

ORBITING CHAOS

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Chapter 1

Gabriel

You asked me, Laney, why not just surf, swim, sleep on the beach at night – live on little, need no one?

I see how it would make sense for orphans like us to think that way. There aren't a lot of material costs when you live your life as a daydreamer and the guardian of unfinished poems.

Still, there are risks, like feeling nothingness, and experiencing the sunlessness of that.

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

Chapter 2

Laney

I met him in a bar, of all places – an old wooden building that looked like a western saloon, across from my apartment building.

I went in to give the owner a letter from a winery which was accidentally delivered to my silver mailbox. I left it with the bartender. As I was turning to leave, I saw a young man sitting at a corner table with an open notebook. I found out later he would sit at that same small table, the one with the most direct ocean view, almost every Friday night. He would nurse a large bottle of Perrier. His notebook was always open. He would leave after sunset, after the beach turned dark.

It was 6 pm, which meant I was in my after-work clothes – worn-out, ripped, comfortable things I'd never had the heart to throw away; old museum pieces from the dark ages, thousands of miles and memories from this place.

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

It fluttered its wings directly above the man at the window table. The man looked up, then held out his arm, straight and still, to make a perch, and waited, but the bird was apparently not trained.

I watched for a moment more, then put my arm straight out too, mocking him. He smiled, acknowledging the joke. But then, to my amazement, the bird glided down

and landed on my wrist, then brushed against my cheek before flying out the open window.

Despite being startled, my eyes followed the bird's escape. It flew in a pulsing forward rhythm, gliding across the beach, over the waves, then turned south and disappeared.

I thought to myself, "What a beautiful escape...." Apparently, I had said it aloud.

He was standing very close to me now. He looked right into my eyes.

I turned and left the bar immediately.

Chapter 3

Laney

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

Years later, I wondered where I came up with the name, Amy. A – me? A – my? Or was it just *Amy*, imperfectly rhyming with my own name, Laney?

My mother said she named me after a young heroine in a novel she had read by Joyce Carol Oates. I haven’t read the book. She often told me to read it when I got older... so now I won’t.

Chapter 4

Some changes are subtle, like the evolution of the cliffs on the Hana coast. The wind sculpts soft curves out of everything over the millennia.

Other changes are brutal, like the formation of lava rocks, created from rivers of fire. They stay sharp and vicious through time; battle tough.

Changes used to be a subtle thing for Laney long ago.

When she turned eleven, she started improvising on the piano. She understood things about sound, and the *shapes* of the sound on the piano keys.

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

Her voice sang melodies that interlaced perfectly with the chords she created; odd, unguessable melodies no one had ever heard before.

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

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

Now in the bar — a bar no less (she didn't drink because her mother had consumed a maximum lifetime quota of alcohol for both of them) -- she felt something, actually *saw*

something, that momentarily freed her from that childhood nightmare. A small patch of blue appeared.

She had never let another person enter her world on any level. Not even the girls who wanted to befriend her in high school or college. She had no interest. Not since her thirteenth birthday: Her mother disappearing. Her father calling the police – she had to have been abducted, they thought. The phone ringing in the middle of the night – they thought she was spotted – in Michigan. Then in California. A week after that, a phone call came. Her mother pleaded with her father to stop having her followed.

Laney's father broke down. He was hospitalized for three days. He came home in pieces. He tried to love his little girl. He had loved her. He had always loved her. But he was never the same. He became a ghost. His heart had scattered into space. She was orphaned in two weeks' time. A screwed-up mother that would never be coming back; a broken father who would never feel love again, not even when his daughter tried to reach out to him.

The piano seemed dead to her now. Life was too sharp and vicious. Happy thirteenth birthday. A true coming of age.

But the bird, that bird, it just flew right out the window and across the sea – so easily – after perching for a moment on her outstretched arm, as if to say, *Watch how easy this is.* To escape....

What had walking away from her music done for her? It certainly hadn't set her free. She was simply mirroring her parents' sense of aloneness and desolation. She recreated desolation for herself.

The bird — there was true innocence in its actions. It was trapped for different reasons than Laney had been trapped. So it simply waited for an opening, then flew, so natural. Laney wanted to find an opening, a sense of direction. But she was already in her twenties now, and still waiting.

