

JOURNEY
THROUGH THE
RIOTOUS
DARK

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/ GM

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Chapter 1

I promised myself I wouldn't look. But, of course, I did. It was as hideous as I thought it would be. The kind of thing that would give me nightmares for days, if not weeks.

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

When you go to a small liberal arts university, it's small enough to know everyone's business, and liberal enough to have a professor kissing someone you're dating, while also being challenging enough to flunk out in your freshman year if you start thinking too much about stuff like that.

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

The professor was married. His wife was living somewhere on the West Coast. I'm sure he was lonely. But

that's no excuse. Maybe what he was doing with Sierra Townsend was legal in America. But could you do these things in the third world countries he was teaching us about without the government eventually stepping in and lopping something off? Where was his sense of global ethics?

Another ironic thing about this situation was, the day I first met Sierra we were in this professor's history class.

Across campus the very day I met Sierra was Clair Kinsley. She was sitting in a biology class dissecting a frog.

Normally, you wouldn't think there's any kind of meaningful correlation between love and dissecting frogs. But I've come to see there are meaningful correlations to pretty much anything if you think about it long enough.

In this case, dissecting frogs and dissecting love can lead to the same disgusting conclusion, that you shouldn't be trying to analyze something when it's dead.

Chapter 2

The history professor was a good teacher. When he spoke, his words lit up the scene right in front of you. His words created little movies in your head. I could see ancient people walking around, having conversations with each other in a language that doesn't exist anymore, running from volcanos, torturing each other.

He was a very charismatic guy. Not at all like the typical history professor you see in movies with a little white beard and a kind smile and a secret tragic life. This guy was dynamic. He was strong and tall and had a nice face. Neatly trimmed dark beards go well with blue eyes, especially when you're wearing a sports jacket.

His basic message was that history is much more than just the names of leaders and dates of wars. It's ultimately about human psychology. You can't understand taboos, or coups, or assassinations, or cultural creations, or the formation and inevitable destruction of any political structure, without analyzing what motivates and disturbs the human mind. Because no matter how lofty an initial idea may be -- and here was his main point -- human minds will inevitably find a way to screw it up.

He asked us to imagine putting a freshly finished, brilliantly detailed oil painting into a bathtub full of water.

That was his way of explaining to us what happened to all the best governments that have ever existed.

To see who humans are today, he took us back thousands of years to Egypt and India and Greece and Rome. They all seemed way more amazing than we are. It's not like I'd rather have lived in ancient times. And I'm not going to dress like a Pharaoh or a Jain for Halloween or anything. And I'm not going to go around talking about this stuff when I'm on a date. Nor would I have voted for Caesar, knowing what I know now. But studying these ancient cultures have given us insights about how incredibly stupid and ingenious and hideously heartless and cruel humans have been throughout time, all the way up to this moment. (Including my semi-married Sierra-groping professor.)

By the way, I'm not going to mention the name of the professor, or the university I went to, because I don't want to get sued.

In fact, even some of the other students might want to sue me. Because most of them were going to college for the sole purpose of getting a job. And if I mention their name they might not get one.

To me, going to college just to make sure you get a job is a bit like sleeping with your girlfriend for the sole purpose of having a baby. I mean, slow the hell down.

I wanted to go to college to enjoy my time, and learn

about life's important things. I thought all of the professors would be wise, and willing to share their wisdom, and be wildly charismatic -- I was attracted to charisma itself. I wanted to be *stunned*. I wanted a metamorphosis.

So when I told Sierra that I didn't go to classes that didn't interest me, and that I didn't care if I got an F or a W or an I, for "I don't know who he is because he never showed up for class," she assumed a metamorphosis was not in my future. She ended up being wrong about that, but not for the reasons she assumed.

A university doesn't teach students about the most important subjects. Like fun, for instance. They should be teaching you that you can't fake fun. At freshman orientation they should have started out by telling us that fun and joy should be life goals. How do you capture energy that lights up your world, and then have it last for more than a few minutes or hours? *Wouldn't you want to know the answer to that at eighteen?*

They could say, beyond drugs, beyond sex, and alcohol and Adderall -- fun *can* exist. They should have at least mentioned that, and then given us some examples. Because it's hard to think of any, off hand, when your college age.

Or, that if the fun you have with someone like Sierra finds you nose-diving through a burnt-orange atmosphere without a parachute, you will hopefully look up at the

cerulean blue sky -- just before your heart splatters on the cold ground -- and fondly remember everything, and believe it was worth it.... They don't tell you how to do that either.

They also need to teach you that as bad as it sounds, living a life like that, and having that happen to you, could be *better* than the life you currently have in mind, working for some corporation for 50k a year.

I was hoping our psychology class would teach us how to actually recognize joy.

I was hoping the science classes, at least one of them, would teach us how to escape the gravity of a situation.

I was hoping the English professors would give us books to read that would change our lives and make us happy.

I wanted to be inspired, and set free.

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

Chapter 3

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

I sometimes called her Clair de Lune, because she emanated a moonlike strangeness even in broad daylight. But she had an absolutely wild sense of humor. Pretty much anything she said was funny, to me at least. Hence, my pun referring to the Italian word for *moons* -- she always came across a little bit looney.

She was also hauntingly beautiful, like the full moon on a cool night. And her dark blue eyes seemed star-touched. She always seemed to be looking at things beyond where you were.

She wore her golden hair short, down just below her ears. In fact, even her ears were beautiful -- small and delicately shaped -- which is amazing, because I'm not a huge ear fan. But I really did like Clair's ears, even from the very first time I saw them.

I almost forgot to mention her nose. Way before it was cool to have such a thing, Clair had a tiny diamond gemstone placed on the side of her nose when she was a child. It was about the size of a pinhead, maybe even a little smaller. It was a real diamond. Because in a certain light you could see an occasional sparkle.

The story behind that was, even though she was blonde and fair-skinned, she was born and raised in India. Her father had work of some kind over there. She received the tiny diamond gemstone on her tenth birthday. Right after that, the family moved to Little Italy, in New York. They weren't Italian. They just liked the neighborhood.

Clair sometimes spoke a made-up language, which, if you listened closely enough, made sense. For instance, when she called me, or any friend on the phone, the first thing you would hear was her soft melodic voice say, "Hadafugahya?" It was spoken liltingly and very fast, as if it was a long Indian word. The "gahya" was spoken with the accent on the "ah," like the Indian word for illusion -- maya.

She called me "Maestro," not because I played music, and not out of deference or respect. She called me that to make me laugh when I got too serious. She would say, "Maestro, compose yourself!"

When I complained that B.F. Skinner was comparing us to rats, she would say, "He should have had some sympathy for the ego of rats."

One day, I was talking to her about ancient Indian religions, which, having spent so much time in India, I thought she might have some interest in. But when I mentioned the Upanishads she said, "I like the 'Up' part. Up is part of my religion. The -anishad part without the up is

just a bunch of crap, like all the other religions.”

I said, “What *is* your religion, anyway?”

She said, "*Sarcasm*. And I'm very serious about it. If someone tries to stop me from being sarcastic, I send my priests to torture them. We will also start wars if we must. So, it's really just like any other religion.”

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

“It won't be long, Maestro,” Clair said with her eyes closed, her hands hovering over an imaginary crystal ball.

She was a true visionary.

Chapter 4

Sierra, even before she was seduced by our soon to be infamous history professor, had a way about her that most guys immediately fell for.

There was an L.A. confidence about her. She also liked wearing very short skirts and halter tops. This was usually accented with wrist and ankle bracelets, bejeweled necklaces, sparkly earrings, eye shadow and lipstick.

I would describe her style as “California suburban, with an Egyptian’s flair for jewelry.”

She liked having a boyfriend, even if it was me. She liked to show me off to her shy nerdy friends and make them feel awful. In front of her hip L.A.-Egyptian jewelry-type friends she mostly teased me and made me look like her indentured slave, because she would boss me around a lot. That made them feel jealous, since they also wanted to have a boyfriend slave.

Regardless of how chemically enriching things were between Sierra and me, every time I was with Clair I didn't want to leave. But there was a problem with not leaving, even after Sierra had moved on. Clair had a boyfriend, kind of.

Her kind-of-boyfriend’s name was Norman. He had tight curly black hair and bushy eyebrows, a hooked nose

and, somehow, a charming face. He also lifted weights and had strong legs and hairy muscular arms.

He always carried around a beat-up guitar, but he couldn't play it very well. No one would ever ask him to play. He'd strum it while he talked to people, as if he were a minstrel, except he didn't know any songs.

