had their moments, which I wholeheartedly agreed with. And she respected lots of the ancient heroes too, like Springsteen and The Stones. She honored the roots. I liked that.

Her parents mentioned she had been accepted at Wesleyan, which was a very good school, so she had a brain. I had been accepted to the University of Berkeley. Our destinies were no longer in our hands. Which apparently was our choice.

At some point my heart started racing whenever she started talking, no matter what she was saying. Her eyes seemed iridescent blue. They got brighter when she laughed. After dinner, as we all got up to leave, she asked me if I wanted to hang out the next day and I was like, “Sure, okay.” I figured she was just being logical. She could have chosen to hang out with her parents for the millionth day in a row, or hang out with me.

We decided to meet at the Musée de Orsay the following night near closing time because it was the first Sunday of a month so admission was free. We both liked things that were free more than our parents did. Spending money gave them some kind of odd pleasure.

After looking at *Starry Night* with me for a moment she whispered, "Let's walk." I said goodbye to van Gogh, and we zigzagged our way down to the first floor just as they were locking up. We stopped briefly to look at a statue by Camille Claudel. It was a woman with a pleading face reaching out to the open hand of a man who was being pulled away, or guided away, or stolen away, by some kind of demonic looking angel (it could have been his wife).

Or maybe it was her psyche pulling her future creativity just out of reach. An artist's greatest nightmare, memorialized.

Ruth and I had our own unfolding scene going on. Hopefully it wouldn't end like that. We started making our way down café-filled streets. Neither of us knew where we were going.

She wore clothes in layers -- an unbuttoned blue silk shirt over a light pink T-shirt over a yellow undershirt, which barely peeked out above the neckline. The pastel colors were reminiscent of a Monet painting I'd just seen the day before with my parents at the Marmottan.

I looked up at the sky and saw stars swirling. It felt exactly like what van Gogh was trying to say in his painting. It was whispering loudly to the world -- however sucky you think your life is, there are always going to be nights like this.

Chapter 2

First of all, thanks. You have to really like to read books to get all the way to Chapter 2 without some kind of mysterious murder happening by now, or some sex scene that involves infidelity, or a depraved act. I respect that you're willing to suspend judgment and give me a little time to get going. Most people don't seem to read books for pleasure anymore. Too many people just read Chapter 1, and then if something weird hasn't gotten them totally hooked they just read the ending and think they can figure out the rest backwards. They read what they have to — for class or for work, plus maybe they glance quickly at the Internet news once or twice a day to see if someone like Michael Jackson died. They like the martyring and crucifixion to be detailed, with lots of close-up pictures, captioned with as few words as possible. This is how business people and housewives, and loafing wannabe guitar players sitting around their apartment in front of a TV get to rebel against all the "information" they were forced to hear and read as a kid in school.

School hasn't changed that much since the days when my mom and dad went. It's amazing that when people grow up they forget to do something about it.

We all know what school is trying to do. It's an inoculation, force-injected upon wide-eyed youth while their docile parents stand helplessly by. They hand off their kids' brains to strangers at the age of four or five, and that's that.

We spend our youth having our arms and minds twisted and shaped into a particular way of thinking. And we learn how to put up with the charade so we can go to college, so we can join the heroic march toward paying our electric bills and owning a house, so that we can get to feel trapped and bored and go through a midlife crisis that everyone laughs at, reassuringly whispering, "it's just a phase."

And the French become French. And the Chinese fall prey into believing they are Chinese, because just like our culture does to

us, their culture pushes the Chinese thing on them until the code is unbreakable.

We're forced to believe there's an unbridgeable frightening cultural difference between us. (Until or unless we marry each other, and we find out there's no difference at all. Everyone's kind of a jerk.) It's ridiculous really.

The interesting thing is that the kids in school don't realize they could rebel in mass and bring down the whole system in thirty days.

But what's the alternative to a system we enslave ourselves in by signing up for college without being legally obliged to? Living completely off the grid, under a tree in a rainforest, refusing to file a tax return? Not accepting any culture as one's own? Not using local currency as your personal get-out-of-jail free card? Not getting all hung up trying to create some unique and valuable personal identity? Is there really some other way to live?

I was looking for a middle path, as the Buddha might have said if he were about to go to college while hanging out with a beautiful girl in Paris.

I rationalized everything, as everyone except someone like Buddha does. I figured I would check out UC Berkeley and see if it had something truly different to offer, something that wasn't just about living attached to someone else's leash, although I was under no illusion—I was born with the docile-dog gene along with most people. Although I think that gene mutated ever so slightly about the time I turned sixteen.

I'm also pretty sure that this book will never be mandatory reading at any school on the planet unless the school is run by my younger sister, who adores me and everything I do for reasons I totally don't understand. I really should be nicer to her.

The day before her fifteenth birthday I overheard her talking to her snotty friend, who was planning a party for her. They were huddled secretly in her slobby all-pink poster-filled room across the hallway from mine. The friend was suddenly talking about me, which I, at first, only heard as a muffled word that sounded like "Myr" while I was sock-sliding towards the bathroom to relieve myself of half a carton of orange juice, which I drank way too fast after a two hour

game of basketball. The echoey monologue got louder and I definitely heard my name again, so it made me stop and eavesdrop.

The snotty friend said, "I mean, he's kind of cute, but he's mostly a dork. He's always listening to sappy crappy music like Avril Lavigne, and playing sports and things like that. And no tattoos. What's up with that? I love guys with tattoos."

And my sister says, "Nah, he's okay."

What a saint! I told you I really should be nicer to her. Plus, I had really never thought of myself as "kind of cute," so that was the one positive thing I took from the conversation.

I looked in the bathroom mirror and tried to see what "kind of cute" looked like. I smiled. I tried to make a just hanging around, trying not to pose, kind of cute face. But all I saw was that after five days of not looking in the mirror I probably needed to shave the new whiskers on my chin.

Back to our walk in Paris, Ruth and I glided unconsciously in a zigzag pattern towards the Seine. I felt like I was this wild winding river flowing around her solid calm energy.

She was confident about herself, comfortable with who she was. She was so unlike me, since I was not confident about anything - I guess I was in the throes of a midlife crisis that came about thirty years early.

Occasionally our hands touched just by chance, causing a strange electrical jolt. I was pretty sure she felt the same thing I did in those moments. And yet we still felt obligated to an alternative future where we might not ever see each other again. We didn't just say, "Okay, we're in Paris, we've met, let's stay here. Why leave?"

By the time we got back to her parent's hotel it was pretty late, but she didn't seem in a rush to go in. We wandered away from the entrance, over to a corner that wasn't well lit, right near a small garden of multicolored flowers, and I kissed her.

She kissed me back, putting her hand around my neck, with her stomach pressed against my stomach, until I found myself blissfully destroyed. Right there, standing in the dark on a Paris sidewalk. I didn't even know the name of the hotel, or the name of the street, or

who owned the garden we were standing near. All I knew was that spot would always be somewhere important to me.

I decided the garden would be the first place I'd visit if I ever got back to Paris someday, to remember what it was like to feel clear and cleaned out of all the junk that gets crammed into you. It was reverse school. It was the very first place I felt like I owned in some way – not legally by the exchange of money, but because no one could take this purely personal transcendent moment away from me, even if the flowers in the garden died by the time I came back. Even if they built a skyscraper in place of this four-hundred-year-old building (which they would never do in Paris). But it wouldn't matter if they did. It would still be there for me.

Ruth texted me the next day to meet her under the Eiffel Tower at 20:00. I texted back, "Sure."

When I told my parents they kind of raised their eyebrows, like, "Really? You're seeing her again?" I tried to downplay it. "What's the big deal?" But they were like, "Okay, uh huh." Overall, my parents are not terrible.

Chapter 3

Summer in Paris is a time of midnight sunsets. The sun starts to go down around nine, falls below the horizon around ten, but even then, the sky doesn't turn fully black until midnight. As I walked from the Trocadéro to the Eiffel tower the crisscrossed iron beams were still bathed in sunlight. I saw her standing there near the entrance waiting for me. She was wearing a ruffled white shirt that she might have bought that day in a Paris shop, with a faded blue T-shirt visible from underneath, which she'd definitely had for a while because the collar looked a bit frayed and wavy. Her face was as pale as alabaster (from the Anglo-French *albastre*).

She immediately took my hand and led me away from the crowds lined up maze-like, waiting for the small red elevator to take them to the top. Soon we found ourselves walking down a quiet street alone.

"I've been thinking about you," she said quite out of context, wiping her long-ruffled sleeve quickly across her forehead to clear away a streak of hair.

"Yeah?" I figured this was either going to be something very good, or very bad.

"I decided you're not a dork."

"Actually, my sister doesn't think I'm a dork either."

"Well then she's got good taste."

I said, "I'm glad I've yanked myself out of the land of dorks all the way up to okay. It's encouraging."

She pointed to a very old building – which in Europe means circa 1500s at least, and we walked towards it. When we came to the entrance, we touched the cool rough stone wall and looked up at the darkened windows. No one lived there. Another wall had what seemed like a dozen different layers of pastel paint, one color thrown on top of the next over decades and centuries. Maybe Monet

saw this as art and just evolved the layering into dots and micro-fine brush strokes.

I thought to myself, this is when you're supposed to kiss her, here in the cool shadows of this ancient place, amidst a whirl of colors breaking through semi-darkness. So I didn't. Because I didn't want it to seem fake. I didn't want to feel like I was in a dweeby movie following someone else's script. But then she said something that made me drop all that anti-script pondering because the feeling, the feeling overwhelmed me.

She opened her arms wide and said, "Let's live here!" She was joking, of course, quoting Bill Murray's final line in *Groundhog Day*. It was almost as if she knew that I knew the quote, which I did, because it was one of my favorite movies of all time. Did she also somehow know that I'd been fantasizing about the whole why shouldn't we abandon everything and live here thing all day today?

Her eyes suddenly turned twilight blue. Sunset wild, gravity, drawing me closer. I mean, I was really screwed up. So I kissed her because there was no distance left between us. But it didn't stop there. We started laughing and kissing some more and touching each other everywhere. It was Paris, it was an empty street in a dark corner of antiquity. Paris honors lovers. If someone had walked by, they would have smiled, looked away, and walked on feeling happier.

It was another late night. As we walked back to her hotel, we turned the final corner and the Eiffel tower appeared above the roof tops. It looked like an illuminated gold spaceship from the nineteenth century. It overwhelmed my senses and soaked up all my attention until our next kiss.

The next night we all met for dinner - "all" meaning it including La Parents. We had an overall extremely awkward time, except when we told them we were going to wait outside because we needed some air during the bill paying ceremony. Once outside we immediately started kissing, thinking we had only a few minutes before they would emerge from the restaurant. But paying the bill can take quite a long time in Paris, so we talked quietly and made plans to see each other the next day.

As it turned out, those plans were DOA. Her parents were catching on and decided to clamp down on the late nights. So on her

last day in Paris, we were only allowed to meet at a café near where they were staying in the 7th arrondissement to say one final farewell. We were given a two-hour limit.

We talked about everything except the future. Childhood stories, and what our friends were like, and I think that's when I realized something almost too intense was happening. Because I was really starting to love her as a human being. I mean, I was happy just holding her hand in a café and talking about pretty much anything.

She promised to text me from the airport the next day. Then her parents entered the café and ushered her back home. She shook my hand goodbye.

As I was going to bed that night something felt different. I'd had girlfriends before, but I always felt disconnected from them.

I would let things happen, or out of curiosity I would push things to happen, but I always felt a bit like an observer. My heart and mind felt stuck in a dark vault. And through no fault of whatever girl I was with, she didn't know the combination to free me. And I sure as heck didn't know it. After a while, maybe a few weeks, maybe a few months, I just knew she wasn't supposed to be with me, even if she didn't know.

But now the vault door was wide open, too open, and I was flying around, roaming free, out of control. It wasn't just that I had found the one thing that was supposed to free me. Everything was freeing me! It was overwhelming, and it was awesome, but it also hurt. I didn't like the missing her part, and the neediness that came along with it. Because... she hadn't texted from the airport.

I felt a bit sick about it. I made a list of reasons why she didn't text me -- logical reasons that made me feel better, and then, equally logical reasons that made me feel worse.

The logical reasons that made me feel worse won out somehow, and then turned into illogical reasons that made me feel way worse. Then there was the old, "she has a boyfriend back home" nightmare. Or, maybe she thought about it and realized I actually was a dork. All of this prevented me from sleeping, which often makes illogical things seem horrifyingly logical, especially just before sunrise.

I started missing that feeling of calm, an almost bored disconnectedness I felt before I met her. It allowed me to feel nothing. Friends of mine do drugs to feel nothing. "Nothing" is a valuable commodity that is often paid for with shaking and desperate hands. "Get me back to nothing," scream the life-weary, the lovelorn, the life-torn, the tornado-of-star-fog emotionally-exhausted --- and me, sometimes.

Chapter 4

When she called the next day I was as happy as a sleepless zombie could be. She said she wanted to call me from Aéroport Paris-Charles de Gaulle, but she didn't want to talk to me with her parents around. And texting was just going to make her miss me more and cause suspicion. She wanted to hear my voice. She didn't think I'd care one way or another about waiting an extra day to hear from her. She had no clue about the effect not texting had on me, and I sure wasn't going to tell her! Teenagers are not completely stupid all the time.

When our vacation ended and we flew back home to L.A. everything seemed different. Nothing had actually changed, of course. We'd only been gone for two weeks. But after being in a city like Paris, Los Angeles seemed like an overgrown box of gaudy metal with streets of "trying too hard to be cool" cars. Downtown vibrated beneath a vaguely orange sky.

Also, my friends suddenly seemed a bit clueless, seen through my new eyes. They came across as immature and odd instead of funny and weird. I felt bad for them because I knew that I had been acting that very same way before I left, before I met her.

I had been lost, just like they were. I hated life quite a bit, just like they did, because I was bored with school and parents and all the stresses that come from thinking about the future, and scared about everything I couldn't control, which was everything. I was also feeling pissed off about having to experience all of the above.

And then there were all the phony politicians, and the constant wars. And financial implosions worldwide that were supposed to change everything, for those that had things.

I wasn't allowed to scream at the teachers or the government. That would have been "acting out." It was the typical senior year angst, I was told. What else was new?

Except I didn't feel the angst anymore. Because Ruthie and I were Facetimeing each other every night. I loved looking at her looking at me. I loved that I could make her laugh by saying something stupid or talking about my crazy friends. She liked me staying casual about us. I wasn't being pushy or laying some big trip on her or making her feel like she had to live up to anything. Most nights she would call just before bed to say goodnight. Things were looking up.