She walked the beach in the dark for the first time since she'd moved to this distant island. She felt a bit vulnerable, a bit frightened. Not afraid of some intruder, but afraid of the roar of unseen waves breaking -- any second one could wash over her; she couldn't see them cresting. She had to clear her head, and be careful not to wander off too deep.

Then in a flash, *nothing* made sense: Her job at the computer store. Her desire to buy a nice car someday. Her stubborn refusal to touch the piano that a neighbor had placed in her apartment before leaving for Europe — suddenly all those realities broke apart.

And that man in the bar — last in her thoughts actually -- he was simply a catalyst. She had no burning desire to see him again.

Her mind became silent enough to hear a melody. It was nothing she had ever heard before. She allowed herself to acknowledge its beauty, rather than hating it for being there.

Her mother always encouraged little Laney to sit and play her made-up songs on the piano to pass the time. The piano was like a babysitter, while dear mother was on the phone, her voice becoming loud sometimes with anger and frustration.

So Laney would play louder to drown her out. Emotions she didn't want to feel would strike chords within her — painful, sharp, transforming. She shut her ears *into* the

music to drown out the screaming voice on the phone. She knew it was her father, silent, on the other end of the line, listening to her mother's anger on his lunch break from work. Years before the end, it had ended.

She tried to love her songs instead of hate her mother's craziness. But the craziness was overwhelming. When she took her hands off the keys, the craziness always won.

Chapter 5

Gabriel looked in the mirror and imagined her standing next to him -- blonde hair falling messily around her face, peach-white skin, barely touched by the strength of the sun in this place; soft features -- nose, mouth -- but sky-blue eyes full of fear, or wonder, he couldn't tell -- eyes that were looking at something far more than a bird escaping.

He tried to turn his mind to another subject. The waves he surfed that morning, ten, maybe twelve feet. The rush, like flying a jet without the plane's body around him. He was the jet, with a deafening energy moving him forward, until he found a glide path through the tube, then saltwater spray, then the hiss of foam applauding.... What was her heritage with a face like that? American-Swedish-French-Irish-*Orphan*? He could sense another orphan sometimes, although he couldn't know for sure. Light eyebrows frowning, then lifting in surprise as the bird flew across the water. No lipstick, soft pink lips, then they parted slightly. And the half-smile.

He really had to stop. His equilibrium was being affected. His life depended on balance and calm. He wanted out of this dream. He was trampling on sacred painful ground. Unwelcomed recurring images. Jaime Sutton. Tilden Park. First year of high school. No one in the small meadow on this fall day. They kissed, touched. He surrendered his fear of letting people in too far. Bodies merged without pre-thought; unworldly, out of time.

He melted into her so deeply, so fully, his mind seemed to liquify with hers. He mistook this for holy water and

swore to marry Jaime Sutton someday. But Jaime was not holy water. She turned cold and mocked him at school the next day.... Manna. Momentary. Like all love he'd known.

His heart turned away. He realized no matter what he did, or how much he thought he was loved, he would always be turned back into an orphan. The parents who adopted him confirmed this feeling. They had abandoned him long ago.

New love arose from time to time -- thematic variations, but the same rhythm. Like a collapsing wave you couldn't quite catch. Try to dive beneath the crest. Let it pass by high above you.

This girl he saw in the bar for some reason seemed equally guarded. She never looked directly at him -- only one quick glance by mistake. Then she was gone. That strange small bird was about as keen to stick around as she was. But why should he care? He had given up trying to capture birds in flight long ago.

Chapter 6

Gabriel

Another Friday night. The most interesting person in this place, by far, was Jimmy Hoy, the bartender. The thinnest bartender in Maui. A local boy. Not particularly talkative; not at all a father-confessor type. But not trying to ignore anyone either. He was an observer, like me. I often watched him watching the customers.

I gave in to my base impulses. I walked over to the bar during one of his rare free moments and described the girl to him. I had never really talked to him before. I was just the Perrier kid at table six. The one with the notebook.

The other regulars always thought I was a bit weird. The sparkling water seemed to make them self-conscious about the amount of liquor they were consuming.

Do you know her, I asked him? He didn't know who I was talking about, until I started to walk away.

"Oh yeah," he said almost to himself. "Wait a minute." I turned around to see if he was talking to me. "I think she come deliver a bill, yeah?"