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

They met in high school in Little Italy. Then he followed her to these hallowed halls. But unlike a typical boyfriend, he was always telling Clair about which girls on campus were his type. Once in a while Sierra and Norman and Clair and I would hang out, and he would just about lick Sierra all over with his eyes' tongue. Norman was not a subtle flirt. Clair and I would watch and shake our heads and laugh, and eventually we would eat their leftover food while they jabbered away.

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

She was smart enough to help Norman with his class

work. What she received in return was considerable. He would buy her anything she needed, and sometimes even do her laundry.

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

Once I caught Sierra with the professor, my first thought was to just be by myself for a year or two. But my second thought (less than ten seconds later) was to go to Clair's lunatic-designed dorm room – a room with a stuffed clown sitting in cross-legged meditation, and a painting of a painter painting a painting of someone throwing away a painting. She also had a pair of long black boots hanging from the ceiling. She told me the hanging boots were a metaphorical way of honoring life's journey -- boots suspended in midair, directionless, going nowhere. Stuck.

I needed to be there with her!

I ran as fast as I could to her dorm room to meet her right after her sociology class. But the second I walked in I saw she was crying.

Chapter 5

Late in my adolescent career, when I was still just a stupid sixteen-year-old, I found myself eating ice cream with my poor teen-battered, teen-befuddled father at a local ice cream shop in my hometown, which shall also remain nameless, due to embarrassment, because no one would ever want to admit they came from there.

Anyway, Dad was trying to reach me. Teach me. Beseech me. It was like trying to stop a fish that was happily swimming out to the edge of the world, ready to take the plunge, because, who cares, I'm just a fish.

Then he asked me a question. Dads have the innate ability to blindside you with a question when you're least expecting it.

Beware, teenagers! This can happen to you:

He takes you out for ice cream (bringing back memories of when you were ten) and then nails you when you're half-unconscious from tasting the drug of choice from your younger years. It's gliding down your throat like laughing vanilla snowflakes. Your eyes are staring out into space, tasting that indefinable thing -- cloud-cold joycream - - you're fully in that present moment, and dreaming deeper still, you remember all the other ice cream outings with Dad after the Little League game, or after you got straight A's on

your report card for once. All the while you're smelling the sweetness of a freshly baked sugar cone in your nostrils. You're about to take your first crunchy bite, because you've gotten *that far* down the ice cream mountain without speaking -- when *wham!* Your guard is down. You mistakenly think he's in that sugary-high dream with you, *right there with you*, a friend, an ally in the sugarcloud, because he got a two-scoop cone too. But no, he's staring at you, with his bottom scoop starting to melt down the sides. He's not licking it upwards with his tongue either. He's not even thinking about getting an extra napkin. He's just waiting for an answer. "So what kinds of things are you interested in, Shannon? Any thoughts about what you might want to major in when you go to college?"

He pretends to have an air of casual disinterest, as if he had just thought up the question on the spot. His Irish background taught him long ago to shrug his shoulders and say, "Fine, sure," when being offered a cold beer, even though he was dying to have another one.

"Right now, majoring in ice cream sounds good," I smiled. I was still high on the taste of it. Teens can be so unsuspecting, like a deer stopping to smell a pretty white flower during deer hunting season.

"Well, you'll be going to college in just two years."

"Maybe."

“Okay, seriously. Enough with the ‘maybes.’ I don’t want to hear another word about maybe. You’ve got decent grades. You want a decent job, don’t you? Or would you like to spend the rest of your life digging ditches?”

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

“Well, you asked me the question,” I mumbled, with vanilla now coating my upper lip. “I didn’t want to lie to you.”

“Don’t you *ever* think about the future? Seriously!”

“Dad, I’m *sixteen!*” I moaned twelvishly. But I just couldn’t end it there, on a relatively neutral note. I was pissed that he ruined our time together.

“I’ll tell you this. I don’t want to ever be a dad if I have to have conversations like this with my kid. Because, I mean, honestly, right now, I *like* being clueless. Not *serious* about anything! I like dreaming about getting invited into some girl’s house to swim in her pool when her parents aren’t home, or playing basketball with friends until the park lights turn off, and then shooting threes using our iPhone flashlights to see the outline of the hoop. You should try it with me one night! But, I mean, don’t you remember *sixteen*? Why do you think I would care about the future at my age

when I'm living in a hormonal war zone? Meanwhile, I'm still being fed three nutritious meals a day for free by my parents. And taken out to eat an occasional ice cream cone. What's my motivation? Where's the true concern?"

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

He actually got it!

But then, he launched into one of his stories about the hippie days, and all the great times he had. How it was a time of *consciousness* and life lessons. Woodstock this, and Berkeley People's Park that, and how he somehow *knew* not to go to Altamont, and how he burned his draft card after his best friend died in Vietnam, and how all this taught him about being *personally* responsible, instead of just being responsible to an immoral government, and how personal responsibility only comes with integrity and experience, and that I'll soon be old enough to vote, and do I know what a privilege it is to have that sacred right, and that 50% of registered voters don't vote, so politicians only need 25.1% of all the potential voters to vote for them and the news will still report they won with over 50% of the vote. And that hippies were actually defenders of democracy, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and all the rest of the original revolutionaries, and how all the drugs and sex were

just perks, spoils of war so-to-speak, and that the music back then was inspirational, not conspiratorial and soul-diminishing like ours is, because it was all about joy and building things up, not tearing things down and having to shock people awake out of their sleep with a barrage of curse words and violence. And that, yes, there *were* songs with lyrics like “School’s Out Forever,” but they were *joking*, they weren’t rappers or mindless country singers or black-clad Emo bands screaming things into a microphone and faking like they wanted to kill themselves while becoming rich. Because music and life meant something high and wonderful back then. Not to mention (as he always mentions) the war protests – yes, and hearing great minds speaking out, *standing up for people’s rights*, hand-in-hand with Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and Pete Seeger, and Peter, and Paul, and Mary, and Woody Guthrie, and Dylan, and Phil Ochs, and -- that *courage to lead* -- whether through art or poetry or politics -- that belief in goodness prevailing over evil -- transferred over to the rest of his life. And now, it was *my turn* to take the world stage along with the rest of my generation. Was it not? That time was quickly approaching.

If I had known about history back when I was sixteen, I might have said, “Well Dad, Athens created democracy thousands of years ago. But it didn’t last. It didn’t work.

They found Socrates guilty of thinking, and questioning everything including the government, and killed him because of it. Then democracy disappeared for thousands of years until America was born. The black slaves and Indians fought on the side of the British because we had taken away their freedom while we were writing the Declaration of Independence, so we could live free or die on the backs of slaves and indentured wives. Two hundred years later, not much has really changed, except now we're stamping *Live Free or Die* on our license plates. But slaves can't afford cars. And when you work for minimum wage it can feel like you're a slave."

Disoriented by my logic, but proud of my cynicism his response might have been to fall back on his famous Abbie Hoffman quote, "Remember son, as Abbie Hoffman once said, 'You measure a democracy by the freedom it gives its dissidents, not the freedom it gives its assimilated conformists.'"

To which I would have said, "Cool, I know, dad! I remember that quote from the last time you took me out for ice cream. That's great. You're a real inspiration. I'm glad after Abbey Hoffman helped take down Nixon your generation helped elect Bush and Cheney, and Trump. Can we go home now?"

.... So as I looked at Clair crying, sitting cross-legged on her bed in her bizarrely decorated room, which she called, post-sanity décor, I realized not even *she* could escape reality completely. My heart sank seeing tears flowing down her face.

"What's the matter, Clair De Lune? What happened?"

She shook her head and began to cry harder.

"Norman?"

She didn't answer me.

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

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

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

She took a deep breath, *"We are friends. That's why I'm crying."*

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

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

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

She turned away.

Did the professor know about this, or care? Was she with both of them at the same time? Did Norman know? Did anyone besides Sierra totally get what was going on at this school?

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

"I'm sorry for *you!*"

I said, "Why?"

"What do you mean *why?* Don't you want to be with her?"

"No! I want Norman to be with her, so I can be with you."

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

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

"No, star-drops evaporate faster than snowflakes. It's chemistry."

"I love evaporation. I got an A in evaporation. And I love our chemistry."

"You are the First Clown of Academia, you know that? You're kind of like a moron savant."

"Clair, listen to me. I'm not a crazy poet like you are. And not as funny. But I'm getting more sarcastic by the day, so we share the same religion. Right? And I'm glad I'm here with you, laughing and crying. Look, I don't care about Sierra! I came here to tell you that anyway."

I sat down next to her and kissed her for the first time — softly, on her wet warm cheeks. It was also the first time in a long time, pitiful as this may sound, that I truly felt alive in this world. The last time was probably when my dad took

me out for ice cream and didn't ask me any questions. But that was a long long time ago.