But I guess if you look up too much you can go blind from looking directly at the sun. I felt like I was falling, even as things were getting better and better. Icarus. Hearts without a parachute. I'm dancing on the moon thinking about the Challenger disaster. My emotions were exploding.

Three weekends after we got home I persuaded my parents to let me fly to San Francisco to see her. I wasn't going to let them stop me. I just needed the money to get there. What I didn't tell them was that Ruth's parents were going to be out of town, visiting her uncle, who owned a chateau up north in the wine country. She was an only child, so she usually went with them on weekend jaunts like this. But she told them it sounded boring and that she would be happier staying home alone. What she didn't tell them was that I was flying into SFO about two hours after they were scheduled to sip their first glass of Zinfandel.

She was going to be happier staying home alone, so we figured it wasn't exactly a lie.

As the plane reached peak altitude on this, my first solo plane flight ever, I settled back and looked out the window while being serenaded by U2 on my iPod. Remember iPods?

I felt so adult-like, flying by myself to visit my girlfriend. "It's a Beautiful Day," dum de dum dum..... dum de dum. Bono screaming out those words. The sunlight blazing off the triple-layered acrylic window. I could see the micro-scratches unevenly absorbing the sun's rays.

I remembered seeing a live U2 concert on YouTube — they let a thousand doves out into the sky above the stadium during the last chorus of that song. None of them crashed to earth. I took comfort in that.

How smart are airplane mechanics anyway? Were there any Harvard graduate airplane mechanics? I was afraid to ask.

It wasn't all that long ago that I was playing baseball with my father in the ball field behind my public school. He wanted me to be a good athlete and a good student. Therefore, a college scholarship. Therefore, he saves an insane amount of money. Therefore, he retires earlier.

But I think he saw it coming – I was always asking him crazy questions about science and math and astronomy, and spending too much time in a semi-catatonic state lying on my bed with my headphones on listening to music he hated. I can pinpoint the exact night my dad gave up on me becoming a white Hank Aaron – I asked him if I could skip going to a night game with him at Dodger Stadium because there was a Mike Doughty concert at El Rey Theater.

The most memorable moment that night for me was not a home run hit by Manny Ramirez. It was when some white kid who looked like he was a stoned drop-out from USC asked Mike Doughty if he wore the same shirt for every show, because he had seen him three nights in a row in the same shirt. Mike said, "I have three shirts just like this, so the answer is both yes and no." Then he added with a wink, "Also, I shop at J. Crew. Don't be a hater." Without a second's pause he slams into a great live version of "27 Jennifers," then "Ossining," then "No peace, Los Angeles." I hope I get a chance to take Ruthie to see him some day.

The plane began to dip slightly, then it jolted and emitted the low grinding sound of the wheels releasing, and we swooped down into SFO like a big slick bird who'd just spotted a very tasty meal. Maybe that was my projection, as they say in the sequestered rooms of the psychologists' offices. Because my eyes were starving to see her. I was famished from not having her around.

She picked me up in her mom's gray Lexus, so I slipped my Mike Doughty CD in and played her "White Lexus:"

Please show me how to live

Please show me how to have a day

I don't wanna wake up now

Why do I have to wake up, anyway?

...Try to feel nothing on command

When your white Lexus comes

I kept looking at her as she drove us back to her house in Mill Valley. She looked less exotic now, without Facetime framing her face like a painting, and away from Paris, without the Eiffel tower looming above her like an enormous halo in the evening sky.

She looked less remote and mysterious. Her clothes were more plain, although still layered in colors. And a gold bracelet jangled from her wrist as she shifted gears out of the airport onto the freeway. I didn't like thinking of her as some rich girl. But her parents' Lexus was a nice ride. Her face was pale and smooth and finely featured. She listened to "White Lexus," but she didn't make a big deal of it. She didn't say "wow, I like your music." Dare I say it, she was more like my sister, Darcy, in many ways. Cool in her own way. Confident in her own skin. And she just liked being around me for no particular reason.

We crossed the dazzling Golden Gate, red as the inside of a blood orange, with the fog racing in from the sea, getting tangled up in the cables. Then she sped down Highway 101 a few exits. We were on the outskirts of a small town. We passed a Whole Foods, with a parking lot too small to handle the crowds, then turned up into the hills on a narrow road just wide enough for one small sports car headed in one direction.

Her house was a big wooden three-story barn-like structure with glass windows in various shapes and sizes. It was hidden deep in the woods, private, quiet. We hadn't said much after a brief hello because she kept the music turned up high on our ride and listened to the CD all the way through. That was fine with me. I felt comfortable listening to the sounds and checking out the sights as she drove, not having to make small talk.

When we pulled into the carport, she took the keys out with one quick twist and said, "Let's go. Leave your stuff in the car."

She quickly jumped out and began to run. I ran after her to the front door. By the time I got there she had already unlocked it and raced inside.

I followed her inside just in time to see her running up the stairs. I was laughing, curious, chasing her shadow. She ran into her room and left the door open. It was filled with candles, and there were actual paintings on the wall, abstracts, rather than posters. There was a bowl of summer fruit on the dresser — peaches, apricots, plums, green grapes. She smiled at me and lit some of the candles, then slowly began to take off her shoes and socks. I wasn't sure... but then she unbuttoned her shirt just enough for me to see the yellow tank top she had on underneath.

She kissed me and threw my baseball hat off my head. We fell onto her bed.

There was some odd inner light shining. The big light we have in our minds when something is suddenly shockingly frighteningly good. It was whirring around inside me like a lighthouse searchlight, signaling to some lost captain that land was near. A land where all things become perfect and safe and sane. A land I don't think van Gogh ever knew existed.

After being swept ashore, we were out of breath, giddy, dazed. But we went out to sea again and again, so we could turn back and look at the lighthouse glowing. We wanted to repeat the experience of being lost and found and lost and found. For a long time.

Chapter 5

Later that night we decided to head into San Francisco. She had lots of friends she wanted me to meet, but I was not allowed to meet them this time, of course, because I wasn't supposed to be here. I didn't happen. I was invisible.

But I didn't care about being invisible at all anymore. In fact, I didn't want to meet anyone, or be around anyone but her. I didn't want anyone to see me but her. So flying around the city in her dad's green Jag seemed like a pretty good compromise as far as being invisible goes. They had three cars -- the Mercedes SUV went up to the wine country with them.

We went to a club on 10th Street called Dango, and saw -- well, mostly just heard, since the lighting was pretty nonexistent -- a band that sounded like a poor man's version of Dimmu Borgir during their Death Cult Armageddon phase.

We left early to get drunk in a quieter, ever so slightly more romantic setting, not knowing how we were going to get home with both of us so completely liquidated.

She began driving home very slowly at 2 a.m. Not a lot of cars on the road. But when we got to Golden Gate Park near 19th Avenue she pulled onto a quiet street.

"I'm too drunk to drive across the bridge. I need to sober up first. If I smash up my dad's car it would be so very very over. Especially with you in it!"

"Maybe we should rent bikes." I slurred the words. After a very long pause she began laughing.

"Mayor, I have an idea what might sober me up...."

"What's that?"

"You."

We had parked in a very upscale neighborhood. The street was empty at this hour, no cars going by, no people anywhere.

“Come into the back seat with me,” she said. She climbed over the seat, brushing her leg up against me. (Actually, her shoe hit my face but I was so anesthetized it felt like her leg.) I followed her over the black leather mountain. Once I was sitting next to her the rest was just as natural as could be. Everything was in sync. Including the timing. Because just as we returned to the front seat, all tucked-in, a police car drove by, stopped about ten feet ahead of us, and began to back up towards us.

An officer got out of the car and shined his flashlight into the front. Ruth waved and rolled down the window. “Just showing my friend how beautiful the neighborhood is,” she said.

“With your car lights off?”

A real TV detective, he was. He looked too fat to be a cop. Apparently the academy was accepting just about anybody these days. No way he could chase down a fleet-footed robber, or even me, if I were sober enough to run in a straight line. But I guess with stun guns and all you don’t need cops running under 4.8 in the 40-yard dash anymore. They just need good aim.

“Honestly, I just wanted to be in the moment with my boyfriend here,” she said. “We were just saying goodbye before we go off to college... in a few months.”

That didn’t sound quite right. She was speaking with perfect diction and respect, but she was beginning to ramble.

“Mmm hmm,” he said. Maybe he was a little envious of two relatively skinny kids in love in a Jag in the wee hours of the morning. And then maybe he starts thinking back to his days at school when all those kids laughed about how fat he was. And he promises himself all the way back then that someday he’ll become a cop and shoot their asses full of Taser darts. Maybe we reminded him of them. Hopefully these thoughts would help distract him from doing the breath-o-lyzer thing on us.

“Sorry,” she added, “we’ll just move on now.” She pressed the button to roll up the window.

“Step out of the car!”

...Actually, that was poetic license on my part. If he had said that, it would have become a different kind of book. Maybe a better book. But not true. Instead, we got lucky.

All he said was, "Okay, go on home you guys. It's late."

She nodded and zipped up the window in one smooth electric hum. He started waddling away. His holster looked like it was on a seesaw with his wide hips jiggling from side to side.

She drove away from the curb and slowly passed the squad car, its twirling blue light spinning dizzy shadows through our front window.

She waved at him, "Thank you, Sargent Fatness!" she sang out. We cracked up laughing until we were shaking, coughing, losing our breath. She was pounding on the steering wheel laughing out of control. I had to remind her to stop at a red light.

Off we flew down 19th Avenue, heading towards the bridge at 3 a.m. Luckily there were almost no cars that time of night.

We made it home and immediately crawled in bed. I guess our bodies were too drunk to remember what had happened in the back seat an hour before, because as soon as we laid down, we were doing it again.

Chapter 6

What was not spoken during any of the amazing days we spent together was what was going to happen two months later. Neither of us had the ability to change what was now written in stone – she was going to Wesleyan, located in the middle of Middletown, Connecticut. And I was going to UC Berkeley, which was ironically less than an hour from her parent’s house. When she was home on a long school break I could stay in the Bay Area, or invite her to come to L.A. Would she meet me there? Would she be allowed to?

We had no idea how this could work out, but one thing neither of us wanted to do was spoil even one second of the perilously precious, spontaneous, satiating private party we were throwing for ourselves that weekend.

We hugged goodbye at the airport, trying not to get too freaked about the emptiness that was about to descend upon both of us. We promised to see each other soon. Maybe next weekend. Somehow. Somewhere. We still had two whole months before “the ending.”

* * *

Back home with my parents and sister, I tried to ignore the desolation I felt while keeping the joyous memories intact. But that’s not the way love works, now is it? No pain, no gain. In the end, the love you take is equal to the love... well what’s the difference what cliché you try to rationalize about it – it sucked being away from her.

I tried to pass the time hanging out with my once good friends, who were now spending most of their time on Facebook. Andre Tresh was one such geeky friend who was quickly becoming one-hundred-percent cyber on me. He smoked cigarettes, and smoked everything else too, but never once did I see him cough. And he could drink everyone under the table without the awful residuals that come with that kind of fun. He’d wake up fresh as a daisy. He credited these

superhuman abilities to working out. I said, “How do you work out your lungs and stomach and brain in a gym?”

Andre wanted to be a doctor. You know, do something compassionate for humanity. It said so right on his Facebook page.

Another friend of mine played guitar in a band that was gigging every weekend in drunken smelly clubs all over lovely downtown Los Angeles. His name was Chris Caverston. The band was called, The. They prided themselves on deep “philo-psycho-political” lyrics, lightly sprinkled with heavy literary references, along with a demographically appropriate dose of werewolves, zombies, and dark gods that alluded to some bastardized version of Greek mythology. Chris wrote the lyrics.

Andre and Chris were friends. Andre even did the lighting for some of the The gigs, in places where there was lighting. Most of the gigs were performed under a bare bulb high above the stage, enhanced by the smoke and flickering Zig Zags in the front row.

After my private party in San Francisco hit the neighborhood news we all met at Chico’s Mexican Taqueria for beer and lots of free chips and salsa, so they could grill me on the details. After enough alcohol to un-pry my modesty I told them about this unreal thing that happened. I met a girl in PARIS, who had the name of someone’s grandmother, who wore clothes that were kind of like Avril cast-offs when she was seventeen singing Sk8er Boi, who was funny and smart and drove me around in a green Jag, and when she took off her clothes her skin glowed like an angel. I admit, I played it up a bit. More than a bit actually. I turned her into a myth — just like they secretly wanted me to, but really didn’t want me to. They were drooling, hands covering their eyes, moaning, shaking their heads. They wanted what I had, and were becoming jealous, and therefore sarcastic. They had to try to drag the myth down to earth so they could stomp all over it and piss on it. Because it’s the only alternative to not having it yourself.

There’s nothing like friends.

When I got home I saw that Ruth had called my cell, which I’d left in my room in case my parents tried to call me to tell me to come home.

It was only ten-thirty, so I decided to call her back. I was hoping she missed me and wanted to sneak off somewhere this coming

weekend. I went over to my computer. I wondered, what was halfway between L.A. and San Francisco?

I googled "Beautiful places halfway between L.A. and SF."

Shelly "who loves red wine anytime". says:

The Madonna Inn is really romantic and cool in a retro sort of way. There are lots of places along Highway 1.

Marilyn Monroe from Mexico. says:

Carmel

Gustie Wind Z. says:

Madonna Inn? Well not really. In fact, anything but the Madonna Inn - unless you two are aging swingers with a caveman fetish.

Eggywedgy says:

take the 5 freeway; u will pass a HUGE cow pasture, make sure u don't roll down the windows. it smells pretty cruddy. i have stopped my car there quite often to take a picture of the cows w/ my hubby. passerbys will stare at u but just ignore them and keep on snapping those pics!! Nice place! I love cows!

I took some mental notes: No Madonna Inn. No cow pastures. Maybe Carmel.

When she answered the phone, her voice seemed subdued.

"Hey, what's up? I have an idea for next..."

She cut me off. "Listen, I really like you, Mayor. I mean I really like you," she said slowly, almost in a whisper.

Uh-oh, I thought. She's had a boyfriend all this time.

Or maybe she met someone at the airport after she dropped me off.

Or...

"But, my parents found out about us and what happened last weekend. And. Mayor, I'm like so skunked. I'm so screwed. Docked for the rest of the summer."

“Wow, how did they find out?”

“Neighbors. The fucking ‘Neighborhood Watch.’ These goons live up the street from us that are, like, once a year friends of my mom and dad’s. I think they’re big time religious nuts dedicated to keeping me a virgin. Turns out my mom told them to keep an eye on me while they were gone, so they must have bought a fucking Hubble telescope for the occasion.”

“We have to do something! Maybe I could call your parents and apologize?”

“Call who?”