I came closer and leaned across the only empty seat at the bar. He leaned in toward me and said, "I think she live across the street, brah. One of those." He pointed to a small apartment building. All the windows were dark.

Chapter 7

Laney

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

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

Up until then I had been sleepwalking through workdays; the same job for nearly two years. I didn't particularly hate the work, until tonight. Suddenly everything inside me was screaming "*No more.*"

What was tolerable before today seemed like an unbearable waste of time... I had enough money to live for a year, maybe two if I stretched it. Who cares what would happen after that?

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

Chapter 8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her hands were shaking. But she played for hours. Halting. Wrong chord -- not the one she was hearing in her head. No! Yes, that one. Stiff, stuttering, fingers feeling like lead weights at times, feeling like racing clouds at other times. Haunting movements she'd surely remember tomorrow, conceptual pathways being pried loose from a thirteen-year-old's bedroom back in Maryland.

Hours melted into an orange puff of sunrise rising above the mountaintops, peeking through the window.

She hadn't cared about these songs flowing through her, not for many years. She had heard them, fragments of them, but turned them all away. She told herself they were not worth capturing. Just let them go. But they wouldn't leave.

Now she wanted to remember everything – not just the songs themselves, but how to access the extensions of them. Slowly her fingers found shapes that matched her instincts. Slowly her mind fell into the other world, where these things birthed themselves from chance and chaos. She knew it would take months, maybe even a whole year, to get all the way back to knowing how to truly play again, but she felt determined, unafraid, as she wandered wide-eyed down long-ago abandoned pathways.

Chapter 9

To change yourself takes more than just a leap of faith. It takes more than a revelation. Things have to burn themselves away inside first, layer by layer, until you allow change to enter one willful minute at a time.

Gabriel considered what it would be like to change himself into – what's the opposite of an orphan? Someone with the memory of parents?

Maybe he could make them up – invent them -- pick the two best parents he had met of all his friends in childhood and secretly adopt them in his mind, an amalgam, then make up family vacations, and playing baseball games with the father, and talking about dreamy confusing things with the mother, Mom, before bed.

Maybe these parents even had some kind of clue about the meaning of all this.

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

Chapter 10

Gabriel

I was a loner, living in Berkeley, California, with adopted parents who knew that genetically they had no responsibility if things turned out wrong.

During my high school years they seemed to give up. It's as if they thought -- we tried to love him long ago. If we were his real parents we wouldn't stand for this quietness, this secretiveness, locking himself in his room all night. But there's nothing we can do. He'll be gone in a few years. Then it will be over.

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

My adopted aunt told me that my real parents were two straight-edged kids from Berkeley High School. I came to be, despite birth control.

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

Chapter 11

Laney

Music is a road that widens as you travel it. The mind can never grasp the entirety of what's before it. The hands cannot do everything the mind imagines. The variations are as endless as sun rays; each beam holds a thousand songs that will quickly fade unless you reach out.

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

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

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

myself in it. And I *will*. Passion, not just promises to myself, will drive it.

Three: I want to rely on my instincts more, whether they are right or wrong. Because instincts shift me into another reality. A reality far removed from clock and calendar reality. The physical world of work and money, being subservient or logical, just drains me.

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

Five: No more writing lists like this. I am not a computer tech anymore. I am a freelance songwriter. I don't have to think in chronic-logical order. Life should be more like a diary of dreams than an outline of goals and successes and failures. Therefore, there's no number Six. My number system ends at the number Five. After that, there's just me, a numberless thing.

Chapter 12

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

Of course, growing up in Berkeley, one was encouraged to seek the *out of the ordinary*. And not knowing your real mother and father will also certainly pull you off the cultural grid. So he had a lot going for him in that way.

Yes, when seen through the eyes of an optimist, he had a lot going for him, especially when it came to understanding the lonely brutal things all writers have to know before they write their first decent sentence.

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

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

Obviously, politics and spirituality were diametrically opposite in so many ways.

But the other obvious problem was that there were no jobs being offered in the “spirituality without religion” field.

Nonetheless, it seemed to him that without knowing what the real game behind “being here” was, there was not much point in choosing a profession.

As always, nothing quite made sense.