Chapter 6

Philosophy might aptly be defined as, "People becoming famous for discovering a debatable truth about something that pretty much no one really cared about before the philosopher thought of it."

There are also other philosophers with provable opposing truths to the original philosopher that no one previously cared about.

Then in philosophy class, everyone argues about whose truth is more true, until mercifully the clock strikes metaphorical midnight, and class is dismissed.

My famous conclusion, after studying and reading philosophy for *a whole semester*, was that truth and wisdom were entirely different. In fact, there were lots of times when the prevailing truth wasn't wise, and the prevailing wisdom wasn't true.

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

One quote was by Friedrich Nietzsche, slightly paraphrased:

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

The second quote was written by Immanuel Kant:

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

In my paper, I combined the two great masters’ words by surmising:

"Science is a form of human intellect that attempts to calculate the truth about reality in mathematical terms, the sum of which will eventually be of no value."

I thought my paper was brilliant, if a bit short of the five hundred word minimum.

Unfortunately, my professor thought the deductive reasoning was weak. And fell far too short of the five hundred word minimum.

He wrote in the margins:

“If you are going to conclude something as radical and cynical as this -- where you basically take all the science discovered throughout history and reduce it to nothing more than a series of worthless illusions -- you will surely be out of step with the beliefs of most ‘wise’ scholars, medical

doctors, and rocket scientists who know more about those subjects than you or I ever will.”

His response seemed typically pompous for a philosophy professor. And the B minus I received, which he deemed “generous,” did nothing but piss me off.

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

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

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

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

I fearlessly replied to his nauseating cliché (how dare he quote Nietzsche's *only* cliché) with a second note attached to my paper, thrown back on his desk:

“I hereby accept a life of excess, while not agreeing with your, or Nietzsche's, definition of the word. Excess can be a

noble thing. A courageous thing! I quote Sukant Ratnakar: 'When enough is not enough, a Hedonist is born.'"

He didn't reply to this. Possibly because he didn't know who the hell Ratnakar was.

Did I make up the quote and use a fake name just to humiliate him? Or maybe he just thought I was too idiotic to bother responding.

To be fair, in context Ratnakar was not a proponent of Hedonism. If you re-read the quote you can surmise that. But since a lot of people win arguments by quoting things out of context, hope sprang eternal.

In the end, my grade remained a C.

But this exchange of thoughts between me and my philosophy professor changed everything for me.

I went from being an innocent two-bit moronic rebel to a proud newly-born secret hedonist.

I was a *secret* hedonist because I didn't want my parents to find out, since I still wanted them to pay for my college education while I fine-tuned my hedonism by finding out more about how to be one.

Chapter 7

I had Clair cheering on my Hedonism. She began calling me Hedonnus -- her newest fictional Greek God.

Other times she called me, Hedonism II, which I later found out was a clothing-optional resort in Jamaica.

She was enjoying the free-spirited person I was becoming. She loved my philosophy paper, and my responses to my professor's responses.

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

She said, "Academics love a good laugh over a cold beer. In fact, you are the reason why they convulse and spray it all over their table mate's rumpled suit instead of swallowing it."

A part of me realized my love for her was blinding everything. After all, as a hedonist all I really wanted was *her*. That seemed morally off-key to the hedonistic code.

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

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

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

Hedonists have to wear just as many blinders as other philosophical or religious zealots do.

My conclusion from studying philosophy for an entire semester was that philosophers were just as close-minded and trapped in their own reality as I was in mine. Hence, that made us all equally wrong.

Chapter 8

The night Clair and I first slept together she didn't quite give herself over completely to the experience. She stayed very light and easygoing, as if our passionate interlude was as simple and normal as eating a meal together. Having sex was just another way to have fun. It wasn't better or worse than other ways of having fun. It wasn't about *losing yourself in the other*, or getting all mystically connected and floating off into outer space together. So I found myself floating off on my own. Lonely in my wild moon landing.

She watched me, bemused -- enjoying herself observing me. That's what it felt like. The first few times she did this it freaked me out. But I didn't say anything. And then something strange happened. After a while, not losing myself, and not making the physical act into an earth-shattering event, made sense in a way. It was just *fun*. As a hedonist, why couldn't it just be fun? *Why not?*

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

We would make jokes about politics. We'd make jokes about Norman and Sierra. She now called Norman "Ab-Norman-al," and called Sierra "The Mountain Range That Keeps On Giving."

The reason I laughed along with Clair was because, beneath it all, she wished them well. There was no malice whatsoever. She just thought, for as long as it lasts, good for them.

As hard as it was for a hedonist to admit, sometimes it did upset me to have her be so breezy about things, and about us in particular. A fear crept over me that maybe she would hook up with someone else one day for no particular reason. Or get back together with Norman, if they ever were actually together.

But there was no way Clair was about to get serious enough to have a conversation with me about love, or what I meant to her, or even if we were officially together. Maybe I was just someone she liked to hang out with, and mess around with, and snuggle next to on cold nights. The truth was, *she* was the true hedonist. I was just her apprehensive apprentice.

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

Things just got deeper and wilder for me, multiplied by her aloofness.

Her blue eyes, they were so dark sometimes I felt like I

was being drugged inside them. The Clair-drug would drag me away, moonstruck one moment, lost at the bottom of the ocean the next moment. In fact, I would often feel like a dreamy-eyed fish that had found its way back to the hook it had temporarily escaped from. She was sailing away from me, laughing, forgetting. I was trying to swim after the hook.

This Clair-time got me so addicted, so high and anxious at the same time, that sometimes I lost track of time and missed class. All I wanted to do was sink into her insanity and hide with her in there.

I'm reminded specifically about Valentine's Day. I wasn't a hopeless romantic. I was *worse* -- I was a *hopeful* romantic. I brought her flowers and chocolates, assuming naively that she would have some small gift for me as well, even if it was a quick softly spoken "I love you," which she had never once uttered to me -- perhaps followed by a simple kiss on the cheek. That would have been enough. That kind of gesture would have just about brought me to tears. But as Valentine's Day night continued ticking down to midnight my confusion grew. She acted like my gifts were nothing special. The flowers were still lying sideways on her desk. All the chocolates were eaten in sixty seconds, as if I'd presented a lamb to a ravenous wolf.

Finally, after a late dinner, I cracked. "Clair, do you know what the flowers and chocolates were for?" I said with

a tinge of meanness.

“Sexual favors?” she asked, cocking her head slightly like a Scottish terrier.

“Well...yeah...I guess,” I said sheepishly. (She being the ravenous wolf.)

I regained my composure, “But it’s about something else too.”

“Something else, or something more?”

“Else.”

“*Else!* I see. Well, hmmm...” She started humming the “Jeopardy” song. “Oh, wait, you mean the flowers and chocolates were for *Valentine’s Day*?”

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

“So you want me to buy into the ‘it’s Valentine’s Day’ thing, Maestro? Okay, how about a pair of gold cufflinks? Oh, that’s right, you only wear ratty T-shirts, even in the winter. But then you could always use the cufflink pin to pierce your ears. But then you’d look like a girl. But that might be great, because I’d get to be a lesbian. We could get married and adopt! Now *that’s* romantic!”

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

She looked under the pillow and there it was. “I will! I will,” she nodded. “Tomorrow morning, when it doesn’t

have to *'mean'* anything."

"Like...wow." I was at a loss.

She could tell I was getting more upset by the minute.

"Okay, you want me to give you something special?" she said more seriously. "Something that will equal the generous intentions of your flowers and chocolate, right?"

I shrugged my shoulders, forlorn.

"Okay. I'll do it just for you."

She got down on all fours and crawled next to my feet.

"I *bow down* to thee, oh Maestro." She nuzzled up against my leg.

"I am *wowed* by you, Maestro."

Her hands and arms rose up and down in a wave as she mock worshipped me from her knees. Then she began to wiggle her backside. "Or, as any good dog would say, '*Bow...wowed!*' Now, in dog language I think I have pretty much said everything you have ever wanted me to say. But do you want me to tell you the equivalent of 'bow wow' in giraffe language?"

"Sure, go ahead," I laughed.

She pushed me onto the bed, put her arms around me and started licking my neck gently. The feeling was electric.

"That's the same thing as bow-wow," she whispered. "But giraffe language is far more erotic, because they think words are a fucking waste of time."

Chapter 9

That brings us to early spring.

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

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

Clair was wearing a red sweater with a hand-sewn hand on it with the middle finger extended. She put her hands under her shirt, pressing the middle finger on the sweater against the window.

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

She opened it to the first page. It was a photo of her at a young age with someone I assumed was her father. He too had blonde hair; a bit darker than hers. He was smiling and lifting her high up in the air, straight over his head. She was about seven or eight, I guessed. In the photo, she was big enough and old enough to look surprised that her father was that strong. Her eyes were wide and shining. But while she was showing me the photograph, she was oddly serious.