“Your mom and dad? I’m good with parents!”

“Hello, cuckoo dude! Mr. Innocent! You think you can, like, get on the horn and pull a Zac Efron? I appreciate the insane gesture but they would lure you up here to Mill Valley, telling you everything’s cool, and then kill you. Do you want to be the dead guy I met in Paris?”

“Ok, ok, so...” I began fidgeting with some of the non-functioning buttons on my cell phone, which I did sometimes when I got frustrated or nervous. “How am I going to see you again?”

“Moot question at the moment.”

There was silence, for too long.

I had to ask the other question, because drunk teens eventually let their true emotions show, “Do you want to see me too?”

Then: “Oh shit,” she whispered, “gotta go, the guards are coming.”

She hung up. I was left alone to figure out what just happened.

I watched some plasma to calm myself. All crap, as always. I flicked through channels at a rapid non-stop pace: a gun going off, a woman hitting a man with her fist, a police chase, a slimy politician threatening someone’s life if he exposed some secret, a court scene with the judge yelling, a man hitting a woman in a cape, a bomb going off, a kiss interrupted because the guy was stabbed from behind. That last one was all I could take.

Got sleepy. Turned off the tube with the soft rubbery push of the red power button. Turned on some music on my phone. Marilyn

Manson. Anger, screaming, jarring. Just the right fit for the mood I was in.

Ruthie was completely filling up every synapse of my beer-drenched brain. I didn't want to have to get up the next morning, Saturday. The sun would be out, no doubt. Although the sun in L.A. is more like "su-" -- one third haze and air pollution. Why get up? Why walk? Why eat? Why get toasted again with a bunch of so-called friends every night, each of whom will stand in line for hours just to laugh their fucking heads off at my pain. After what I told them, I don't blame them. I fucked with them first.

I fantasized about turning back the clock, changing cultures, to a place where there are pre-arranged marriages. I would hang out with the guys in the rice fields all day, then go back to the hut and eat fish until the sound of grunting chimpanzees lulled me to sleep. What was so fucking bad about that? Compared to this?

Chapter 7

I was now officially “pining,” according to the online Webster’s dictionary:

1: to lose vigor, health, or flesh (as through grief).

2: to yearn intensely and persistently especially for something unattainable.

Ruthie and I still texted occasionally, but we were walled-off by Parent Prison. Her parents were all over her texts and emails every night. She had to delete everything after dinner. I barely made it past dessert before being erased.

She was pissed at her parents, but she wasn’t about to just blow them off. They were paying for college. She wasn’t about to do anything stupid because deep within that grungy wild brain of hers was a very smart and very pragmatic and organized person who had a goal, and had a life to lead, unlike yours truly.

Plus, her parents weren’t particularly bad or unfair as parents go, when you stop and think about it. I mean, first she lied to them, then she snuck a boy into their house while they were gone, then she and the boy virtually (and not so virtually) swam inside each other for two straight days finding and re-finding each other-- all this just two months before the boy was very likely never going to see her again. And, you know, parents will be parents.

It’s not like they were going to say, “Sure, go ahead and fly to L.A. and shack up in a motel for a week with this wonderful young man of yours and get it out of your system. In fact, have you ever been to the Madonna Inn? It’s halfway between here and L.A. and a real hot spot. Just a mile past the cow pasture.”

Because that would have been so totally fine with us!

But no, parents will be parents. And if I were a parent, and it’s not at all apparent I ever will be, I’d probably have worked her over pretty good myself. I’d have threatened to kill me, in fact. And if I

were that rich the threat might have come from a family attorney hiring a hit man. I can be pretty good at seeing both sides of things.

So I half-expected this conversation when she called me one night about two weeks before school started and told me:

“We just got off on the wrong foot.”

“Yeah.”

“But we sure had fun while it lasted.”

“Yeah.”

“And we can stay friends, right? Are you on Facebook?”

“No, and I don’t plan to be,” I said.

“Are you angry?”

“Me? Well, yeah, I hate Facebook for some reason, but I just can’t explain it.”

“Oh.”

“Listen Ruthie, have a great time in school. Maybe during Christmas break we...”

“You too, Mayor. I bet Berkeley will be a blast. You’ll meet some cool people there.”

“I’m sure I...”

“Okay.”

“... . Okay.”

“Okay,” she whispered. Then she hung up.

And that’s the way it ended, with everything being okay, but not okay; obviously neither of us was supposed to say that it wasn’t okay – because why bother, when nothing could change what wasn’t okay?

Chapter 8

But see, that's just not me. That was not the way I was brought up. My dad taught me to hate quitters.

He hates Dodger fans that leave in the 7th inning to beat the traffic. He hates investors that sell their stocks and fire their broker in the middle of a bear market. He hates governors that quit in the middle of their term to run for president. So I decided I wasn't going to let things end this way.

And there's something else that's just not me, I was finding out – it's not me to want to go to college. At least not yet.

I mean nobody ever asked me what I thought about college. It was only which college, never any other rational choice considered. But I didn't want to just walk into a little shiny mousetrap with no way out. I didn't want to eventually settle for a poor imitation of what I was feeling when I was with Ruthie. She had awoken so many things in me I didn't know existed. Like a hunger to live a real life, for instance. Not just the life handed to me:

Here's a difficult puzzle, young man. Take it out of the box. Now put the puzzle together piece by piece Ah, congratulations. Here's your college degree. Now go get a job as a chemist and change the world through chemistry without it being an illegal drug. We can't make money from an illegal drug, now can we?

And then it happened: One searingly clear moment in time, there, with Andre and Chris stumbling around Venice Beach with me -- we wandered down to the boardwalk amongst the day-old litter and street lamps that reflected off the ocean. Andre took out the hugest thickest joint ever rolled in the western hemisphere, unless Jamaica is in the western hemisphere – what he called “The Giant Killer.” It was a pun, since there was some WrestleMania dude called, “Andre, The Giant Killer.”

Of course, there was also the metaphorical fact that we all had these giant problems that needed slaying, and the weed was without

a doubt the only way to wipe them away, like ghostly little bugs off a windshield.

Feeling the smoke expand ever-so whitely in my lungs, I believed (on pure faith) that in a matter of seconds something unbelievable and virtually unprecedented would replace my morose mood, and, yes, YES, here it was, coming now, down the wind tunnel of time – a sudden image of Andre’s wild curly hair sparkling in the boardwalk lamplight. It was an aura of micro-stars twinkling behind him. The ocean cracked loudly in the background. I think someone must have amplified the waves breaking while we were inhaling.

“Micro-stars,” I mumbled, squinting at his licorice black hair, pointing.

“Mini-Nebulas!” Andre screamed at the top of his lungs, pointing back to me.

“Nutritious Neutrinos!” screamed Chris, as if taking an alliterative Rorschach test. Chris was always hungry.

“Neon Neanderthals,” Chris added. He was obviously coming up with some new lyrics.

“Nebraska!” Andre stated seriously. That made no sense.

We had all become perfectly senseless.

A strange silence followed until we heard a big wave smash onto the beach. Suddenly we began laughing, running.

At this moment in time, Ruth was settling in at Wesleyan, since her orientation started earlier than mine. She was a light-year removed from me. She probably thought of me as her Paris fling, a graduation present before settling down to college, eventually finding a boyfriend, who would someday become a fiancé. The future was clear: graduating, job hunting, successful career, Nobel Prize, marriage, children, grandchildren.

My brain twirled into a descending spiral. I was fading out like a shooting star in a Nebraska sunrise.

Back on Venice beach, we began to roll around in the sand. We kept rolling towards the sound of the ocean until wet sand was hanging off of our skin and clothes like mud. In fact, we started pretending we were rolling in actual mud. We oinked and grunted at

each other for a while, pushing each other over, rolling on top of each other, making each other wheeze with laughter, with sand getting in our mouths and filling our nostrils.

“Oxygen!” Chris begged. Sand was gathering on his tongue like wet cement. I believe, “oxygen” meant “water” when correctly translated from pig world.

And then, as I lay there on the beach, breathing heavily, I looked up at a single pulsing star peeking weakly through the smog-filled atmosphere of the always admired but never loved L.A. basin. It was twinkling cryptically as it arrived from its hundred million light-year journey through deep space, fresh as a daisy; spilling down to me through emptiness and dark matter, and finally falling right into the retina of my heavily dilated irises.

It seemed like this van Gogh-like fog-star had come all this way just to send me a secret message -- the one true thing. It was fighting through all the incongruous insanity I had just inhaled. It sparkled one thought that could change my life forever. A simple but profound star-whisper:

Ruth rhymed with— truth. Ruth, truth. Right? Because she was the only thing in my life that wasn't a fake, a lie. So maybe, just maybe -- my head was still scrambling to unscramble the mystical message from the light beam of the truth star... I suddenly heard a mumbly hum similar to the one in the monolith scene in the old classic, 2001 Space Odyssey. My mind, which no longer resembled the mind I knew fifteen minutes ago, had reassembled itself into something more lit-up, more alive. I was no longer a Neanderthal following another Neanderthal's butt down some dirt road into an ambush. I had touched a star! I was stricken with consciousness!

The answer appeared, bright as a lighthouse beacon, as clear as the Eiffel Tower from Pont de Grenelle, flashing, strobing, at the stroke of midnight....

I had to go. I had to go.

Not to Paris. Not to the street garden where we first kissed. No. I had to get on a plane to Connecticut. I had to see her. Tomorrow!

I had no idea what we would do after that. Or if she would even want to see me there. But if I didn't go I would never find out

anything about anything. I'd be marching away from everything sensible. For what? For who? (The word whom isn't sensible anymore either. Not according to the whisper-star.)

I had to follow the whisper-star's direction. My mind-compass pointed due east. (Or extremely far west.) I had to go.

There was no middle path that could get me to Middletown. This was no Buddha-calm surrender to whatever is. This was a rocket launch, right to the center of my desire-filled meaning-starved life. This was a crash landing from a distant star with a live passenger onboard.

Chapter 9

My parents told me I was insane. The problem with their argument was that I agreed with them that I was insane. They had no rational response to that.

But, here's the truth, beyond the cultural definition of insanity: No one could say for sure if it would ultimately be a disaster for me to do this, or not. If I joined the march of students to UC Berkeley it might turn out better, but it might not. My revelation was: it was simply my parents' job to play the odds. To play it safe on my behalf. Not to look at the individual in front of them, who I know they loved in a general sense. No, they couldn't afford to open themselves up to life with me. They had to work the stats, precisely because they loved me in a general sense. It was actual love turning into actuarial love.

With no college education the odds increased that I could end up dead on the streets someday. (Although Telegraph Avenue on a Saturday night may have yielded the same result.)

But the question in my mind was — who was I if I didn't follow their stats? What was that fog-star trying to tell me when my mind was unlocked from the game?

I had some money saved but not quite enough to activate my plan, so I got as job as a waiter for a month that felt like a year, along with what felt like a year of arguments with my parents, who had gone berserk. Their frustration was palpable. But their fear was pitiable. They actually thought their son was going to end up homeless on the east coast by winter. I tried to assure them that waiters make good money and I could get a job anywhere. But that just seemed to make matters worse.

It was mid-October by the time I was ready to leave. My bank account was emptied, my bags were packed. I gathered my sundry tech lifelines -- my MP3 player was fully loaded; my phone was charged. I now had about two thousand dollars saved up from various odd jobs and birthdays and Christmas gifts from weird relatives I hardly ever saw. They usually had no idea what to buy me so they

shoved twenty bucks in an envelope with something scribbled on it – Happy, whatever, and what nickname do they call you these days? “Mayhem?” Yuk, yuk, yuk!!!!!!

- Love, Old Uncle Rusty.

“Save it for your college mad money,” -- this was the voice of my father, clear as day – my financially savvy father – whispering in my head – trying to instill a sense of fiscal responsibility into the quivering brain of a love-smitten raving maniac.

Nice try, Dad, but I have to go.

* * *

I made an executive decision not to contact Ruth before my arrival. The reason for this was obvious -- I thought the odds were too high that she would tell me not to come.

I arrived in Middletown on a perfect fall day. The color of the sky was outer space blue; deep and velvety, with a small hazy day-moon painted near a single cloud. Back on earth, bright red trees stood proudly next to yellow-haloed trees next to orange glowing trees. The air was cool and fresh and had a mildly inebriating affect. Fallen leaves swirled upon the ground, mixing together like splashes of pastel paint. Tens of thousands of leaves were raked into nice big piles on the side of the road. Even fallen leaves were having plans made for them. Their true fate swept aside by man. But then a sudden gust of wind freed them, lifting the top layer of leaves into the air. They skittered down the road, hip-hopping freely with each new gust, scattering across the landscape. It was a sign. I had a chance after all.

I found a nice inn near the campus called The Inn. A tribute to understatement, or born in a totally uncreative moment, or both. I proudly gave the receptionist some cash to pay for one night. Ever the pessimist, I felt like a foreigner on an impossible mission – a mission to rekindle a love that had been stolen by enemy soldiers.

I was given a room key. I quickly threw my knapsack on the perfectly made quilted bed, looked at my face in the mirror hanging above the sink in the small ultra clean shiny white bathroom, decided there was nothing I could do about it -- my face wasn't changeable in any positive way, hair would be messed up by the time I got to

the campus even if I were to comb it now, so whatever will be will be -- que sera, sera -- and I immediately made my way toward the university gate.

I entered Wesleyan on a street I immediately loved, because it was called High Street. I could easily relate. I was completely in the stratosphere mentally – still trying to decipher that foggy little singular star. Was it laughing at me now, telling me it was all a big joke? Was it ever really there?

I ran around asking students if they knew the whereabouts of Ruth Delaney, but it was a pretty big school. Two thousand kids. And she was a newcomer. I found the admissions office, but they wanted to know why I was there, and who I was. Well, that's exactly what I'm trying to find out!

Back onto High Street I tumbled. I followed cars coming into the campus. Sometimes running after one that looked like it might stop for me. Someone walking out of Parking lot A overheard me asking a student if they, by some crazy chance, knew where I could find Ruth Delaney.

Just as I slumped dejectedly away from another giggling group of girls, probably secretly wondering why a girl their age would be named Ruth, I felt a tap on my arm. "You're looking for Ruth Delaney?"

The words were spoken by a blonde girl with a sweet Midwestern face, as fresh as the autumn air, wearing a fashionable gray wool overcoat, carrying a computer bag on her shoulder, and the requisite number of thick books under her arm.

"Yes, you know her?"

"I'm in one of her classes. I think she's at Olin right now."

"Olin?"

"Olin Memorial Library." She pointed with her free hand to a building in the middle of campus.

"Thank you!" I kissed her – mwaa. "Thank you!" She was perfunctorily shocked.