Chapter 13

Gabriel

When I was young I would ride my bike to Sproul Plaza. The college kids would be out and about. I envied their lives. I envied the fact that they were accepted at a school as prestigious as Berkeley. They seemed happy, but serious. Arms folded, laughing at something someone said. The backpacks they carried were weighed down with books about chemistry, math, physics, all the lessons of the world they were challenged to absorb. Their life seemed free of everything else.

Years later when I was attending UC Berkeley myself, I crossed over from political activist to spiritual de-activist, and then devolved further in my junior year until finally, I became a math major, hoping someday to become a math professor.

I could get passionate about math because it was cold and provable and safe. I could feel *passionate* about things that couldn't turn on me, shock me, make me feel doubt. I could teach it, and torture my students with thought-puzzles, like I was tortured by *my* professors. Make them stay up groggy-eyed for two or three days in a row chasing equations through mazes, hoping everything wouldn't suddenly blow apart, like smoke rings. Sleep makes you forget the roads down which you found the errors in the first place, so upon waking you're destined to travel too far down those faulty roads all over again, until you fall into the same maddening abyss, or maybe a parallel one.

I worked hard at keeping my grades up. I kept looking for real friends – the ones with the backpacks full of books about science, the ones who would want to talk to me about how they (we) were going to change the world once we'd figured the math and the science out.

But I guess times had changed. Or the illusion was exposed.

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

I often allowed myself to play the counterpart to their fantasies. But I tried to keep my heart aligned with deeper things. No one was going to be allowed to touch the place in me that Jaime Sutton touched in Tilden Park. She had created my first and only religious experience – a sensual church with an innocent stained-glass window that exploded into kaleidoscopic fragments overnight. One thing was clear to me -- I was not about to start a new religion any time soon.

I kept repeating to myself I wasn't good enough, and that orphans are destined to repeat lonely disconnected nightmares over and over.

I wrote about Jaime once, but only about the beauty, the silkiness of her skin, as my skin touched hers, the chemical combustion, etcetera. I couldn't find it in me to be angry. But when I wasn't in control of my thoughts by writing them down carefully, changing the script to be something more acceptable as a memory, the truth erupted -

- total devastation, humiliation, the de-evolution of love, open-heart surgery with no anesthesia.

“Math can launch spaceships.... Can it someday find its way to God?”

(These are the kinds of silly questions I asked myself to avoid thinking about Jaime Sutton.)

The paradox of searching for a God, and pondering spiritual questions, without simultaneously allowing myself to actually *feel* love for anything or anyone, didn't go unnoticed by me.

Chapter 14

Laney

I faxed him. I faxed my boss that I wouldn't be in on Monday -- or ever again, actually.

I was not giving them two weeks' notice, because if I came into the store again for even one minute the senselessness of it all would overwhelm me.

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

.... I hereby declare that laptops, desktops, circuit boards, silicon chips, cardboard boxes, and Styrofoam shells, are forevermore extinct in my universe.

Over the course of a single weekend they have become prehistoric.

I want to find my natural rhythm.

I have turned my technologically-trapped mind into soft rain.

Chapter 15

Wild storms with clues in the clouds. This is the fantasy world Laney explored each night; writing song after song.

The music framed a backdrop for the lyrics, which came later. When the mood and tone and form were complete, the story created itself.

But the lyrics didn't often appear in a completed form. Lines were changed to get them more aligned to the heart of the meaning.

Sometimes she would write about a wild girl doing things she could never imagine doing herself. The girl was sensual. Love came easy to her. She took chances. She was seductive, extroverted, confident. Those lyrics usually didn't survive the final cut.

But the music never needed changing or editing. It was simply available to her, usually as a completed piece, in a way very few musicians ever experience. This is what was gifted to her. It never left her, even after she'd run away from it.

Chapter 16

Gabriel had been going to Sunny's Bar almost every Friday night for about six months. He'd stay for just a few hours. He would write about the characters coming and going. These were like practice sketches.

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

Sunny's Bar was only three blocks from his apartment. The exterior of this friendly but dingy pub had become a familiar signpost on his walks to and from the beach.

If some woman happened to spot him writing and was curious enough to ask him what he was working on, that would certainly not have been unwelcomed. But he was not about to introduce himself to any of the women that came in there on a typical night.

However, that one girl, the girl who lived across the street. He thought about her often, in his apartment late at night.

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

Maybe she would be rushing through the front door and he could say hello, acting as if it were a chance meeting.