She turned the page. More pictures of her dad, and one

of her mom. Her mom looked pleasant, smiling nervously for the camera, with her arms around her dad. "I took that shot of them," she said.

"Where do they live now?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clair closed the book, laid it down on the floor, then started speaking in a southern accent. "Back when mah pa died, well sah, she just went plumb crazy, which was lucky timin' 'cause it was plum season. So she just fit right in with

all the other plum pickers in a place called Wonderless-land, where people go haywire and set fire to their memories.”

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

What I didn't understand at the time was that this night was pretty much the beginning of the end of us.

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

She said, “No. Actually it's quite the contrary. I've decided to become a nun. But there could be the occasional choir boy....”

Chapter 10

We tried to be distant friends for a while, but distance won out. I decided to take a big chance in a final attempt to find out what was really going on and win her back—I asked Norman to meet me for lunch.

We met at a café just outside the university where the die-hard drinkers go. Norman fit neatly into the mold. He drank a lot. In fact, day and night. I didn't drink much, but I was willing to order a beer as part of my strategy to extract information from him.

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

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

I looked at him quizzically. "Clair?"

"No! Sierra."

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

"Of course, I knew about him," he shrugged. "We're all members of the Sierra Club."

I laughed.

He continued, "... The indoor version, of course."

I nodded.

"He leaned in closer to me, "While Sierra Club extremists hike around trails and up mountains, our Sierra Club was only interested in hiking up Sierra's skirt."

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

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

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

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

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

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

matey.”

I wasn't really looking for advice about how to get over her.

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

“Look, I want to know what happened, why she broke up with me so suddenly. She saw you and Sierra fighting when we drove into town the other day. That's the night when she told me we needed to stop seeing each other. Could that have been what set her off?”

“Us fighting? No.” He grabbed the glass and poured more beer down his throat. A shaft of sunlight made its way through the café window and lit the remains of his glass with an amber glow. “Clair and I spoke a few nights ago. I understand what's going on. She doesn't lie to me.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Well, what did she tell *you*?” his eyebrows lifted a bit.

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

He burst out laughing. “Yeah, okay.”

I looked at him silently.

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

“Well, you got that part right, man.”

He went ahead and finished the last of his beer because

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

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

"I only drink pitchers at night. So... I'll see you later. Okay?" He winked.

The waitress walked away.

"I play guitar, you know?" he called out to her.

She quickly disappeared into the smog of crowded tables, each one calling for her attention.

"So, where were we?" he yawned.

"What about her dad?"

"Her dad? He's a fucking piece of work."

"Is? Or, was?"

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

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

He went on a rant about Sierra, though. He said she was the most toxic wasteland of a person he'd ever had the pleasure to be poisoned by. He hung around her because she inspired him to write angry love-doesn't-exist songs on his guitar.

Just before he left me with the check, he said that after spending years with Clair he came to realize the world was, unfortunately, not as absurdly funny as she creates it to be.

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

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

"Protected her from what?" I asked.

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

Was this all I was going to be left with before Norman stumbled out of the cafe?

I tried to bring the conversation back to Clair as I stood up to shake his big hairy hand goodbye. But Norman mumbled something about how he needed a cold slap in the

head, and Sierra was perfect for the job. But now he was done with her. It was time to tell her it was over. Tonight, in fact.

He started to ramble, "*Love* -- it's kind of like when you're in a bar, not thinking about anything or anyone except your sexy girlfriend who's about to walk in any minute, she'll be all decked out in a slinky dress, ready to turn everyone's head. You're dreaming about her, you're waiting for her, right? The image of her is burned into your brain -- you see the two of you making wild love, getting toasted together in her penthouse apartment at 2 a.m., and she's saying to you, 'I've never loved anyone like this before...' -- when out of nowhere, some massive moose bumps into you, spills his drink on your pants, looks down with a smirk, blows a big puff of cigarette smoke in your face, and says, 'What are you going to do about it, you dumb fuck?'

"And suddenly you see life a bit more clearly," Norman said as he glared at me. "Love gets put into perspective, you see? And here's what the perspective whispers to love-bewildered idiots like you and me: In the end, -- *the moose always wins.*"

I guess Norman was now ready for the real world, the world beyond college. He was going to graduate with a master's degree in Gloomology.

Chapter 11

An alternate version of reality landed, like a comet slamming to earth right before my eyes. My dad died suddenly.

It's never good timing when a father dies in his fifties. But the timing of this particular passing really sucked for me. Because I never seriously answered his questions. And I had meant to someday.

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

The funeral was dreary. Everyone was old and crying. I was too angry and numb and disgusted to cry. It was pretty unforgivable for this to have happened, since the guy never hurt a flea, and could have only added to the good in the world.

The fact that so many awful people live and continue to beget more awful people while a truly good human being like him dies, seems to be clear proof that sometime around

the of dawn of homo erectus God got distracted with some other planet on the other side of the universe, and never looked back to see what began to unravel down here.

My mom was taken care of— she was moving in with my aunt who lived in Washington, D.C. But she wasn't all there when I looked in her eyes. The love she had for him and with him was real. For some reason that scared me. Where do you find love like that?

I wondered why my father's heart wasn't as strong physically as it was metaphorically. And then, because I felt myself getting feverishly hot and starting to cry, and because my life was ripping apart from multiple angles, I flew out of there, back to the airport, back to my college without a name, without a father, without Clair. Nothing in the future existed in the present.

When Clair heard the news about my father she came to see me. It was the first time she'd ever come to my dorm room. I was always going to her side of campus, to Clair's Lair.

She sat down beside me and told me she was sorry. She asked me how I felt.

Was that some kind of joke? I couldn't read her. I never saw her so serious or caring. The "friendship only" rule

quickly vanished. She made love to me in a passionate and oddly honest way. She breathed on my neck to warm me. I felt like she was exorcising ghosts.

She made me Chai tea afterwards. She served it like I was sick or wounded.

Then she whispered, "Are you still sad?"

"No, I'm not sad, exactly."

"That's exactly what a sad person would say."

"Well, maybe I am. My dad was a really good guy."

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

"Did you feel that way about your dad too?"

What compelled me to say such a *stupid-assed* thing like that after Norman warned me something wasn't right about the story she told about her father?

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

I ran down the hall after her, barefoot, shirtless, but just missed her as the elevator door closed.

I apologized to the thick gray metal door as the cables began to whir. I screamed out to her, saying that it was the worst thing I had ever said, and I'd never ask her again, but the hum drowned me out. Down she went, one beeping floor at a time.

Chapter 12

The next piece of news took the entire school by storm. Sierra was pregnant, and the father had been revealed.

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

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

But the professor was not actually abiding. He was simply biding his time. Once he'd gotten under her, he'd never gotten over her, and he hated that she had left him for a mindless cynical dope like Norman. How could he get dumped for a loser like that? The kid didn't even know how to tune his fucking guitar.

He longed for those sunny peaceful days of yester-year. More like yester-week, since their affair lasted about that long. So, of course, AN (After Norman) he gladly leaped at the chance to be her rebound.

But now, Sierra was pregnant. The cat was out of the

bag, the school was abuzz. Rumors flew.

The professor was nonplussed by the president's renewed threats to fire him. He asked Sierra to move off campus with him into his rented flat on "X Street," while he fought for his job in the courts, because, you see, he found a legal precedent that might save him. He would hire an attorney and fight this. The plan was called marriage.

He also wanted Sierra to have the baby. For real. He would hire a nanny when the bundle of joy arrived so Sierra could still attend school and graduate, and throw her little black graduation hat in the air with her classmates, with the baby waving at her toothlessly, held in daddy's arms.

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

But Sierra did not agree to the AN plan. She became depressed and withdrawn. She didn't love the professor. She needed to start anew. For her, "anew" had always meant "a new boyfriend." But flirting while pregnant was kind of gross.

She knew in retrospect she had been a fool. Now she was determined to save her reputation. Addition by subtraction, as they say. So she left him and aborted the pregnancy. All signs of their love vanished soon thereafter.

A month later, Sierra was back to wearing a slinky skirt

to and from class. And the professor was, I guess you might say, history. It marked the end of an error. The pre-historic error.

During the AN period, a nerdy computer wizard named Graham Sawyer hit the scene and tried to sweep Sierra off her feet. He promised her a good life, as well as many years of free tech support. Sierra declined.

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

We all thought he was getting in way over his head emotionally. As good as he might be at science, we figured romantic chemistry must not be his strong suit — because the chemistry just didn't seem to click, for Sierra anyway.