Then I ran full speed towards the library.

The building jiggled up and down, getting larger and larger as I ran towards it. For the first time since my star-crossed idea was born, I began to question why I was doing this. Would she even want to see me? Had she already moved on to a new life? I tried to escape the doubts by running even faster. Finally, I dashed through the glass doors of Olin Memorial, asking Mr. Olin to wish me luck. (A picture of him hung on the wall near the entrance. "Were you ever in love, Mr. Olin? In love with more than just knowledge and words and education? Were you ever so in love that all you could do was beg for mercy and oink like a pig on a beach on a summer night? And your heart was crashing into walls with joy and fear, and you found it odd that one emotion couldn't survive without the other? You understand what I'm saying, Mr. Olin?")

I stood near the reference desk and began to look down the aisles, and across to the round study tables. Then at a corner table I saw her. She was sitting with some other person. A guy person, actually. A guy person who was looking over her shoulder, actually, and not so subtly breathing in the smell of her hair, which I admit I had never really tried to do myself. I couldn't get past the smell of her neck. But I made a note for next time, if there would be a next time....

She looked over in my direction suddenly, for no particular reason. Maybe a ghost cleared its throat and whispered in her ear and pointed with its Ghost of Christmas Past finger. She did a double take, just like you see in the movies, and stood up like she'd seen a real ghost. "Oh my God!" she said too loudly for a library.

The guy seemed to be asking her what was going on, but she pushed his hand off of her shoulder and came over to me. "What in the world are you doing here, Mayor?"

"You," was all I could manage.

"... Berkeley?"

"No."

"Why?"

"You."

"Oh my God!" she said again.

Her hand covered her mouth. Her eyebrows raised up. Her face looked a bit contorted.

“Him?”

“Shhh....” she shushed.

Nothing else could be said here in this mausoleum of silence, this tomb of wordlessness, where one could only hear the whirring of hard drives.

So she had already found someone else? A large object came hurtling down towards me from the sky. The magical fog-star had exploded into a billion meandering meteors, darkening the atmosphere, until... SLAM!

Her eyes met mine.

Zen stillness.

Until she whispered, “Let’s get out of here.”

Lights hummed to life, flickering at first, until the electricity of the world suddenly turned back on. It took a few million synapses firing at the speed of infinity to really even hear what she said. But then it formed a clear emotion. I felt an emotion; it was one I had never felt before.

Chapter 10

She grabbed her books and whispered something to the guy at her table. I thought it might have been something like, "My brother's in town, surprise visit, I'll call ya later, babe," because he didn't protest. He just sat back down to read his textbook. He glanced up at me once as she bounced over to me. But I didn't wave or smile at him or anything because I didn't know who I was supposed to be in the scene.

It was too cold to talk outside, and her dorm room was off limits, so I took her arm and we walked off campus amongst the trippy-bright colors of autumn, back to The Inn. We walked up old red carpeted stairs to the second floor and I fumbled with the key. "Entrez-vous," I said. "Welcome to Paris, Connecticut."

It was crazy. She walked slowly around the tiny room, peering out the window to the old diner across the street, brushing her hand across the desk, not looking at me, thinking about what to say. I sat on the bed watching her.

"What do you expect me to say, Mayor? You come bounding into town from out of nowhere and think everything can be like before?"

"Yes."

She stared at me and burst out laughing.

Then she sat next to me and gave me a very sisterly kiss on the cheek. "You're bizarre."

She looked at the wall straight ahead of us, then took a breath to say something, but I figured, if I let her say one more word it may be too late. Words are powerful, unretractable, like Parisian buildings; once they're constructed, they can last for all time.

So I kissed her without holding back.

"Wait!"

I stopped and looked at her sheepishly. "I'm sorry."

“Okay, good....” She took a deep breath. “Now, don’t wait.”

I eased her down on the bed and kissed her until, miraculously, we were back to the place we knew, the place that had been interrupted for so long (over three months!), until starlight appeared behind my closed eyes -- that same stream of starlight. The message was clear, it exploded with clarity: I was in the right place with the right person at the right time, in the right universe.

After dark we went to a café down the street where flocks of students were hanging out, pretending to study but secretly looking for someone to hook up with. Even the giggly girls in glasses hiding at the corner tables were looking around, but they would never dare admit it. They kept their books open on the table while sipping their coffee. I was suddenly wise. I could see through everything.

Pizza with olives and frosty beer were the main course, followed by warm peach something, smothered in ice cream which buried the flavor of the peaches. Maybe they were apples. No one would have been able to tell. The music was too soft, the waitress was too loud, gaudy paintings hung crookedly on the red brick walls, undusted, ignored for too long, too hard to see in the dim light, smell of beer in the air, but wondrous, electric because she was here, luminous eyes and all.

Once we got back to The Inn, we made love. I felt an electrical charge of energy when we kissed that took me higher than any drug I’d tried. I was bewildered, between worlds, reality couldn’t be this good. But a dream couldn’t be this real. I felt like this moment was all I had ever needed. I just assumed that it would never come.

I reached for my MP3 player. I wanted to turn her onto some cool music I’d been listening to on the plane. But she stopped me.

“Mayor,” her arm was resting behind her head, “what are you doing here? What are you expecting to come from all this?”

“All what?”

“This!” she said quietly. “You basically went AWOL from your freshman year at college, now you’re here with me. But I can’t just be here in this room with you, still-life, like a perfect painting, for the rest of eternity. Time moves objects around, you know, even me. Paintings fall.”

"You're going to class tomorrow?"

"Of course!" She seemed perplexed at the question.

"Well, I haven't thought any further than this day," I said honestly. "It was the only thing I could think of."

"Shock of shocks," she teased, closing her eyes in a condescending way. "But, little cowboy, doesn't it flip you out that you should also be going to class tomorrow, three thousand miles from here? Don't you have any idea how badly this could screw up your life? What do you want me to do? You want me to drop out, so we can travel around the world on our parents' credit cards until they cancel them, maybe go back to Paris where I can dance with you under the Eiffel Tower? Is that what you're thinking?"

"That sounds perfect!"

"For how long. Mayor? I mean, how long can dancing be what we do? I mean, I am so glad you're here, I am. I missed you so much. I'm not trying to sound like a parent or anything, but what are you going to do now? Because I'm here. And I'm not leaving."

"You think I wasn't thinking about anything when I came here? Ruthie, let's go ahead and play the future out if that's what you want to do.... let's play that game. Think it through. Let's say I graduated Berkeley, with honors, and then I get this job and eventually become the CEO of this cool tech company, and I bring home lots of money, enough money to support you and a family someday. But of course, you've also graduated with honors and you're also the CEO of a tech company. You're also making lots of money. Wow. Congratulations to us. But what is that? Is that all? Or is there something that gets left on the side of the road along the way, like a pile of autumn leaves, colors all scrambled together, until they go flying off in the wind? Who cares about fucking leaves when we have to get to work, or catch a plane? And the world drags us all around by the scruff of our necks until someone pays for our funeral, and picks the flower arrangements that look eerily as colorful as an autumn day. But we never saw that day, never noticed the colors, never even tried."

I looked at her face, her eyebrows were furrowed. Of course, I wasn't done. This was my natural internal banter, I was just finally saying it aloud for once.

“You don’t want to run off into the sunset with me to see what’s there? Okay then. So instead you marry someone else someday, maybe Arnold back there in the library, or whatever his name is. And he gets a better job than me. Because I’m wandering around lost out there in the cold without you. I’m looking for the Ruthie that will come play the random life game with me, but she doesn’t exist. I’m alone because there are no Ruthies.

“You have your degrees, you and Arnold. You both work at interesting jobs, challenging jobs, and let’s say it doesn’t eat your soul like a parasite until you’re a gray and lifeless ghost. Let’s put that improbable factor into the equation -- that you have actually survived. Try to follow my logic here, Ruthie!

“So then you have a family -- great kids, not a kid like me -- and they go to daycare happily so you can keep working, so you can buy a bigger house with more rooms and a faster commute time. And they grow up. And sometimes they make sense to you, and sometimes they don’t. And sometimes they get sick and you have to take care of them, but by the time they are in high school they don’t give a damn what you did for them when they were eight, because they’re not part of you anymore, they’re them, they’re out of control. Because that’s their job.

“And sometimes they fuck their boyfriends in their little pink rooms while their childhood dolls watch from the closet with their little cloth mouths frozen in a tiny ‘o.’ And sometimes your little teenage darlings have to lie to you about sex, and the types of drugs they take, because they’ll hurt your feelings, because you don’t get it.

“But in the end, let’s say it all works out, Ruthie. They get over their high school hormonal thing, they go to a good college, maybe even your alma mater, they get good jobs, and they get married, right? Just like mommy did.... And now, praise the lord, you have grand-kids! Wow! Congratulations again. And Arnold graduated from smelling your hair in the library, and well, he became very successful, and left you his entire estate when he died. That was ultimately the meaning he found in life, to leave an estate to his wife, who actually made more money than he did.

“So now he’s dead, and you’re seventy-five, and you move to a sunny condo in Boca Raton, limping around on your little fat legs,

hoping and praying that your kids will bring the grand-kids to see you at Christmas. You have extra rooms in the condo just for them. In case they come. Someday.

“And that’s what you think is a sane plan? That’s why you’re giving us up?”

She stared at me for a long time, expressionless. I couldn’t read her. I could still hear my voice echoing in my ears – I was talking way too loud.

“You know the really sick thing about you, Mayor?” She shook her head and tried to gather herself. But tears were forming in her deep blue eyes. “You make sense to me,” she screamed. “Why? How can you do that?”

She started crying. It was the first time I saw her cry. And I hated it.

She sat up, not noticing that the blankets had fallen from her shoulders. “You’re like a computer virus, rearranging all the data to fit your code. You’re screwing up what I thought was a perfectly good future. A normal life. You’re a disease. And I can’t get rid of you.”

I tried to reach out to her, but she gently pushed my hand away. “No.”

“Ruthie, if everything was so perfectly grand, why not just go back to Arnold tomorrow and tell him you and your brother had a really good time, but that he’s your guy. I won’t say anything. I’ll just leave.”

“His name was Eric! I mean, is Eric.”

“Well, make up your mind. Is he a was, or is he an is?”

She laughed. “Neither! I mean he is a never was. He was a ‘was’ long before he got to ‘is.’”

She put her hands over her eyes and laid back on the bed. She seemed to be disengaging.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

“I’m sorry for giving you the choice.”

She nodded. "Mayor, you can't just tear down everything that is and then leave me, and us, with nothing solid in its place. If everything I was hoping for is a lie, and we're here, escaping the lie, then what's the truth?"

I thought about it and answered her honestly. "I don't know," I admitted. "So far, just this."

Chapter 11

The next morning found us rising slowly from our dreams, cuddled up in Room 4.

She was skipping her biology class this morning, because now she wasn't even sure she should go to biology. Her life was a messy fight between logic and, well, me.

Logic still told her to stay in school and follow the fate set up for her long ago by her parents and the social rules of engagement. But logic also revealed other things she'd begun to consider without me saying a word: Her dad hated his work. Her mom seemed frustrated all the time – with him, with herself. Yes, they went to Paris for their twentieth anniversary, but Ruth wasn't so sure they were happy during most of those twenty years. They were celebrating because that was a part of the way things were done. In Mill Valley the friends and neighbor folk approved of the trip – ah Paris! Twentieth? Perfect! So romantic. They applauded the lovebirds as they sped off with their beautiful teenage daughter in a white stretch limo to the airport. None of it had to make any real sense, it was merely logical. It fit the pre-arranged picture.

Ruth was also appalled to realize, tearily, wearily, that she was just as much a waif and a reject as I was. She had always questioned everything. The difference between us was that she questioned silently, then obeyed. But not anymore, maybe.

“Mayor, isn't there anything you've ever wanted to be or do? Something you'd be willing to dedicate yourself to, besides me?”

I was brushing my teeth at that moment, wondering about breakfast.

“Maybe a dentist,” I spit out the toothpaste and ran my cupped hands under the water. “I don't know why – it kind of just came to me.”

“I'm serious! I mean, if you could do anything in the world, what would you do with your life?”

There was a long silence as I wiped my face on the nice white cotton towel, breathing in just a hint of bleach, added for extra freshness. I could get used to this lifestyle, if I had endless money.

I exited the blindingly white bathroom and sat beside her on our unmade bed.

She urged me on, “You’ve told me you were good at math and science. Wouldn’t you like to do something exciting someday, like build rockets?”

Her eyes lit up with excitement for me. I wished I could feel about rockets the way she did in that moment.

“Maiming and destroying.”

“What?” She looked confused, the light in her eyes dimmed.

“That’s all it would lead to – maiming and destroying. They don’t just use rocket technology to catapult some dude to Mars on the way to making us interplanetary. And there are no Martians to interbreed with, so we’d still be all too human. Which means the technology would eventually be used to blow things up. Why should I be part of that?”

“Okay,” she said. Then her eyes lit up again, “You love sports. You said you’re a good basketball player. How about joining the UC Berkeley basketball team?”

“More maiming and destroying,” I said.

“What?”

“Ruthie, without intentionally committing homicide those guys would trample me like a bug, slam me down, step on my face. I would be eaten for breakfast – speaking of which...”

“Oh come on, Mayor, why the sudden lack of confidence?”

“It’s not a lack of confidence, it’s a lack of about eight inches and fifty pounds of muscle. A five foot seven, one hundred forty-pound college basketball player is...”

“Muggsy Bogues!” she shot back.

“What?”

“Muggsy Bogues,” she repeated.

“Wow, I’m, like, so impressed....”

She smiled. “You’re a lot taller than five foot three. That’s how tall Muggsy was, and he played in the NBA!”

“I am really, REALLY impressed! You’re – you know what?” I sat closer to her, “You’re the most amazing living thing on the planet. Have I ever told you that?”

“Several times,” she laughed. “All for completely stupid reasons.”

We looked at each other in silence for a while. So I decided to turn the tables, “Well, what do you want to do?”

She smiled sheepishly and shrugged her shoulders. “I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“So there you have it. You’re in the same place I am!”

“Not really. I don’t want to fuck me all the time.”

“LOL. How about becoming a stand-up comic?”

“As opposed to you, lover-boy. You’re a comic when you’re lying down.”

“See? See how funny you are?” I playfully lunged at her. I sat on top of her, holding her arms down with one hand while trying to tickle her mercilessly with the other.

“Stop, please, I’m serious! I hate tickling.”

I stopped. I wanted to build trust. “Hate is a powerful word.”

“I hate tickling,” she repeated.

“How about this, if you don’t like tickling? Is this a fair compromise?” I kissed her softly, still holding her wrists down, and began to lick her shoulders.