I met up with Sierra as we were walking to separate classes one day and I suggested she give Graham a chance. She asked me why I would suggest *him*, of all people?

I said, "Well, you've given lots of people a chance, but I'm not convinced that anyone, including me, actually gave *you* a chance, or deserved you. Imagine how your life could change for the better if someone like him turned out to be someone who actually cared about you, and wasn't just another clown.

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

"Maybe I was the best of the clowns."

"I may be a female clown."

"I don't know. I think your life could go either way, to be honest. You definitely know how to make wrong turns and screw up. But you also have a brain, and a good heart. You deserve to be with someone who knows how to love you for real, little clown. That's all I'm saying."

"Well, *stop* saying that! I'm done with the clown thing."

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting," I smiled.

She hugged me, and I think she tried to turn it into a kiss.

"You're *not* a clown, by the way," she whispered.

"Try Graham."

"I'll think about it."

Later that day I convinced Graham to ask Sierra out, again, since the first time all she said was, "Sorry." And the second time all he got was a laughing emphatic, "No!"

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

He said, "Well, ice can warm up to some degree, but still be ice."

I said, "Yeah, I didn't know that. But look, I think she's warming up to you more than ice. Maybe she's more like

mushy snow at this point. But you won't know unless you test the waters. Know what I mean?"

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

We waited for Sierra to eventually blow him off, or to be more chemically accurate, blow him up, possibly into a ball of curly black meth smoke.

But to the school's utter amazement it was Sierra who seemed to change over time, not Graham. She was always quite a decent student when she put her mind to it, but now she was studying hard, with him, and getting really good grades. She started attending all of her classes, rain or shine, even the very early classes almost everyone slept through. She even took to wearing jeans and sweatshirts to class instead of tight short skirts that showed off her milky inner thighs. That was a true loss. The school was in mourning.

She even donated her jewelry to a salvation army store. Her arms and fingers and wrists were the only naked part of her visible now besides her very cute face which was now unaccompanied by lipstick and eye shadow.

She wasn't drinking with her friends anymore either, which was usually her main weekend activity. (This was an art form she had mastered from Norman, and it had filled up most of her weekends after the breakup.) But no longer.

She wasn't flirting with me anymore either -- no more

trying to kiss me as a thank you for the slightest good deed. And no more flashing her big beautiful smile at the helpless innocent freshman boys. Graham must have re-programmed her brain or something, I swear. She was like a reverse Frankenstein.

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

But what I came to realize in a very profound way when thinking about Sierra Townsend was, despite my previous belief to the contrary, people *could* deeply shift and evolve.

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

(And maybe me as well.)

Chapter 13

The more days that passed, the more hung up I was on the idea of winning Clair back for good this time.

I wanted to have with her what Graham now had with Sierra. He was her solid support. He seemed to take her eccentricities in stride. He didn't pry. He didn't demand to know everything about her past. He didn't beg for her affection. He never needed to know "the truth." He was lost in his own head, so he never needed to get lost in someone else's.

Sierra also changed Graham -- he became more relaxed around people. He knew Sierra in ways that I had gotten to know her, but took it to another level. He saw the sensitive and serious sides, the *real* person behind the swaggering raw sexiness that helped her survive growing up in L.A.

The irony, of course, was that I now wanted to be in a serious relationship with a person who was more *averse* to seriousness than anyone I'd ever met. And not exactly what I would call sensitive either.

But she was nothing like the old Sierra, if I were to dissect the frog, so-to-speak. She wasn't looking to be with anyone else now. Norman said she was "cryogenically in love with being cold and aloof." That was her new persona.

I believed him, convincing myself she might also still be

loving me in some deep frozen corner of herself.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 14

I said goodbye to my hedonic phase and entered into my detective phase. Something wasn't adding up.

The first thing I did was call 411 and ask for "Kinsley," in Little Italy, New York. Kinsley was Clair's last name. Could her parents possibly still be living there? The operator had no listing.

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

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

He said, "Thinking about buying real estate?"

"No." I started to look glum.

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

I shook my head and started walking away.

"Okay, okay. Come back. I can tell you've been snooping around. So, I can't believe it, but I actually pity you...."

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

He stared at me for a long moment while an out-of-tune D chord mercifully faded. "Look, if I tell you some

things, it didn't come from me, right?"

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

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

"I promise."

"You're willing to lie to her if she asks you how you found out?"

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

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

"No!"

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

"Okay, okay, I admit it!"

"Admit *what?*" he smirked.

"*Come on, Norman!*"

He was laughing now, "Say it!"

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

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

"What? *Fuck! Fine! I'm a liar.*"

"Thank you. At least you're honest about it."

I waited, scowling.

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

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

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

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

I was trying to assess how all this fit together. "But in the café, that day when we first talked about her, you said,

‘Saturday nights are not her favorite nights.’ What did that mean?”

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

“Wow, that’s too weird. What creeps.”

Norman strummed his guitar, angrily this time, and then looked at his watch and said he had to go.

“Is her mom back in Mississippi now?”

“Still in jail.”

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

“Her *adopted* mom. That’s who she was talking about. Not her real mom.”

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

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

“I don’t know. *Both.*”

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

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

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

He strummed his guitar with anger again, strumming something twice that sounded equally bad. That meant the conversation was over.

Chapter 15

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

It was brilliantly sweet. It made me love her even more.

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

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

The next time I saw Sierra walking across campus, books in hand, I ran to catch up with her. She was glowing and smiling at me, looking amazing in a pair of new jeans and a beige crop top. She was wearing glasses instead of contacts, which made her look almost as nerdy as Graham. Despite all the visual downshifting, she was still sexy as hell.

She stopped to talk to me. We didn't touch on anything important. Gossipy stuff, classroom talk. Then out of the blue she blurted out, "You know, Clair is in my computer class. She asked how you were doing the other day. She

seemed concerned.”

“Concerned?” I laughed nervously. “She won’t even talk to me beyond hello and goodbye. You know, Sierra, I was such a freaking moron. I said something that hurt her really badly.”

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

“I asked her a question about her father, but I realized the minute I said it that she didn’t want me to question it.”

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

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

“I thought you left *her*! That’s what she told me.”

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

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

I struggled with this idea, but the temptation became too strong. So after Sierra sauntered away, I decided not to text her. I actually called her -- which, obviously was a bold

move, because no one was calling anyone anymore these days. Everything was text and Instagram, etc., etc.

She answered the phone after three rings. She saw my caller ID:

“Hadafugahya, Maestro?” Her tone was softer than usual.

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

“Couldn’t be better. You should see my room. I’ve given it a make-over. It’s been redecorated in early Lascaux. It’s like a cave. I drew animals on the wall in red pencil and made a handprint that looks twenty thousand years old, at least.”

“I’d love to see it.”

“I know, but you’re not invited.”

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

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

“Well, if you’d spend some time filling me in, I’m all ears. I *want* to know you! I’ve even...” Oops. I stopped.

“Even what?”

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

“What did you dream?”

“I dreamt you came down from the star-drop atmosphere to teach me about giraffes.”

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

“That’s all I’m going to say. You’ve got your secrets, I’ve got mine.”

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

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

“It was Norman, wasn’t it?” she said laughing.

“I can’t really....”

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

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

By phone!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clair was already seated in a booth that had been quickly cleaned for her. It was isolated from the other tables.

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

"Hi." I kissed her on the cheek. She didn't resist or encourage it.

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

"I'll probably order my usual," I smiled.

The waitress came. Clair said, "Two root beer floats."

As soon as the waitress walked away she turned to me, "So, you've dragged me out of my cave. I don't have a lot of time because the wall animals need feeding."

"Well, I mean, how have you been?"

"Just be honest with me."

"Look, Clair, I promised the person who told me this that I wouldn't expose their name."

"It's fucking Norm-dumb. Duh! Go on."

"I didn't say that. You did. And you could be wrong."

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

"I promised I wouldn't say who told me. I'm just

making that official and on the record. But the rumor I heard is that you were adopted, then kidnapped by your real mom, then returned to your adopted parents. That's pretty much all I heard."

"Okay, fine. So now you know. So what?" she said nervously. "I mean, where did it really get you by knowing all that?"

"A root beer float and a hello kiss on the cheek?"

"I hope it was worth it. And you're paying for the floats, by the way. I didn't bring my purse. I've been using it for my ancient animals' feedbag."

I said, "Look, I just want *someone* to love you, Clair. If it's not me, then honestly I hope it's someone better than me. That's all."

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

"Yes. I do."

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

"You know what? I'm done needing to know anything that you don't want to tell me. Here's the actual truth -- I just want to be with you again. I don't care about the past or anything else."

"Be with who?"

"You!" I repeated, puzzled.

"And who is that?" she asked with her blue eyes turning a bit teary. Did she mean to say I didn't know who

she was, or that *she* didn't know who she was? Or was she saying that the latter fact would, of course, lead to the former?

"Clair, I just want to be with the person I've come to know, and have had such an awesome time with."

"She's dead."

"*The Clair I knew is dead?*"

"My real mom."

"Your real mom?"

"Is dead."

She looked down at her hands sadly. Were those real tears now?

"I'm so sorry. I thought she was still in jail..."

Shut up! You shouldn't have said that! Do NOT ask her how she died, when she died, where she died.

Honestly, at this point I didn't care about truth or reality anymore. What's the difference whether any of this was true or not, or whether she was just screwing with my head again saying something true was a lie, or that some lie was true? I just wanted to feel her nose rubbing against my neck again. I wanted to feel her warm porcelain-smooth skin against mine. *That was truth in its rawest form!*

"She couldn't take the cold. New Hampshire was a hell of a place to try to survive when you're poor. She died young." Her eyes had that "bravely mourning an old loss"

look.

Someone was lying. I shouldn't have cared. I didn't want to care. But why were they trying to mess with me like this? Were they in on this together, laughing at me when the day was over? Were they waiting for me to play the desperate fool and fall into their little traps? Norman had said she lived in Mississippi.

If they were waiting for me to crack, they got their wish. Tears started forming in my eyes.

A cold stare came my way in return.

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

"No."

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

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

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

"That's not what I meant!" I shot back. "I said I was

sorry first. *Then* I said, 'let's move on.'

There was an awkward silence. I raised my eyebrows in a "was that funny?" kind of way, until she suddenly burst out laughing.

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

"Really? I mean, I don't..."

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

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

"Want to come back to my cave after floating in root beer with me?" she shrugged shyly.

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

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

As we walked back to her dorm we became as quiet as twilight. Words had finally taken their rightful place in Hell.

Chapter 16

Her ceiling was now painted in antediluvian brown -- the wet dirt look. There was a stone tablet in the corner filled with odd symbols she called Clair-oglyphs. There was an abstract work of art on the wall -- it looked like a shaky hand-made sketch of bulls locking horns, painted in maroon paint on a tattered bed sheet hanging from the wall.

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

Her physical love turned all the lies and tricks into laughable incidentals. I couldn't even be angry at Norman, if he was the one who was lying. Or was *she the one*? Or *both*? I promised not to care anymore, but rather celebrate the lies. Unintentionally or not, Norman helped get me get Clair back.

I was carried downstream towards the oceanic feeling -- passing Romain Rolland waving as he rowed by -- until early the next morning, when I realized I was about to miss my psych test.

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

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

When I got back to my dorm room later that morning my eyes stung from a lack of sleep. Despite my assumption that Clair and I were back together, I began to feel strangely depressed.

It was probably because I was flunking out of college. I had been spending so much time trying to find out "the truth" about who Clair was, and what was really going on, I had stopped studying, even for the courses I was interested in.

I allowed myself, just for a moment, to sink into the notion that when you were a couple you were supposed to actually get to *know* each other. What I knew of Clair's past was either a mosaic of honest facts zigzagging around in the wind like individual snowflakes melting. Or, white lies wrapped inside a massively cold practical joke. Or, pure car-

exhaust-black deception coating miles of snowdrifts lining a highway leading me nowhere.

The world itself, as I was quickly learning, wasn't exactly solid either. Even with the love my mom felt for my dad, he eventually melted away, from her, and from me. What was clear or solid about that? Where did he go? Where did all that love we had for him lead to? What was the point?

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

Chapter 17

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

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

I knew it.

“Oh, come on, Norman,” I said, almost in a whisper, “who’s lying to who? Do we really need to...?”

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

“I did *not* tell her that you said *anything*, Norman. She knew before I could finish my first sentence. But I still refused to say who told me anything. Look, Sierra lied to me, and suddenly she was fucking our history professor, and then you. But everything worked out. I've made my peace with other people's lies and deception. I don't care anymore.”

As I heard the words spoken out loud I knew they weren't true. Not in the long run. Clair and I couldn't go on pretending there was no such thing as reality *forever*.

I wanted to believe passion and joy was all I would ever need from her, from life. But actually, I didn’t want to

be loving a ghost. Fun as it may be for a while, eventually there's nothing there to hold onto. Just an empty sheet with eye holes.

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

"Great, that's terrific, Norman. So everything you said was a lie just to hide something else. Well, fuck you. I don't care."

I decided to hang up. I searched for the red button to end the call. I pressed the glass but nothing happened. The glass seemed to be in on the plot. *Fucking phone.*

"I know everything she told you last night Shannon. I was with Clair just before I called you, fucking her all morning while you were taking your psych test. That's the kind of thing that can happen to liars who don't care about lies."

Would she really do that? Could she? And how would I ever know if *that* was true or not? Was I supposed to ask her? Obviously, even bringing it up to her would be a no-win situation. She'd either say yes, or no. Either of which could be more lies.

So I realized in that second of frozen time, while still searching for the red hang up button, the following things:

1. I was now officially dead inside. Love had

assassinated me.

2. Or, maybe their lies had assassinated me. Love had nothing to do with it.

And one more thing I began to realize:

3. Hedonism sucked.

I finally found the red fucking button and hung up.

I laid back down on my pillow. I hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours, but all I felt was nausea. Like I'd eaten a thousand crows. But who was counting?

These crows were still squawking in my ear, sticking in my craw, eating me alive from the inside.

I was also seeing images of Clair in my mind, remembering the last time I was with her, but at the same time I was now completely repulsed by it, because of him. Did he get up afterwards, after licking her neck and laughing about how I liked it when she pretended she was a giraffe, and strum his guitar with a victorious major chord? Could she even *hear* how out of tune it was?

I was tired, like an insomniac is tired — tired of being awake. Tired of my thoughts killing me hour by hour.

Clair De Lune and Norm-aniac had succeeded in completely crucifying me to their crisscross of chaos.

But I couldn't die.

Not yet.

Chapter 18

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

I went outside the safety of my college campus (what was so safe about what I was going through in there?) and walked around the desolate city hour after hour without stopping. I was walking quickly, trying to walk quicker than I could think, to stop my thoughts from haunting me, or at least make them mumbly and senseless, until I found myself falling down on the sidewalk, exhausted, asleep at last.

But then snow began to fall, hesitantly, intermittently at first. But it was enough to wake me, since several snowflakes fluttered onto my closed eyes.

I almost slipped getting up from my little catnap since the snow left the sidewalks icy wet. The cement turned a shade darker before right my eyes as the wetness expanded. It reminded me of watching toast brown. My thoughts turned a shade darker, burning, blackened, as I reluctantly remembered why I'd fallen asleep on the sidewalk in the first place. I was falling into ice black hell.

Stiff leafless tree branches became coated in soft white

as I wandered the empty roads. I dared to allow hope to drift down from the sky. I begged it to fall, and fall harder. Until suddenly I thought I saw hope-snow swirl against a doorway. But there was a locked anti-theft gate in front of the doorway -- just my luck.

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

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

Then a figure came into my vision that looked familiar. It looked like Graham. In fact, as he came closer I realized it *was* Graham. He was taking his early morning run. In the snow! He looked like Zeus. I squinted at him, a weak confused mortal, hunched over and withering. He seemed untouched by the inevitable wearing down of the flesh and mind. He was clean shaven and bright-eyed, wearing only a T-shirt and cargo shorts, as if to mock the icy morning. His fresh nurse-white sneakers were blurring by me. He looked more muscular than I remembered. He was actually glowing in love, stronger than muscular. Sierra was rubbing off on him, literally. He smiled a broad smile, just like her, as he

passed by.

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

"You look terrible."

"I couldn't sleep."

"School?"

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"Clair?"

"Yeah."

He was breathing hard, smoke was rising from his breath. "Hey look, can I buy you lunch later?" He meant it. There was no sarcasm, no lies or trickery were about to happen.... And he was offering to pay. What a first.

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

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

I smiled, "Yeah, all good."

"So, lunch?"

"Okay, sure."

"How about noon at The Metro?"

"Noon, Metro," I mumbled. Where else but The Metro?

The scene of all my most memorable and miserable recent conversations.

I tried to lift my arm to wave goodbye, but by the time my brain located the command circuit to wave, it was too late. He was already speeding up his pace, heading to the finish line, which was probably straight into Sierra's room. Why walk if you can run?

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

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

I was the moron now.