Forget breakfast. She was my food, my air. But love is never enough, is it? Not in this life.

Chapter 12

“So I have another profession for you to consider,” I said. We were scarfing down morning eggs and toast at the café.

“Uh- oh!”

“I’m not kidding about this one. You’re not like the other Wesleyan-tonians. And yet, somehow you are. You’re comfortable in both worlds, right? You understand all dimensions. Theirs, yours, mine. You really get it. And you’re also great at inspiring people. You make people feel like they can be real with you. And you have a good heart. And you’re super smart. So I think...” I took a bite of my egg to add a bit more drama, then said, “you ought to be a psychologist!”

I smiled while she looked at me stunned.

“A psych...what are you, a college version of the Wizard of Oz, handing out everyone’s jobs now?”

“I could see myself having a career as a Wizard.”

“Look, Mayor, I know you don’t want to be pinned down, but I just think at some point, I mean, we can’t just click our heels and go back to Kansas and wake up when we were twelve years old! We’re all grown up now. Toto’s dead.”

Reality cooled and turned to ice – because a sprinkling of snowflakes hit our cheeks as we walked back to The Inn. It turned icy financially, as well – I was going through my two thousand dollars way too fast. I was trying to preserve it like someone might try to preserve a canteen of water while crossing the Mohave desert. And believe me, if you haven’t been to the Mohave desert, do yourself a big fat favor and don’t go.

Another thing I had to consider: Was I just playing the part of the serpent in the allegory of Adam and Eve? Tempting Ruth with knowledge and freedom while possessing neither myself?

What if I was tearing her away from her best possible statistical life just so I could have her for myself for as long as possible, with no idea why?

Chapter 13

“So tell me about Eric... When you kissed, was it as good as our kiss was in Paris that first night?”

She looked at me quizzically.

“Remember? In front of the garden?”

“I remember, you goon.”

“Then tell me honestly, was it as good? I wanna know.”

“I have no idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because we never kissed.”

“But you said...”

“No, you said.”

“What you are talking about?”

“You said, ‘Him?’ And I said, ‘Shhh.’”

“And what does that mean other than you don’t want to talk about it?”

“It meant, yes, we went on a first date the night before, and yes I liked him a little, and yes I knew he was into me, and I didn’t know where it might lead, and if you hadn’t dragged your sorry ass into the library I think I would have gone out with him again. Maybe. I don’t really know.”

“Oh,” I smiled.

“Oh, what?” She sounded a little annoyed, wanting to change the subject.

“So what’s he going to do once he gets out of the pen?”

“Actually, Mr. Hobo, he wants to be an engineer.”

“An industrial engineer or a railroad engineer?”

“Actually, he wants to be an electrical engineer, since you must know.”

I nodded seriously. “So electric trains.”

“Or maybe he did say industrial engineer. Something like that. I really wasn’t listening to what he was saying, you know?” She started laughing pretty hard, “He was a little boring, honestly.”

Then she added, “I hope I made the right decision skipping bio yesterday.” She bit her lip. A look of worry appeared on her brow.

Chapter 14

On Sunday morning we awoke to a cold sun shining through a frosted window. This was the last day of rest for us. I couldn't afford to rent the room much longer. Reality was coming down the track with its little white headlight shimmering in the distance.

"Let me treat you to breakfast this morning, Mayor. Because, well, I have something to tell you. And you might not be so hungry after I tell you. So it's not going to cost me that much."

I couldn't read her. "What is it? Tell me now."

"I need to go back... to school. I need to make up the class I missed, and I need to be a student for the next four years. I know that's not your dream, not a part of your reality, but it's a part of mine. I'm sure of it now. It's the only thing that feels right to me at this point..."

I nodded. "I understand."

This is what I understood. My life was an instant mess again. A train wreck. The little train that couldn't. I tried to prepare myself for this possibility, and all the feelings it would evoke. But I couldn't feel anything after she told me. She had a life here, she set up something fine for herself. I got that.

But as reality set in I also realized that college was not a fallback plan for me. Even with her out of the picture. That was my truth.

I said quietly to the white wall I was now staring at, "I am a scam. I am not here, but I'm not there. I have nothing real to give, I have no plan. I'm just The Wizard of Oz, sweet Dorothy."

Then I added, "Or, you could come to Paris with me!"

"Didn't you hear what I said, Mayor? I have to go back. I love you! I do! But all the traveling and eating and sex and music and dancing and talking in circles, it's crazy. I need a life with a wheel to steer in some direction. I'm sorry, but that's just me."

She dropped down wearily onto the bed. A long time passed. I watched the last of the morning frost melting on the window ledge.

I thought she was about to fall asleep, but then she blurted out: "Okay, I have an idea. It's not Paris, but it's about us."

"You're going to pay me to help you with your math homework?"

"No, weirdo. And I don't need your help, I'll have you know."

"You want me to teach Eric how to drive a train?"

"Shut the fuck up about Eric already."

"Sorry."

"I really need to study today. I need to get back to my class work. It's not going to be an easy path -- but what if I made a promise to you, and you made a promise to me? It's October. Why don't you take some time for yourself, see if you can figure out what you want to do with your life, and see if I fit in with your plans somehow. Promise me you won't go out with anyone until after Christmas break. I'll promise you the same. It's not that long to wait. But let's not even contact each other for those two months. Let's give each other some serious space to re-think everything, okay? No more surprise visits. No more trying to convince me of anything. No texts. No phone calls. Just give me some space to think, and give yourself some time to think without me screwing with your head all the time, and then..."

"And then?"

"And then, if you come here just before Christmas break with a plan that makes sense, and you can figure out a way we can be together, a way that has even a speck of reality attached to it, then I'll be here to listen. But it has to include me staying here and letting me graduate. That's what I want for myself. Four years of that. Maybe even grad school. I don't know. It has to include my plans for me. But it also has to include a plan for you.

"And, I guess if you don't show up just before Christmas break then I'll know when I go back to see my parents that you're somewhere out there, living a sweet crazy life, the life you want, and I'll love you, with the memory of these days. But we can really never be this way again."

She took a deep breath and waited for me to respond.

“Okay, Ruthie. Okay, I’ll try. I swear. I’ll try to figure things out, and...”

Her eyes filled with tears as she interrupted me. “And then I’ll see you just before Christmas. Okay?”

I thought it was a rhetorical question, so I just kept staring at her moronically.

“Okay?” she repeated pleadingly?

“Okay, yes. Okay,” I whispered.

I hoped I wasn’t telling her the biggest lie of my life.

Chapter 15

“Hi Dad.”

“Hey, Mayor. How’s life as a vagabond? Are you done yet, please?”

“Ah, kind of, maybe.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I think I’m making progress.” I felt like I was on a job interview.

“Do you want to talk to me in English or code?”

My dad was a good man. Worked hard as a financial planner and a stock broker, made people a lot of money in bull markets, lost a lot of it back in bear markets. And now, for his many years of loyal service, he had become senior vice president at Morgan Stanley. One of thousands of senior vice presidents, so no use trying to google him. He lived and died with his clients’ successes and failures. He cared about everyone a little too much. Which was more than I could say about myself.

“Where are you?”

“Still in Connecticut. But I’ll be leaving today. I want to come home for a week or two....” my voice trailed off.

“And then?”

“I’ll tell you when I get home.”

“Any chance you could tell me now? I’m dying to know.” His voice was sarcastic but not mean.

“Okay, Dad. But I have a feeling you’re not going to love the idea. I, well, I want to go back to Paris for a while. I want to start by being back there again. Kind of like rewinding to go forward....”

“Paris? What? Mayor, I don’t understand. Give me a clue what’s going on.”

"I just need some time to get my head straight, Dad. I feel like I'm supposed to go back there. I felt something different when I was there, about myself, and about life when..."

"Son, you met Ruth there. Remember? And you stayed in a four-star hotel, and ate in four-star restaurants, with us overseeing everything and paying for everything, making sure you had some fun before college. We were celebrating! That's what was different about Paris! I'd go back there too if I could repeat that kind of experience. But repeating experiences is not possible, Mayor. You can't!"

He was confusing me like only he could. "Maybe it was just an impulsive thought," I added weakly.

This is what I thought he was going to scream next:

"IMPULSIVE THOUGHT? The very first impulsive thought in your life, I suppose? Look, you little runt, the entire mess you call being alive has been one stupid-assed impulsive thought after another. And if you're about to ask me for money, I'm not about to let you pick my pocket anymore. Now get a job as a mechanic or something, just like every other good upstanding teen with only a high school diploma. Or come home where you won't cost me anything except room and board and sit in your room and space out underneath your headphones all day, alone, where you're out of harm's way. Maybe you'll grow the fuck up some day. Dreamers tend to get hurt out there in the real world."

But he didn't say that.

He said something else, as if thinking out loud.

"Look, boy, there are a lot of things I wish I did before I went off to college. I was a hippie, after all. And, you have no idea, man. Look, I understand what you're after. I do. I just don't want to see you waste your life wandering around in circles until you're washed down the drain."

"Actually that would be a spiral, Dad."

No laughter. I knew he was leading to something.

"I get it. You're trying to live out a fantasy. But fantasies aren't always dreams. Sometimes they're lies. How will you know the difference?"

"I know fantasies can be lies, Dad. But I'm not talking about living in a fantasy forever. I just want to..."

"Why don't you try going to Berkeley then? It's not too late. I could call them and work it out for you to start next quarter. As far as they know you're taking a gap year, or possibly less than a year. Why don't you at least try?"

"I don't want to do that. I'd rather come home, get a job, and figure things out from there. I don't see the rush. I'm not ready to surrender just yet."

He was listening carefully. He was good at listening. It was a big part of his work.

"Surrender? Is that how you see it? Maybe I'm an idiot for saying this," he said, "but I know you. I do know you. You're a good kid, a smart kid. And you're right, time is on your side, for now. But maybe what you're doing right now is surrendering! I just want to let you know that."

When a father believes in who you are, nothing can replace that. And it was true – surrender was a complicated concept. Sometimes it's good to surrender -- as in letting go....

"Your mom might kill me for saying this, but, I'll loan you the money to go back to Paris for a while if you think that will really help you. Two weeks! That's it. On a two-star budget. After that, the deal is, you'll strongly consider re-applying to Berkeley for the winter semester. Or come up with a more reasonable plan that makes sense for your future. Deal?"

He loved making deals. That's what he did all day long.

"Okay, deal." It sounded kind of like the deal I was making with Ruth, so, as they say in the investment world, there didn't seem to be any conflicts of interest, but there was also no hedge. This was all in.

"Two weeks! That's it. And you email us every day."

"Thanks Dad, thanks so much."

"Mmm," he grunted. Maybe he wasn't sure he'd made such a good deal after all.

"Hey, Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you kind of a personal question?"

"And what might that be?"

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I just need to know... Are you actually happy with your life?"

He laughed a short choppy kind of laugh. "Yes, I'm happy."

"How? Why? Isn't work...?"

"Work's okay. Not great. Some of the people I work with are obnoxious jerks. Actually, most of them. But..."

"But you spend all your time doing it."

"Too much time, I agree. But I love your mom. I love you, and Darcy. She's turning into a very special young lady. I'm at peace. I have a wonderful family and a good life. And when I look in the mirror, I'm able to sleep at night. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah... I guess."

I sensed another lecture coming on. And when he started on a "life lessons" talk, his voice deepened like a radio announcer and his words got more formal.

"Mayor, look, I don't like my life all the time. No one does. I only like my life most of the time, and you know what? You know what?"

He was repeating the question for drama. Here comes the spin line. I braced myself.

"That's as good as it gets! That's as good as it can ever be, for anyone. So I'm good with that. I have no regrets."

I knew he wasn't done.

"You're searching for something perfect, Mayor, something that will last forever. One perfect endless shining moment that never dies. But that's a fairytale! Just a fairytale, okay? Not real. Not true. Not possible."

He could be very persuasive.

"Life can be good even when it's not a fairytale. Life can be good even when it's hard, if you work at it. If you dedicate yourself to it, day by day. But you can't be flying off to Paris every time something doesn't feel right, okay? Even if you could afford it, that's just not going to satisfy you in the long run. Because after a while, it will stop

meaning anything to you, because you can do it any time you want. It will start to feel like just another escape, not a fairytale at all. More like a prison. One you've created for yourself. Which means you have to look deeper."

"Okay, what? Be specific! What's 'deeper?'" I kind of yelled this at him.

"Connection. Not unplugging from the way the world operates. Finding connection to it. Look, for many years of your life, Mayor, you were connected, right here with your family. But then, when you became a teenager, I guess everything has to get explored, discovered for yourself, right? You need to unwind everything to baseline so maybe someday you can wind it all back together in your own way. But if you go down that road for too long, if you just keep unwinding things, well, there's a fine line between a seeker of truth and wisdom, and just being a bum floating around without a clue, holding his thumb out on some empty highway until it's too late for him to turn around. There's a fine line between an adventurer and a wanderer. Or a rebel and a madman. Or a...."

"Maybe being rich makes you a madman!" I shot back. "Maybe working day after day with nothing real to show for it other than money is more senseless than being a beggar. Maybe it's just being a different kind of beggar."

"I agree, there's a fine line between a rich man and a beggar, son – because regardless of how much money a rich man has, if he's a greedy man, he's a beggar. I get it. A billion dollars will never change that. I see that with some clients at work. They will never stop being trapped by their money. Because they have no actual connection to it, or to anyone, not even themselves."

"So what is it that you feel connected to, exactly?" I asked.

"Family. I have a connection to your mom, and you, and Darcy. Parents can't always talk to their children like this. Or won't. But we've kept that connection going, even if we disagree, haven't we? It's called love, Mayor! Not just someone to love you when you're winning, or when you're kind, or clever, or when you're high and you say funny things – but deep connected love, like the way Darcy loves you, and like your mom and I love you."

I was heart-deaf. Soul-blind. Mind-numb. Morally muted. Because, honestly, at eighteen, all I wanted to do was fuck Ruthie over and over again – that was my only connection – and if I couldn't do that, then GO TO PARIS! I am not going to lie to you. That's as far as it went for me. And no speech from my dad was going to change that.

But, it also crossed my mind and made me wonder, could Ruthie ever love me like that? Did she? Or was she trying to tell me, look Mayor, "Act I" was good, but now you have to come up with an "Act II," that wows me even more. Perform for me! You're not good enough yet. Figure something out. Become something brilliant! Something different than you are now. Walking around Paris with you on a summer night is not enough! YOU'RE NOT ENOUGH.

"Look, come home, stay for a few days," my dad said into the silent phone. "And if you still want to go to Paris, I'll loan you the money."

I laughed a little, even though I tried not to. "I'll be home tomorrow night, I think. I'm flying standby...."

Then a thought came to me and for some reason it felt almost urgent: "Hey, Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Can I say hi to Darcy? I kind of miss her. I haven't really talked to her in a long time."

"Darcy? Really? Sure, absolutely, hold on!" He was very happy about this.

I heard him walking around, then the sound of feet running quickly up the stairs, a knock on the door of that slobby pink room across the hall from mine. Mumbles, some more silent moments going by.

"Hey you!"

"Hi, Darce! How's my baby sister?"

"Fine! How's my anciently old brother?" She seemed very excited that I wanted to touch in. "Did things work out with Ruthie?"

"Kind of."

"Oh?"

Darcy read between the lines. She decided not to push me any further. "Hey, I got my beginner's driver's license and I'm driving around by myself during daylight hours!"

"Ah, welcome to the world of faster wheels -- you've graduated from our bicycle races!"

"I still love to ride my bike. I miss beating you on the straightaway."

"Never happened."

"Oh, yeah, okay. But anyway, driving's fun! So when you're back home I want to give you a ride somewhere."

"Actually, I'm coming tomorrow, I think."

"Wow! Because..." she stopped mid-sentence.

"Cause why?"

"Well, because, I've missed you. You're kind of like my favorite person, you know?"

"Oh God, Darcy, don't say that!"

She laughed that sweet innocent laugh of hers, quiet, full and cheery. "You're my fave. Now I can add humility to all the reasons why I love you. Anyway, can I drive you to lunch or something? I need to practice."

"Sure! That would be great. Just don't wreck my ride before I get there!"

"Roger that," she said.

I imagined her saluting me like she used to do. Not a speck of defensiveness at sixteen. No snide comeback like, "Well at least I don't drive stark raving drunk at four a.m. like you used to do with your insane friends." She would never say that. She was way too cool. I looked forward to spending some one-on-one time with her.

I got my wish. With all the darkness that followed.

Chapter 16

On this, my second solo airplane flight ever, the earth shrank quickly below me, and my life became small and still, floating through marshmallow clouds. No one was sitting next to me. I took off my iPod headphones and leaned back in my seat with my eyes closed.

My father's words about finding connection began to sink in a bit, but with a twist. I knew how dead life could be with the 'work, marriage, kids, grand-kids' thing -- the soliloquy I so eloquently freaked out Ruthie and myself with. But... what if everything I presently wanted suddenly came true? What if I went to Paris, had a great time by myself, and discovered what I wanted to do for the rest of my life to make money -- like open a French café. Or invent cool new phone app in French? What if then I rushed back to Connecticut to whisk Ruthie away because, yes, I persuade her to change her mind, she actually drops out of school, and only wants to follow me wherever I go. Anywhere! Like Darcy probably would. "Take me on an adventure," Ruthie says smiling, as a big rainbow appears in the sky behind her. We go to every imaginable place on earth until we exhaust all the lust, wanderlust, frustration, anger, curiosity, passion, and the wildness of the world, and are left resting at last breathless and empty on some sunny beach in the South Pacific with girls in grass skirts asking us if we want another Piña Colada. And here's the point -- I would essentially be in the same mindspace as I am now, not knowing what the crap any of this was for, or why I should care, or what I should do tomorrow. OMG!

I started talking to myself, like some kind of psychotic.

ME: So let's get this straight, my mind is an endless vast expanse of meaninglessness, and unless that changes somehow, everything leads to nothing. I am The Wandering Jester of Darkness. REALLY?

ME: Yeah, that sounds about right. Because, look, everyone gets the joy thing but you. Your parents get it. Darcy, well, she lives it every

day. Same with Ruthie. Somehow, they don't feel disconnected, they have some magic umbilical cord to... something.

ME: So what is life about then? Mostly dark matter interspersed with a few random flickers of light? A U2 concert followed by meaninglessness, matterlessness, where all the doves die?

ME: One could see it that way.

ME: I do see it that way, obviously. That's the problem. (I was getting upset.)

ME: Maybe how you see it is the problem, but in reality there's no problem.

ME: Well, I can't change the way I see it, now can I? It's just the way I see it. You see what you see.

ME: Well, if you don't think you can ever change the way you see it, and what you see sucks, why not just kill yourself and get it over with? Get to the finish line before it gets you?

ME: That's crazy. What the hell do you want me to do, shoot myself because I can't figure life out at eighteen?

ME: You're not man enough to pull the trigger.

ME: What kind of thing is THAT to say? Are you insane?

ME: Are you?

ME: I just want answers!

ME: From me? Talk about insane.

ME: Fuck you!

ME: Well, fuck you too!

It was a very weird flight home.

Chapter 17

When I got to my house, the same house I grew up in a few miles from Venice Beach, there was a single porch light on. Oddly, the garage was open with no cars nestled inside. Mom and Dad had gone somewhere separately? Darcy can't drive at night yet.

My neighbor ran over to me. I had known him since I was born. He started out married with kids too old for me to play with, and ended up divorced with his kids scattered all around the country working various jobs. Every Saturday he mows his lawn. That's usually the only time I see him. So this was a surprise. "Mayor, I've been expecting you."

"Hi Mr. Greenway."

His long wrinkled face darkened. "Mayor, there was an accident this afternoon."

"What?"

"Darcy."

"No! What? Well, is she okay?"

"I honestly don't know, son. Borrow my car. Here are my keys and directions I printed out to the hospital. Your mom and dad are expecting you. You need to go, now."

I was near tears and starting to hyperventilate. I found myself driving his old car way too fast. What if... don't go there. I tried calling my dad while I was driving, and then my mom. No answers. Not a good sign. I pressed harder on the accelerator. My mind could think of nothing else but exit signs receding, and traffic to swerve through, and stop lights turning red at wrong moments, and the double yellow lines whirling far too slowly under the wheels. They were the enemy. I raced time to my destination.

When I blasted through the glass doors of the emergency room and got to the reception desk everything smelled nauseatingly anti-septic. Overhead fluorescent lights were bare-bulb bright. I was a bit

jet-lagged from the flight, my eyes were blurring, but then again, I might have been holding back tears.

“I need to know where Darcy Allston is, please.”

There were homeless people and sick people and coughing people and bleeding people stuffed like human sardines all over the waiting room. Some were sitting in the corner on the floor.

“And you are?”

“Her brother.” I didn’t say my first name, it was the cause of too many strange looks and unnecessary conversations, like — “I’m Mayor Allston.”

“Mayor who?” Side look, eyes squinting. “You don’t look a Mayor.”

Right. “But...” Gag line. On and on.

The nurse was ruffling through a stack of papers. So many sick people. Names upon names upon names.

“She in intensive care on the second floor...”

I passed by signs for Kidney Dialysis. Nurses’ stations. Doctors on break hanging out near the nurses’ stations. So many sick people in each of the rooms, with all the doors opened wide. Everyone hooked up to some machine, waiting. Waiting.

I finally arrived at a door that said, “ICU.” I looked in and saw a figure that looked like my dad walking across the room. I pressed a buzzer.

“Yes,” said a nurse behind the window.

By now I had no more cool left. “Let me in! My sister’s in there! Open the door!”

“Sir, you’ll have to...”

My dad waived her off and pulled me inside, putting his finger to his mouth to signal for quiet.

“What’s going on? How is she?”

“It’s pretty bad, son.”

“Oh no, no, no.... How bad? Tell me.”

"We don't know yet. But your mom and I have been here since 11 o'clock this morning. What time is it?"

There was a clock right behind him. He was stone-cold out of it. No life left in his eyes. "9:30 at night."

"Okay, look, if you can stay here, I'm going to try to force your mom to get out of here for 30 minutes and get some food at the cafeteria and get a breath of fresh air. She's going under. Not rational. I have to try."

"Sure, of course."

I crept silently over to where my mom was sitting. She was leaning in, an inch away from Darcy's bed. Both of them were motionless. Still-framed.

My mom started crying when she saw me. It was like she had no tears left, it was just a quiet dry sobbing. She stood up wobbly-legged and hugged me and wouldn't let me go.

My dad pulled her away after a while and insisted she take a break. She pleaded, "I'm the mother. I don't take breaks."

But he was firm, "Sooner or later you'll need to refuel. You have to take care of yourself so you can take care of them."

I was aware he said, "Them." Maybe by habit. Or maybe before Darcy got hurt I was the one they considered to be in intensive care.

"Come now. Darcy won't be alone. He'll stay right with her."

They left the room, rag tag, zombie-like, swirling in misery. I sat by Darcy's bed, partitioned off from the other injured and sick.

Darcy was sleeping, or in a coma, I couldn't tell. Her right leg was raised slightly, in a cast. Her ankle poked out of the bottom. It was dark blue and black and purple. Some kind of ice pack covered the other leg, which was swollen twice its normal size. She was hooked up to a machine measuring her heartbeat and other vital functions. Her head was wrapped at the forehead with a bandage. Some of her long blonde hair escaped, waterfaling away from the pillow.

Her face was pale, angelic, expressionless. No expression of pain. Mouth slightly open. Almost as if expecting a kiss from God. Lost deep in sleep.

Memories rolled in. She and I riding down the Venice beach bike path, a windy sunrise. A Saturday morning before anyone else was riding. We could hear the waves falling in chaotic rhythms as we pedaled hard. Sun rising bright red and orange in the eastern sky. She looked over as she caught up with me, hair flying behind her, body thin and strong, gaining shape and essence at fourteen. Her ratty tan shorts, black Beatles T-shirt untucked, billowing out behind her like a sail. Her smile was pure and golden. Her hair was flying like a wispy flag under her baseball hat; that hair was a part of her identity since she was a baby, natural blonde, staying golden yellow through the years. And that big pure smile of hers. She always had that. Her silver-spoked wheels were spinning madly now, gleaming. I tried to leave her in the dust, pumping my legs harder, but she used every ounce of her energy and power to prevent it. And I couldn't leave her behind. She kept up with me for the first time that day. I high-fived her at about thirty miles an hour. Then we braked to a stop, out of breath, laughing.... And I opened my eyes. And she was here, still and silent. There, here, all at once.

Except all the power and sparkling energy from the day I remembered had been stolen from her. The usual sunlight in her face was gone. Replaced by a cloud, a shadow.

I began to cry, one gasp at first, then silence. I don't really cry. Then I caved in and began sobbing uncontrollably. My eyes just rained tears, curling across my face.

I calmed down after a while and leaned forward. "Darcy, it's me.... Sis, listen to me if you can. I'm home now. You owe me lunch, remember? And, hey," I swallowed hard trying not to cry again, "remember the bike ride, remember, how you kept up with me for the first time that day at sunrise? Remember how you pedaled faster than a pinwheel in a hurricane? Remember that? Well you have to find that strength in you again now, Darce. Use it to get better. You have to fight this! Fight to keep up with me here, okay? Fight to come back.... Please."

Another image came with my eyes closed now. It came reeling out in front of me like some movie playing, so clear: Thanksgiving dinner at our house. She must have been thirteen. We were just becoming friends. I mean, good friends. We were always civil to each other. Putting up with her was easy to do because she'd do anything

I asked. Clutching on to me all the time, wanting to do whatever I did. Go wherever I was going. Tomboy. But by thirteen, we could talk about almost anything together. School, and Mom and Dad and how strict they were. We would laugh about a few really weird aunts and uncles, who were all downstairs at the moment.

Everyone was there. Turkey carved up, wine flowing. But I was in a funk. I just wanted to escape. Take off the stiff clothes I was made to wear. Not have to pretend with a stiff smile, and fake some polite voice when I talked. They were all staring at me with a sarcastic look on their face. "Oh, how handsome you look!" said the aunts, almost in unison. But I knew what they were really thinking: "Your parents finally got you to knuckle under and look normal, didn't they? Learn the lessons of respect and tradition. It's about time." I hated them for that.

You noticed what I was feeling that night, Darce. You saw how pissed off I was. So you took my hand while they were all screaming over each other, barking out one stupid and trivial thing after another until nothing was left but a wall of noise, all drunk now, and you snuck me upstairs to your slobby pink room. You said you had something to show me. Some gift you were going to give me for Christmas but you couldn't wait.

You closed the door, laid down on the floor and stuck your hand under your bed until a wrapped present appeared.

"Here it is," you said breathlessly. Your eyes sparkled with excitement. "Look!" you said. "Open it!" I was hesitant since I knew you'd have to buy me something else for Christmas if I unwrapped it. You couldn't stand it anymore. You untied the bow for me, reverently but hurriedly, like you were about to present me with one of the three wise men's gifts. Then you handed it to me. There it was, shining for me in my hand.

It was a glass ball with a beautiful girl inside of it standing in front of a castle. You took it from me and shook it and snow came down and fell slowly on the entire scene.

I stared at it. Kind of a dumb gift for a fifteen-year-old boy. But it got to me, somehow. You knew me too well. The girl in there, under the falling snow, it was the girl of my dreams, the girl you knew I wanted to find someday. But it also looked a lot like you, Darcy! You

wanted me to love you too, I guess. Or maybe it was you watching over me from your beautiful castle, even at the age of thirteen.

I felt a pang of something odd shoot through me as I stared at the golden-haired girl in the globe.

"Wow, cool." I said.

"You don't like it? I can return it for something else."

You held it out to me. The snow was slowly falling. Your sweet hands were cupping the glass. Holding it out to me like a holy magical thing.

"Yeah well," I said, transfixed, not blinking. "I think it's kinda for girls."

"Oh, okay." You shrugged and your face turned pink. I knew I had hurt your feelings. But you showed not a hint of sadness or anger at me for waving away your magical gift. You loved me that much, didn't you?

You put it aside and laughed at some piece of food that was stuck to my fancy shirt. A thick streak of gravy surrounded it. "See, you found a way to be a slob and screw with their perfect dinner no matter what they dressed you in!" she laughed.

"Yeah, they can never get to me," I confided.

She nodded. "Yeah, me either."

We put on some loud music and listened, eyes closed, until Mom and Dad came in and dragged us back downstairs. "Don't be rude, you two. Get down there."

She kept the glass globe for herself. She put it on her dresser and kept it there. It's still there.

I opened my eyes to see her sleeping, bandaged up.

"Hey, Darce, hey. I have a secret to tell you." I leaned closer to her face. "You don't tell Chris or Andre this, ever, promise? Okay then. Listen, this is the truth, I loved the snow globe you gave me. I should have taken it. Remember? I should have recognized what was in there, and how much it made me feel. And how well you really knew me. How much you cared. But I couldn't let on. See? I mean, you know why."

Suddenly, she opened her eyes just a little! Slits at first, eyes rolling up a little as if she were still deep in sleep. "Mayo?" she whispered.