Chapter 19

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

No sleep or food for thirty-six hours will definitely create interesting sensations. Eyes heavy, achy. Dizziness at DEFCON 1. Stomach burning, mistaking food as the enemy. I could have easily fainted onto my bed, falling into a comatose sleep, but instead I was going to have a lunch date with a computer geek who "owed me" because I played Cupid instead of staying a clown, and helped convince my ex-girlfriend (who was also the professor's ex-girlfriend) to go out with him.

Why couldn't I get someone to love me like Sierra loved Graham now? Was it me? Was it my fault? Or was I only attracted to girls who weren't ready to love anyone yet in any non-carnal sense of the word?

To carry out the task of staying awake until noon I tried studying. I thought it would make me feel better! LOL! I pretended I could concentrate. I pretended I still had time not to flunk out. But my mind was far too gone for reading. So all I could think of was, yes, I'm definitely going to flunk out. That caught my attention for a few minutes.

But then I started pacing around my room. I was actually trying to think up reasons to let Clair go, and move on. Maybe Graham would offer me a reason....

Nope.

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

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

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

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

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

"No, not really," I grumbled.

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

"Sure."

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

“So tell me what’s going on, Shannon. You looked really out of it this morning.”

“I look better now?”

A reserved laugh came, “No, not really.”

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

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

“Wow, that’s great! That’s amazing. You two are a good fit.”

“Well, thanks again. You knew before anyone else. And, Sierra still has a soft spot for you, Shannon. She thinks you’re a really good guy. Not just good looking, but a good person. A true friend. Someone she can trust. That’s a rare thing.”

“Really?” I said. I couldn’t imagine anyone thinking about me like that. I didn’t.

“You’re honest. You never lied to her. You accepted what she did to you and never once tried to get back at her,

or make her feel cheap, or bring her down. Even in the worst of times, you never became petty or mean.”

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

The waitress arrived and slid the ice waters across the Formica table with a somber look on her face. I ordered a fruit salad and a cup of chicken soup. I had to go easy on my stomach. Graham ordered a roast beef sandwich with extra mustard and a Coke. The waitress must have thought I was a very popular guy. Everyone wanted to have lunch at the Metro with good ol' Shannon -- Norman, Clair, and now my ex-girlfriend's boyfriend. Wait until she realized I wasn't paying the bill this time. That would really blow her mind.

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

“Bird watching?” he offered.

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

“Bird watching after playing my bit part in Cirque Du Dark Gray. I've been destroyed by two evil clowns. I was bird watching, looking for vultures to come and pick me clean and put an end to all this.”

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

Graham was getting the story piecemeal, but he was smart enough to connect the dots.

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

I looked at him with dimly lit curiosity.

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

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

"You probably never heard of Austin Colebrook."

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

"Pretty close. He was the CEO of a women's fashion company. A philanthropist, gave millions to charity every

year, and according to the press reports I think he actually did own a yacht," Graham said. "There are quite a few articles about him on the Internet. No wonder she registered under a different name. I bet the school even allowed her to, if they knew what happened."

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

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

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

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

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

was being lied to, but this is just totally..."

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

Graham had no reason to screw with me. And he was smart enough not to be tricked by the two of them. There's no way they could have put a crazy story like this on the Internet, or hacked the New York Post website. And Graham knew I could search for these things on my own to verify what he was saying.

"So, they were both lying to me to hide all this? To protect her from being seen as the victim of her famous sick father? Is that it? She wanted to come to school and get a fresh start. But who is Norman to her? A friend she knew that wants to protect her...." Things were beginning to make some sense.

"Norman is, was... amazing actually," Graham said. "The way her father got convicted was that Clair and her neighborhood friend, Norman, secretly built a hidden camera into the wall of her bedroom and caught him on tape. That's how he was eventually put in jail."

So Clair was both the victim, and the hero, and the prosecutor. And Norman was her secret savior.

"Norman turned over copies of the tape to an attorney and to the police, and then hid Clair in the basement of his

house until her dad was taken into custody.”

“That's insane.... My God.... But, what about Clair's mother? Clair mentioned her mom was crazy. Then another time she said she was dead.”

“According to the story, when she saw the tape she still didn't believe Clair. I guess she *was* either super crazy, or all she could see was that her life was about to fall completely apart. The Post article said she testified that Clair and Norman were doctoring the tape, making the whole thing up.

“Her father's attorneys tried to make Clair and Norman the villains by saying that they were secret lovers, underage at thirteen, and wanted to be together against her parents' wishes. So Clair was lying about her father to get back at him. Colebrook told Norman's parents to put him in a mental institution. In the end, though, the tape was proven by experts to be real. Not altered in any way. And Norman was too believable to a jury. He wouldn't back down. He and the tape won the case for the prosecution, and the father was convicted.”

I was wide awake now. My heart was racing.

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

I was processing all this while also realizing that at this very moment I was missing another class. I couldn't even

remember which one. But everything else seemed inconsequential now, especially compared to what Clair had gone through. And Norman too.

But there was one more thing I couldn't get out of my head. Did she really sleep with Norman an hour after I had left her room. Were they still lovers? Were they lovers before? Did he control her in some way? Did she think she owed him, owed her life to him, and that was one way to repay him? Was Norman taking advantage of her now?

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

"Yesterday morning?"

"Yes, after I stumbled off to fail my eight a.m. psyche test."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think what? You mean *I passed?*"

"No. I don't think Norman could have been with her yesterday morning."

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

"Well, I was in Chem class with Clair yesterday

morning at eight thirty. Half an hour after your class started. And she had to walk at least twenty minutes to get across campus, right? And she had to get dressed before that, right? Because she looked pretty good! And then I played basketball with Norman in the gym for an hour or so, starting around half past ten. In fact, I met him right after Chem class. Clair even came by the gym about the time we were done playing and said something about Norman 'smelling bad, as always.' He said something kind of mean back. They both kind of glared at each other, then started to laugh. She said something like, 'How's your life going lately, sailor?' He shrugged. Then he seemed disinterested and took a half-court shot and missed. I mean, it didn't seem to me as if they'd seen each other lately. Certainly not that morning. Then he sat with her in the corner and they talked for a while. Then, I remember something she said got him pissed and he kind of stormed off."

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

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

"He called me just after noon."

I thought, if she told Norman about us at the basketball court, maybe that's why he got pissed and called me. And if Clair hadn't slept with Norman, then we were back together as far as *she* knew. Even right at this moment! That would be

her assumption. Could she think I was ignoring her now, after getting what I wanted? I'd thrown my cell phone into the garbage, and. . . .

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

"What's that?"

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

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

I nodded. "Of course! If anyone would presume that, it's me."

Chapter 20

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

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

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

I wiped the mustard away from the phone glass (I guess I'd gotten my revenge on the glass) and checked for

incoming calls. My hands were shaking. There was one voice message. Sure enough, it was from Clair. I put the glistening smelly phone up to my ear to hear her voice:

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

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

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

And there it was. A whole Google page of tagged

articles and news reports. One article after another told the truth with a different slant, varied details. But everything Graham told me was dead-on accurate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Man, Shannon, your eyes are all red. Worse than bloodshot! It's like your face just collided head-on with a

Strawberry Twizzler. Are you on something?"

"I didn't sleep last night."

"How come? One-night stand?"

"Yeah. With myself. I fucked with myself all night long."

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

I hesitated, "Actually, Norman had his hand in it. Surprise! But I'll be fine."

She raised her blonde eyebrows comically. "What did that schmuck-face do now? Let me guess, he told you the truth. We're from the Ionian Galaxy, here for a quick visit in Ionion time. Every year here is an hour there. We're like flies."

"Please don't talk to me about flies right now."

"So Norman the gadfly, what did he buzz you about?"

"He told me you slept together yesterday morning after I left."

"*What a fucking cow!*" she frowned. "I hope you realized he was biting you in the ass. I haven't even kissed him since, I don't know, since we were on the Ionian mothership thousands of light-years ago. I think I was twelve. I've really got to work on his perverse sense of humor, it's been a bit over the top lately."

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

Chapter 21

Sleep was descending like a foggy-winged angel. Images of thick white blankets appeared before my bloodshot eyes. I reached into the air to catch their feathery warmth. My insides were no longer churning. My stomach felt calm, as if I had ingested a warm cloud. Everything in the world finally made sense. No more mysteries to unravel. I knew I could trust her, maybe even help her overcome her impossibly horrific past in some way. But first I wanted to sleep right there on the grass for days, right at Clair's beautiful feet.

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

One more thing I was realizing about the puzzle that had been decoded: she had definitely lied to me in the past. But, not entirely. Only when I probed, and only when I wouldn't let go. All this mistrust was mostly my fault, not hers. She didn't have a choice -- she had to lie to protect herself. I should have trusted the privacy she was insisting on and stayed present with her. That was the key. No more probing. Just stay present.

Gray sand was covering my brain, sifting into my eyes.

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

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

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

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

"Tired," I managed to mumble.

"More like run over by a truck!" Clair said. She kind of enjoyed seeing me this way. I wasn't so uptight. I wasn't asking any more questions. I was ready to follow her anywhere, do anything. As long as I could sleep while we were doing it.

We headed back to her room instead of going to the concert with her friends. My eyes were sewing themselves shut. It was close to six p.m. I was using Clair's shoulders to steady myself while she unlocked her door. My quick but blurry math calculated that I had now been without sleep for

almost forty straight hours with no stimulants other than my own paranoia.

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

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

Clair started buttoning my shirt back up and asked who it was.

“One guess.”

“Come back later!”

“No. Let me in or I’ll start playing my guitar.... *Seriously Clair!*”

She remained motionless and didn’t respond.

“*Clair!*”

“Go away!”

“Clair, this is code red. Open the fuck up.”

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

“Well, imagine finding you here,” he snarled at me. “I

thought you'd be in the library spying on the other students now."

Uh, oh.

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

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

"He was Googling things he shouldn't have ever seen. Ever."

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

"I wasn't spying. I found out from someone what the truth was, and I was just making sure that..."

"Who?" Norman hissed.

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

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

"No, it wasn't Sierra!

"Who else could it be? Who else knows?"

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

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

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

“That’s not the point?” Norman sneered.

I ignored him. “Clair, listen to me, I just want to be us, together, here and now, and not go back into the past ever again. I just want my future to be with you.”

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

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

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

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

"Which Clair can handle it? Which one?" Norman was treating her almost as if he were a surrogate parent now.

"Dawn? Emo? Sally Ride? Which one of you is going to take care of the others if the past gets pushed in your face? Which one of you is going to soothe the others when they're freaking out? Or when they don't remember why they're driving somewhere, or who's driving?"

"Norman, don't!" she pleaded. She was crumbling right in front of me.

There was a thick silence.

"Norman, leave her alone!" I pleaded.

"Leave him alone," she whispered.

She looked at me and repeated, "Leave him alone."

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

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

"What's... going on?" I said suddenly.

"The story's done," Norman said. "You should leave."

"Shannon," Clair said hesitantly. It was as if she wasn't even hearing what Norman had just said. "I'm extraterrestrially compli-kidded, as you well now know."

Certain kinds of stress, or meanness compli-kids me interactively backwards occasionally. Sometimes I don't remember things, when, because, in the past, back on the mothership, I guess I was mis-treasoned, betrayed, be-
tried. Like ashtrays of cigarette butts. Everything gets smudged dark. "

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

Norman was like a big brother trying to talk his little sister out of running away. "Clair. Come back! You don't need to do this. You got yourself into this. And you insisted he was trustable. But now you see."

She said, "Ah ha, yes."

"Look, I'm just going to tell him. Okay? Do you want him to know *everything*? All of it? You shouldn't have to explain this yourself."

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

"Shannon, Clair has been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder. Or Multiple Personality Disorder. Whatever the shrinks want to call it. Her dad messed her up really bad. *Really* bad, for a very long time. As you now

know. You've been trying to find out the truth? Well, you can know the truth on some level, but I don't think you will ever understand it. You can't. You will never know enough to reach all of her. Or know all of her. No one can. Not even me. *That's* the truth.

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

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

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

He shook his head. "I know. I understand. Why wouldn't you? She's half genius, half crazy, half saintly, half dead, half angel. A beautiful soul, but less than the sum of her parts. Subtraction by addition."

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

"Shannon, look at her now. What do you see? *Whichever* Clair decides to be here, in the world with us, becomes one hundred percent of her, but she leaves all the other parts in the dark. They hide there until they're needed. In a way, she's more fully conscious and capable than any person I've ever known, because she has to learn to make peace with so many different parts of herself, including parts she doesn't want to know. Unlike normal morons like us, who try to ignore those parts of ourselves until they destroy us silently, she's constantly dealing with unimaginable shadows and

fighting them. She has no choice. I've had to show Clair parts of herself on video that she would never have known about. And then she learns, and creates a relationship with that new part, sometimes even finds a way to permanently merge together with them. But there are so many others. Do you know there is a Clair that was made up just for you? But that Clair is just a fraction of who she is. Can you understand what I'm saying? Or do you think I'm making this up too?"

"No, I believe you," I said.

Tears were forming without my consent. They literally hurt my eyes. They burned. They stung my cheeks as they gushed forward.

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

Norman was about to say something more about her, but then he just shook his head and switched gears. His voice sounded oddly kind, "You want to love her, Shannon? I mean really *love* her?" He looked directly into my eyes. "Because I know what kind of love you want. You want her all to yourself. It's only natural, right? She's your girl. But she *needs me*. The difference between you and me is that you

love her because you want her. You need her. I love her for who she is. All of who she is. Not just who she pretends to be. Because I care about her enough to give her what she needs without asking for anything back. And I always will."

Clair suddenly began laughing like a little girl. "My bro!"

It was clear to me in that moment that this was not "her." Not anyone I knew before. They weren't tricking me. And it frightened me, it brought me to a depth of fear and mourning I'd never experienced in my life. Not even when I found out my father had died.

The truth was slowly killing everything.

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

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

Chapter 22

Who was Clair? She was like the moon, after all -- bright and beautiful and fully present at times, yet even then, filled with things I couldn't see. A part of her never met the sun. She was shadow, and moon water, and unfiltered sunlight combining into one singular element not found on Earth.

She was a mosaic of mismatched tiles. As much as she tried to put herself back together with Norman's help, and with the help of doctors, there would always be missing shapes, ghosts in her cell membranes hunting for something, haunting her for life, while on the outside she made jokes about the world and skipped lightly around the dark edges.

Her father had forced her to hide away. Eventually she couldn't see, or feel, or believe what was happening. He took her life away. He forced her to find a tunnel outside herself, into a strange place where she could find safety in fantasy.

The genius in her refused to be defeated. She found a way to escape through the tunnel, but found many more tunnels to crawl through, before she finally emerged back into the light of day.

In that world, I was just a boy she met in one of her thousand tunnels. We were each trying to find a way out of separate nightmares.

Chapter 23

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

Love could never be necessary. It was not allowed to be spoken aloud. It could never be threaded all the way through a time continuum.

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

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

It would have been something to behold.

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

And I had a stubborn optimism about our future that lasted for a long time. I thought eventually we might create a

new kind of love, with new rules. A love no one else would ever be able to even understand. Only us.

But, here's the thing about time – very slowly I was forced to understand that the changes were never going to end. I know that's true about all things, in all time. But it's not quite what I mean. What I mean is, the labyrinth inside her would entangle everything. It twisted itself into ever deeper layers. It would come from out of nowhere to ensnare her sometimes, and then it would spill over into me, until I questioned whether or not I truly could reach her anymore. Or myself! I questioned whether I should try anymore. Was it really fair to her to try to make her love me? Was I really making her happy? Or was the effort to truly understand me just making her feel more disconnected over time?

Chapter 24

Then the inevitable happened.

I officially flunked out of school.

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

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

Did I care? Sometimes. I admit it. I did learn things of value in class. But not a lot. This was the sum of all I learned during my time at college:

The truth is a journey through the riotous dark, where despite the lack of light, you are able to sense something real, touch it, prove it, write it down in a book, and know with all the power of your human intellect that *forever it will be true!*

But love and beauty and wonder almost always exist someplace else, dancing, staring wide-eyed at the unknown, while we grovel around on our hands and knees looking for that one true thing.

Chapter 25

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

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

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

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

The first thing I asked him was -- what's it like?

But oddly enough, he didn't answer me. Not this time. He just cried. I'd never seen him cry before. He kissed me before he fizzled away. He also whispered as he was leaving that he believed in me. I'm pretty sure that's what he whispered. It might have been something else.

Chapter 26

They're going to release me tomorrow. They've declared me cured of my apparent nervous breakdown.

I still sink into a bottomless place every time I think of her, I'm not going to lie to you, or anyone, about that.

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

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

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

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

But what will happen to Clair?

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

After that....

She is like a prayer that's impossible to get an answer to. She will probably continue to race through the days and nights, alluring to all, charismatic and visually breathtaking to star-struck souls like me. Eclipsing reality. Warm, yet space-cold. Shining. Lonely. Tied together by gravity, yet freed from it too, somehow, as she chases life through its mysterious orbits.

I stretch my hands up into the air to touch her now. I can see her image above the hospital ceiling, miles past these fluorescent lights.

No.

I can't find her like that.

It would take a rocket's strength, and a lifetime of fuel to truly reach her.

Epilogue

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

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

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

I hope to become one myself someday.

THE END

GM