"Yeah, Darce, I'm here!" I moved the chair even closer until I was almost hovering over her.

"Where's Mommy?"

Mommy? My God she hadn't used the word 'Mommy' since she was five years old.

"She's... she's here, Darce. Right downstairs. Back any second."

"I, um, need... I think I need some... water."

"Okay, yes, wait, I'll get some, hold on."

I saw a water fountain in the corner but no cups. I went over and cupped my hand with water from the fountain and rushed back to her.

A light went on and a machine started beeping. She was starting to come back. "Darcy, the doctor will be here in a minute, but here, sip this."

I put my hand gently up to her mouth and she suckled it like an infant. Most of it spilled on her white gown.

"Mmm," she moaned. I had never witnessed anything so intense in my life, seeing her urgency to stay alive.

She fell back under, unconscious again, breathing easier now. I sighed, hugely relieved she could talk, and that she knew who I was. But I knew she was still in extreme physical danger. Would she even remember I was here today?

A doctor came in to check her. He looked at the oscilloscope. Wrote down some notes. Then left.

I sat back and breathed a long sigh. I felt calm for a moment knowing the doctor had just been there. But then the fear came. What if? This time the wildest thing happened. I began to pray. I had never done it before. Not since I was four or five anyway. I had no clue about what was going on "out there." Didn't trust priests and churches, or California gurus, or L.A. philosopher-author-poets, or any of the self-help books I had browsed through at airport news stands before putting them back on the shelf and shaking my head.

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, my fingers were intertwined and glued together like the time I was hypnotized by a magician at Andre's twelfth birthday party. My teeth were clenched.

"Please God, whoever or whatever you are, please let Darcy get better. She is exactly the kind of person you want to be here... In fact, I would switch places with her in a heartbeat, right now, to save her! Go ahead, make it happen! Let her be sitting here praying over me, let me be the one to fight to stay alive. Because it wouldn't matter if I won or lost the fight. But she's too..." But then I suddenly realized that if we were switched, she would be asking God to do the same thing. She would ask to switch with me! And maybe that's what happened!

Maybe God listened to her instead of me, and that was supposed to be me lying there, and she had taken my place. I wouldn't put it past her to pull something like that off.

"If you already switched us," I added, "please switch us back. Look, I am a nobody. I know that. But I'm begging you... Remember, God, when I was five and I asked you to prove your existence to me? I was drying off from a shower and I asked you to just move the toilet paper, rustle it, just a little, since there was no wind in there, it would have to be You! And I asked you again and again to do just that one simple thing, to rustle the toilet paper with some magical isolated wisp of God-wind, or lift it up entirely for just a split second, defy gravity -- anything I could believe and remember. I sat on the side of the bathtub, dripping, and focused on the toilet roll and didn't blink or anything, I was dedicated to you in that moment. I didn't blink until my eyes were burning from the steamy windless air, until finally, I gave up. I gave up and I never asked you again. Remember?"

"Well, this is different now. This is the moment you have to come through. This isn't just a whim. This isn't for me. It's not a game. Not a dare. She doesn't deserve to be lying here like this. You have to help her. After all, if you're behind all of destiny, then this is your damn fault!" I started sobbing again, feeling angry. My eyes were squinting tears from the anger.

Her breath became irregular. It scared me. I looked at the I.V. and the oscillating lines. But I couldn't make any sense out of the flow or the patterns. I wanted to call for a doctor, but I couldn't speak. I couldn't make a sound from the place I'd fallen into.

I screamed loud inside my head, so loud my jaws felt like they would break under the pressure. “Why? Why choose the best person in the world with the biggest heart? Don’t you have any sense of rightness at all? Why would you do this to her and not the millions of bastards out there who have no heart at all? And no brains? Why am I allowed to run free, completely ignoring every wondrous thing I race by, calling you names, believing in nothing, doing nothing with my life? Why are you letting me spew my venomous crap all over people like Ruth, and even screwing with myself, and then taking the best person you’ve maybe ever made in all of time and creation and cracking her ribs open like an egg? What’s WRONG with you? Are you insane? Or maybe all you can do is explode things. Like some little kid. You explode the Big Bang, blow up everything into being, and then watch, like some huge Homer Simpson numbed out in front of some gigantic TV up there, while we learn to blow things up just like you do, like Father like son. Is that it?”

“Don’t you make any decisions at all after the initial creation? Really? Or is it just one big roll of the dice after that? Because if that’s the case, I’ll forgive you. You know not what you did.”

I was getting angrier and angrier. My fists were clenched and turning pale. “But if you had anything to do with this, and you let her die, I swear I’ll get you for this somehow. I will.” The anger burst into complete helplessness and craziness. I was crying so loud when the doctor came in that he had to forcibly lead me out of the ICU altogether.

My mom and dad had come back and taken over by then. I went outside and tried to calm down. Then I remembered. I walked back in quietly and said to my mom, “She said something to me. She asked me for water. She knew who I was. But now she’s the same.” I choked on the word “same.” My mom was hanging on my every syllable.

They tried to get me to leave the ICU around 1 a.m. but I refused. I laid on the cold floor using my jacket as a pillow and went to sleep next to her bed.

Chapter 18

A long two days came and went. I was virtually cryogenic. Frozen waiting. Dreams frozen waiting. Then one morning it happened. She opened her eyes and saw me staring at her. She blinked. "Still here?" she whispered.

I smiled, "Darce?"

"Hey."

Her voice was deep and raspy. "Hey, what... what are you doing here?" She turned her head towards me. She couldn't figure anything out. "Where am I?"

"Somebody hit you on the freeway. Ran right over the yellow divider. Drunk I suppose, or texting."

She nodded. "Oh yeah," she whispered, breathing a deep breath out. "I remember now. I tried to move into the other lane but there was another car there and I didn't want to hurt them..." she tried to swallow but coughed instead.

She breathed deeply three times in a row. I told her to slow down and relax.

"Mayo," she said. "Thank you."

She tried to reach out to me, but the muscles in her hand and arm couldn't quite make it all the way. But I could tell what she was trying to do so I put my hand on top of hers. Her hand was icy cold, digits frozen there in place.

"Thanks for what?"

"For praying for me."

I looked at her incredulously, "How did you know?"

"I heard you. I heard what you said. And you know what? It helped me. I pedaled my bike so hard to get better, you know? To get back to you."

I was glad that's the prayer she meant, and not my talk with God.

“Does that thing hurt?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nothing hurts. Because everything hurts.” She tried to smile but the muscles around her mouth didn’t quite go there.

“Darcy, I’ve made a decision, while sitting here next to you these three days... You know what?”

She looked at me peacefully.

“I’m going to stay home with you for the next few months and take care of you. I’m going to be your physical therapist, loyal slave, entertainment guide, D.J., and basically do anything you want me to do. Except no bike races. Too easy to beat you in the condition you’re in.”

She coughed and shook uncomfortably. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“Sorry. Really though. I mean it. That’s what I’m gonna do.”

I brushed my hand over her fingers. I massaged them gently. “Listen. I was going to go somewhere after seeing you and mom and dad. I was going to go to Paris for a few weeks to get my head together, again. You know? Again, and again? That’s been me lately. But guess what? You’ve woken me up. You are my ‘somewhere.’ I’m gonna get you better.”

“Yay!” she said weakly. That’s all she could say. But I could tell that the thought of having me around was bringing a bit of life back into her face.

“Listen, I’m going to let you sleep, but tell me one thing. Just one thing. This is kind of crazy, I know, but the doctor said you almost died on that first day. So, like, did you sense anything at all when you were out there at the edge...? Or, was it all just unconscious, or... all just darkness?”

“It was way better there than feeling all this pain,” she smiled. “But, no, it wasn’t darkness at all. Something else.”

“Something else?”

She nodded, “Something, don’t know what.”

I was quiet.

Then she fell back asleep.

“She’s not out of the woods yet,” cautioned the doctor. He had been standing behind me for I don’t know how long. “But you’re doing good work with her.”

I was embarrassed, but I nodded my thanks. Then I fell back into the chair next to her bed and slept until my parents came back from lunch, or dinner. Time was all a mess. Was it day or night? I hadn’t looked out a window in days.

Chapter 19

Two weeks later Darcy was allowed to go home. We were all going home as a family.

She was wheeled into the fresh air early in the morning, the sunlight sparkling like an electric diamond, searing right through our eyes. She covered her face with her hands and laughed. I remember her trepidation about getting in the car. How would she navigate her still half-broken body into the back seat? And would she be scared when we drove on the freeway toward home? The same freeway. I remember holding her hand all the way. She kept her eyes closed the entire time.

I closed my eyes too after a while. I thought back to when I was sitting by her bedside. I was there most hours of every day. She had become much more lively and responsive in that last week. So I began to talk about Ruthie, and the pact we'd made. She listened but didn't say much. Then, not atypically, all the energy suddenly went out of her and I could tell she was about to go back to sleep. She grabbed my hand once and whispered, "I love you, Mayo."

"That's your territory," I said. "That's where you live all the time. I have no idea what that means," I whispered back.

"What what means?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me what you mean!" She focused back into the present again.

"If I really cared about Ruthie, I'd get a job and just marry her or something. So, basically, I suck.... My heart is closed to everything unless life or death hits me over the head. But you, Darce, you seem to feel love all the time, for everybody! It's part of your nature. It's in your face when you're asleep. Me, I have no clue."

I thought I had been blabbing too long and that she had already begun falling back into the unconscious world. I was used to talking

to myself while she slept. But she hadn't gone under this time, she was listening to every word.

"Are you asking me what 'I love you' means?"

I shrugged, "Sure, I guess."

"When I tell you I love you it means... whatever happens to you when you hear the sound of those words."

I didn't respond right away.

When I heard the words "I love you," and thought of Darcy, all the lights came on. Just like they did with Ruthie, most of the time at least. But some people hear those words spoken to them, even from people they care about, and feel nothing. I had experienced it too, living in my cold world.

I began to realize something. You know how totalitarianism sucks? Dictators obviously suck. Well, sometimes I lived in reverse totalitarianism -- my own fucked-up thoughts are the dictator, and the rest of me is, or are, the cowering masses. If I wanted to be rebellious, if I really wanted to be a rebel in this life and live free, the first source of evil to go after would be the original source - me; the way I thought about the world. I was creating my own nightmare.

"I'm really feeling better, you know," she said.

"I know! I bet we'll go home soon, and you'll soon be back in your slobby pink room."

She smiled at the thought.

"Want me to paint it black instead? I could be so Goth."

"Not this year," I laughed.

Then she said, "I think you should write about all the things you think about. Because..." It's as if the words froze in the air.

".... What, Darce?"

"Well, you asked me what I saw at the edge. Remember? Here is what I remember thinking: Time is a fairytale. And anyone who fears it, or depends on it, or lives by it, well, they never really get to live. They never really know anything."

I nodded, wanting to hear more. I stared at her lying there, still wired-up and slightly drugged.

"I have a present for you, Mayo. Dad got it for me a few days ago, thinking I wanted it for me. But it's definitely for you. See it over there?" She pointed to the nightstand next to a vase of flowers and a glass of water. "Pick it up, go on."

It was a blue notebook — all empty pages — so I started to hand it to her, but she waved me off.

"No, no. It's yours. Take it.... Find out."

"Find out what?"

"Find out if it's a good gift or not. You owe me... you didn't take the snow globe, remember? Take this gift, Mayor."

For a second I thought she'd become delirious again, which had happened on some of the worst nights.

"The Thanksgiving snow globe," she continued. "You turned it down. You wouldn't take it."

Had she heard everything I said that first night? I thought she was unconscious. She heard and remembered everything I said.

"Don't turn this other gift down too. Just try it."

"Okay." I said it mostly to appease her.

She sighed a huge shaky sigh, moaned under her breath, and squiggled around slowly trying to get her body more comfortable.

"Give it to me for a second, and pass me the pen, it's there near the flowers."

She took the book and the pen from me with great effort, since it felt heavy to hold in her hands, and on the first blank page she wrote in big shaky letters:

"Somewhere Beautiful"

"There's the title." She smiled, then closed her eyes. Her breathing leveled out.

She had stayed awake just long enough to change everything.

Chapter 20

After our first few days home my mom remarked to me, “You’ve grown a lot lately. You’re back to the way you used to be.” That’s all she said. I thought about how ironic it was that someone could grow by going backwards. I guess it made sense coming from a parent’s perspective.

All through the month of November Darcy was housebound, so I was housebound too. It wasn’t much of a sacrifice. All my friends were in college. I read on their Facebook pages how new and exciting and academically slobby their lives were. They posted photos of girls they were hooking up with. Drunken parties on weekends.

Darcy couldn’t physically go to school. But she was keeping up with her high school classes remotely. I was helping her stay updated and organized every day. That was pretty much my job; I was basically back in high school again, but this time I was also like her home school teacher. Her friends would come over sometimes so they could do schoolwork together. Her teachers were emailing us everything she needed to read, and papers she needed to write.

Helping Darcy with her schoolwork, and seeing how ridiculous some of the teachers were, just made me more sure I didn’t want to go back to college. But Darcy was way more like Ruthie than she was like me. She had an inner contentment about life, and about all the future plans that had been made for her. I realized it wasn’t right for me to try to unplug either of them from that.

Our Thanksgiving was insane. Everyone was so happy that Darcy was alive, and not going to be disabled for the rest of her life. All of our weird relatives from out of town showed up. There were three turkeys, five bowls of mashed potatoes, people everywhere, in every room of the house. Uncle Rusty dared to sing. Poor us. Once again, I found myself after dinner in Darcy’s room, hiding away from the madness, peaceful there, with the sanest person I knew.

* * *

I had promised Darcy I wouldn't go anywhere until she could ride her bike with me on the bike path at Venice Beach. Two weeks before Christmas, Darcy asked me to get the bikes out. It was time.

She'd been walking since mid-November. There were endless physical therapy sessions before and since. She spent the last week in the gym pedaling on a Lifecycle machine, preparing. She was working her way back from the end of everything, to this: A cerulean morning. Cool. Windless.

We oiled the gears and put on our helmets. We walked the bikes to the front of the garage. And down the driveway we flew.

"Hey!" Mom called. "Hey! Where do you two think you're going?"

Darcy waved back as we turned onto the road, "See ya!"

I can only imagine the joy and trepidation my mom felt as we whirled away.

Chapter 21

Time whirled away too. It was almost Christmas break.

I hugged Darcy goodbye. Before I left, I told her, “Look, I’m not trying to mess with you, okay, because I’m your brother. But I just want to say that you are so beautiful, through and through. So when some boy comes along and tells you he think he knows you, and thinks he knows what you want, and you start to fall for him, remember this one thing for me, okay? Ask yourself this, ‘Does he treat me as good as my big brother treats me? Does he love me that much?’ Because if the answer is no, he’s not the one. Got it? He’s just another lame dude who doesn’t have a clue how to be as cool as you are.”

Her eyes started to fill with tears. Then she smiled and said, “Roger that,” She gave me her mock salute.

I took a quick look around the house, gave everyone a hug goodbye, and was away, off to the cold mysterious land of Middletown, Connecticut. Land of my highest hopes, land of my worst fears.

I would get to Wesleyan two days before Christmas break. Fate would lead the way from there.

Chapter 22

My third solo flight was not to Paris, France. And it wasn't so good, truth be told. Because I had a bad feeling about what would happen when Ruth and I were finally face-to-face. So much had happened in the two months since we'd last seen each other. Not a word was spoken between us. She could have found someone else to take my place by now. I hadn't offered her much compared to what someone else could offer. I offered her a way to escape from her dreams by joining up with mine. That's not love as I now came to understand it. But I kept my eyes locked on my laptop. My fingers tapped away, not once stopping to look back at what I'd written. I just kept tapping, tapping, until the battery went dead.

We landed in a snowstorm. Merry Christmas, east coast style. The trees were barren. No more rainbow leaves. No color anywhere. Just outstretched branches looking dead and frozen stiff, in a state of silent pleading.

The campus was bustling. Everyone seemed on edge. Finals week. Nights awake. 20 mg doses of Adderall. Large coffees to-go. Pizzas delivered to the dorm rooms for dinner. Cold left-overs scarfed down for breakfast. This day was the last day of tests before the break and everyone was pretty wired.

I sat on a cold unwelcoming iron bench in front of the reception desk just inside the dorm where Ruth lived. She wasn't back from whatever class she had.

I was multi-cold. Some of the chill was from nervousness. I felt like curling up in a big fetal ball to keep warm, and to keep from flying off into space, wailing in some crazy space alien language, like the face in Edvard Munch's "The Scream" seemed to be doing. That visually summed up what was inside me.

Every time the big glass door opened with girls, covered head to toe with thick winter coats and hats and mittens, I sat up straight in case one of them was her. When the hall was empty again I fell back into "The Scream," hands hugging my knees together.

Then she appeared, preceded by some telepathic flash—I knew a second before the door opened that this was the moment, but I didn't have time to think about how strange it was that I knew. I literally stood up a moment before she entered so she could see me.

Anything could have happened then, like her being totally startled by my presence and saying:

“Oh...hi. Wow. I didn't expect you to actually be here... like, ever. Um...”

OR:

“Oh, Mayor. Hi. Remember Eric? ... Eric, Mayor!”

OR:

“Mayor? Damn, why did you come back? You're still trying to spoil everything in my life again, aren't you? Well, I've been thinking...”

OR:

“Mayor? Wow! I have a small favor to ask you: GO HOME!”

She stopped in her tracks and smiled at me calmly. Her eyebrows lifted slightly in what looked to be a sympathetic response, “Hi you! Hi! I knew you'd come!”

She ran to me and hugged me tightly until I stumbled and almost fell backward. Both of our clumsy thick coats combined to create a nine-inch barrier between us. I was going to try to kiss her hello but there was too much physical distance between our faces to reach her. This is why newlyweds honeymoon in warm places.

“I'm a bit teary. Sorry. I just can't believe you're here. But I knew you'd come, I really did.... I missed you so much!”

I was stunned.

“What unreal timing,” she said, out of breath, “I just finished my last final. Did you know that? How could you have known that?”

“My new job as a psychic has taught me a lot. You also have a dog, right? Or a cat?”

“Okay, you weirdo. So I don't have a dog or a cat, but since you've graduated psychic school you must know everything else that's going on, right?”

I tensed up. "Not a clue."

Weak smile. Begging her to cut the rope I was hanging from.

"Where should we go? If you're psychic, you should know that too!"

I had just checked into a room at The Inn. But I said, "Are you hungry? How about the café?"

"You read my mind! Let me go upstairs for a few minutes. I'll be right back." She didn't kiss me before getting into the elevator.

When she said, "So then you must know everything else that's going on" -- what did she mean? Maybe it was just a harmless rejoinder. But what if she meant something else? Something she didn't want to tell me just yet because she knew it would explode everything? She seemed so happy to see me. But a part of me still demanded that I brace myself. Be ready for anything, especially, The Bomb.

"The Bomb," was something I had experienced all too often. Just when you're a moment from total joy, total victory, someone lands a forty foot three-pointer at the buzzer. And they start jumping up and down and screaming and celebrating with their teammates... shock. You were the intrepid defender, with victory a second away. It's a moment they'll never forget.... And neither will you.... My second girlfriend, who I was delusional enough to think that I liked, suddenly was dating the one kid in my school that I hated the most. Swish, nothing but net....

Or, you're about to go to Paris and you discover there's been a car crash, and someone you love is dying. Boom! The fallout is radioactive.

So I had to stay on my guard. Watching the empty skies, listening carefully for the hum of enemy planes. Although sometimes they end up being allied planes. You just don't realize that until years later.

Ruthie came bounding out of the elevator, grabbed my hand on the run, and raced me outside into the snow. We walked down High Street with the sun still radiating a few final sparks of light from its corner of the sky. Ruth stopped to pick up enough snow to make a big soft powdered snowball. She played with it as we walked. Then suddenly she threw it high up in the air with both hands. It came down and hit me squarely on the top of the head.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry!” she giggled.

“Lucky shot.” Some snow water began seeping under my coat, down the back of my neck.

“No way, I’ve been practicing with Muggsy Bogues.”

Hopefully, that blast to the head was the last bomb of the evening. Wouldn’t that be nice?

Away we spun down the street, feeling almost suspended in time. Life was ablaze, pulsing there right in front of our eyes.

I was about to make a left toward the café. But she tugged at me to make a right towards The Inn. The air got frostier as the sun disappeared below the city buildings. Stores were starting to close for the night. Parking lots with empty spaces were carpeted with newly fallen snow. The white lines were buried in white. We reached The Inn, walked up the ratty red carpeted steps, and came to the same room, room 4.

She unbuttoned her big thick black coat, which looked kind of terrible on her. But find me any kind of pretty looking winter coat. I mean, they make everyone basically look like a bear. Or an astronaut on the moon.

She had on a soft yellow sweater, with a purple undershirt sticking out just a lick above the neckline. Earrings, little green ones.

“Okay, tell me everything,” she breathed excitedly. She pulled me down to sit next to her at the edge of the bed. Because really there was nowhere else to sit.

“It’ll take hours and hours. Longer actually. Please, you go first.”

She looked a little perplexed, maybe even a bit frustrated, but said, “Okay. Well, here’s the abridged version, because adventurous it isn’t—I’ve been studying. Finals were hard, frankly. It surprised me a little. I hope I did okay. One of them was wicked. And let’s see... I went back home for Thanksgiving break. My parents have mellowed now that they see I’m firmly ensconced in school and I’m as straight and narrow as a well-aimed laser. They seemed relieved when I told them I wasn’t seeing anyone and just wanted to concentrate on my studies. I should have worn big thick glasses and tied my hair in a bun to underscore my point, but I think they got the message loud

and clear. I'm no longer a hopeless trollop in their eyes. Then I came back and went back to class..."

"Is that everything?"

She became more serious. "No. There is one other thing."

"What's that?" My ears began to ring with the sound of enemy planes.

"I kept wondering if you'd come. I mean, I kept trusting you would. But I didn't know for sure. There was always the chance that all along you were just a flake... Or maybe you would meet someone."

She looked at me. "So..."

"So?"

"So that's everything. So it's your turn."

My ears stopped roaring. I took a breath. "Well, okay... first of all, I pretty much stayed in one place the whole time."

"Let me guess... Paris?"

"Actually, that was the plan. But I didn't go."

She looked at me puzzled, "Did you stay home and get a job?"

"No, not exactly. But kind of."

"What does that mean?"

"I got a lot closer to my sister, actually..."

"That's what you did for two whole months? You got closer to your..."

"Wait! That's not what I meant to say."

"Well, then just say it!"

"Darcy got into a car accident. She almost died."

"What?"

"It wasn't her fault."

I couldn't go on.

"Mayor, I'm so sorry."

"I don't want to get into the details. I haven't talked about it with anyone actually, even though my parents suggested therapy. I was like, I'm fine if she's fine."

"Tell me more."

I started telling her how I stayed in the hospital with her instead of going to Paris, and took care of her once she got back home. I told her about the final days, and how happy we were when we finally got to ride our bikes together.

She listened the whole time in silence. Then she whispered, "Wow, Mayor. That's amazing. Terrible, but amazing, I mean." She got teary. "I don't know what else to say."

She got up and walked over to the window. Then she nodded, almost to herself. "Well, you must be hungry. Let's get something to eat. But all I can tell you is, you seem different."

"What kind of different?"

"I don't know. You just.... I just want to treat you to dinner."

Chapter 23

The café was quiet on this night, since most of the student body was either driving home or packing and printing out their boarding passes.

She talked about some of the teachers she had. Interesting classes she took. Friends she'd met.

I talked about how nice it was for me to be in warm weather back in L.A. I could take long bike rides alone most days, and play basketball at the high school courts in short sleeves. Didn't need to wear snowshoes or ice skates.

Slowly we were connecting again, laughing at each other's stories. It just felt so normal. Like we'd known each other for a dozen years. She didn't push me to tell her about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Or what the plan was. She didn't make it feel like a test. All she knew was I seemed different somehow.

We went back to the inn. When it was time to sleep, she turned out the light and our skin finally touched. I was immediately pulled back into that warm oceanic place where the lighthouse beacon flashed across the water. But this time the message was clearer; no searchlight turning round and round in the darkness. The light blazed steady now.

Chapter 24

In the morning we walked back to her dorm. Tomorrow she would be flying home. She had packing to do.

I spent my time wandering around campus while she packed, bundled up in her winter coat, which was a lot warmer than the one I'd brought. When I came to Olin library I was curious to see if it was open. I mean, why would anyone want to be in a library after finals week was over? I pulled on the door and it swung back. It was nearly deserted. I could smell the subtle scent of a thousand books.

I saw her at that table over there, at the beginning of the school year, with Eric looking over her shoulder. I was standing right here when she came over to me. Then I found myself walking through the aisles, looking carefully through the fiction section, leafing through dozens of novels, seeing with newly opened eyes the amazing gifts that some of these authors possessed. The depth of their craft was revealed to me just by leafing through a few pages, reading random lines, with such sharply defined images, and with descriptions of scenes that somehow threaded themselves together like the subtle brush strokes of a master painting -- a snow-covered valley, the opening of a rickety wooden cabin door. A man drowning in an ocean of dreams.

I met Ruth back at the dorm at the prescribed time. It seemed like it might start to snow any minute. But the sky stayed quiet. It wasn't quite ready.

Snowfall was now a festive thing for me. I wanted to see the swirling flakes touch against her hair and cheeks and stay there a while, happily existing as separate brilliant white crystals... then I wanted them to cover us both completely in a flurry of snow fur and carry us into white-blinding thoughtlessness together, far away from this world.

I still wanted things like that. I still wanted to dream us into a different reality.

* * *

“Okay, I’m all set,” she said. “Where did you go off to?”

“I met some new friends.”

“Really?”

“Yes, there was a guy named John Fowles, and another ‘John’ named Steinbeck. And Ken Kesey, and this really interesting kinda kooky girl named Ursula LeGuin.”

She shook her head, “Yeah, well, she’s definitely the best sci-fi writer ever – ‘The Lathe of Heaven’ ... and you’re still a weirdo.”

She took my hand and began to lead us back to The Inn for our final night there. It was time for one last talk. The one she most wanted to have.

On the way we passed old red brick buildings, a church steeple, a bookstore awaiting new authors. Then we saw the old green road sign, frosted around the edges, pointing the way to the town waterfall.

With the air so cold and fresh my mind seemed clearer. I decided not to wait any longer. I didn’t want to talk about my big plans in a small room. This seemed like the right moment.

“So, there’s a lot left to tell you about my ‘semester,’” I said. “My hardest semester.”

My words were turning to smoke in the frigid air like the swirls in van Gogh’s “Starry Night” back at the beginning of time.

“So to get right to the point, Ruthie, with a very unpoetic lead-in... I’m writing a book.”

“A book? About what?”

“Actually, about all of this,” I pointed to the scene all around us. “Everything we’re walking past, everything I’m thinking and feeling, since the day I met you. Before that time isn’t worth writing about.”

“Us?”

“Well, that’s some of it.”

“Can I read it?”

“Not yet. Not until I come to the ending.” We were only a block from The Inn now.

“Do you know what the ending will be?”

“No.”

I looked at her in an unusually intense way, realizing this was the moment, the first time I would have said this aloud to anyone:

“And then, no matter what happens when I finish, I want to keep writing more books. Because... I think I want to be a writer.”

We stood still for a moment; our smoky breaths blurring the boundaries. She came closer and kissed me softly on the lips. “And how do we fit in? You and me? Writers need a lot of private time, and lots of experiences and adventures out there in the real world.”

“I have plenty of ideas. You can stay in school. I can write from wherever we are.”

She smiled and cupped my hands in hers.

I could tell she was starting to think about all the details that I never considered. I was a big picture dreamer. She was far more practical.

So I added, “I know I’ll need to work to make money while I write. So before you get all warm and gushy about this I want to put this image in front of you – I come home one night with a clerk’s apron on after a long day of cashiering at the local drug store, looking like a dork, with thoughts of dental floss and Pepto-Bismol flying through my head, while you come home from class with a stack of books under your arm thinking about Einstein’s unified field theory...”

“We’re the unified field theory,” she interrupted.

The sky was crystallizing. It was getting ready to snow any second. We both began to shiver, so we started running down the street towards The Inn, holding hands, almost slipping on thin ice as we ran. Our laughter echoed weirdly off the frozen buildings, freaking out the ghost of Christmas Future dashing by in the opposite direction, somber and black hooded.

I held out my free hand, offering to help the poor ghost turn things around, but it didn’t reach back.

Up there, in the cream-thick sky, an image of Darcy’s beautiful girl in the snow globe appeared before me.

She shakes the globe for me, then holds it still.
Angel-white flakes of snow begin to fall.

Epilogue

I used to think that somewhere beautiful was a place on earth, or a rare moment of sensual beauty, like a perfect kiss under the stars in a Paris garden.

My parents and old friends think I'm trying to live my whole life in that place now. They say I'm setting myself up for a fall. They say I'm lying to myself. They say trying to live like this all the time is just a fantasy.

I want to tell them what I've come to see – that not all fantasies are lies.... But that's another story for another time.

The End

~ GM