Or she would be leaving to go for an evening beach walk. Would she even remember him? Why should she? Then something unexpected happened – the faint sound of a piano being played altered his attention. It was coming from the back of the building. He stood near the entranceway for a moment, secretly waiting for her to appear, grateful for the background music, which he could only hear if he strained to do so. People walking by didn't notice the music at all. New silver rent-a-cars slowly cruised down the two-lane street with their windows open. They only heard the sound of the waves breaking on the beach at the north end of the bar.

But as the cars made their way south and the street became empty again the sound of this beautiful music recaptured him. He left his post, walked around the back, through a dirty alleyway, and got closer, then closer still, until he was standing right under the window where the music was coming from. He heard a voice singing over the music. It was a beautiful voice, but it seemed more interested in telling a story than sounding like a "singer."

The melodies of the songs were haunting; everything kept moving in unexpected directions. He was listening to someone with great talent, and suddenly he knew it had to be her. It couldn't be anyone else. The song sounded like she looked; like the nearly singable beauty he had seen in her face.

Chapter 17

Laney had a dream the night before they first met. She was swimming naked in a natural pool in a forest. It was quiet, peaceful. Her feet were touching the bottom of the water, toes touching gray flat rocks that kept her balanced and safe with her head above the surface.

In the distance, she saw a rainbow, created by a huge waterfall. She decided to swim a little closer to see the rainbow from directly below the falls. But as soon as she did, she felt a powerful undertow. It pulled her into a pool that the falls were dropping into from an incredible height. When she looked up she saw the top of the falls rose a mile into the air. The rainbow was far more intense now. Glowing. Brilliant. Almost on top of her. And the noise from the waterfall became unbearably loud.

Any scream for help would have been unheard, even by her. The power of the water clawed at her naked body. But she didn't try to escape the pull, or the noise. Because it was too late. She felt oddly free. She was at the end of her time.

The rainbow was pulsing now, gorgeous, frightening, blindingly bright. Half-solid, half-mist. Half-real, half-illusion. She tried to breathe but the water was taking over — becoming her.

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

Then she turned on the lights in her room and wrapped herself in two big blankets, as if she had the flu. Her

breathing slowed, but the chills continued. She searched for an answer -- what was the dream trying to tell her? But there seemed to be nothing clear to decipher.

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

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

She sat still, silent, stunned:

Even if you had drowned, even if you had actually *died*, the fact is – *there's nothing to worry about! It's okay. Everything is okay.* Death, is... *nothing*. It's like a dream.

"There's *nothing* to worry about," she said aloud.

She repeated these words to herself over and over for a long time, until it became mantra-like in its energy. Then it became a whisper, then it became a wordless feeling, then a memory of a feeling, then she fell back asleep.

Chapter 18

Two days after standing beneath Laney's window, Gabriel decided to take a walk on the main beach in town. He thought about going to Ho'okipa that morning to surf, but he had surfed some pretty big waves the day before. His body was still a bit beat-up. Plus, of course, he held a small secret hope.... He walked past the bar, glancing at the apartment across the way. He listened carefully for a moment, but couldn't hear the music.

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

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

He looked around, shading his eyes a bit from the sun. She was laying down on a blanket about twenty yards away, reading a book. He recognized her immediately. She was wearing a dark blue bikini. A thin white blouse lay beside her. She would never remember him, he was sure of that. She would just ignore him as he walked past her.

But then he thought – here is a crossroads. What path do you choose? The one that walks past her, or the one that doesn't? They had met for fifteen seconds one evening and

she never said a word to him. Maybe the crossroads itself was an illusion. Maybe no road existed at all.

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

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

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

"Remember me?" he said a bit more quietly.

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

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

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

"The cut-off comes just past the wooden bridge," she responded. "I was just there."

He nodded.

"... And I walked it yesterday too," she added.

"Well, thanks for letting me know. I guess I can just go home now," he laughed.

"Sorry," she smiled back. She knew what she said was distancing. It was a way to make him feel uncomfortable.

"Plus, I'm very busy," she said, "I was reading an important book about Lennon."

"Lenin?"

"John Lennon. Until a crazy bird salesman interrupted me."

He couldn't read her.

"And after that, I was scheduled to take a nap. So...."

"Well, I can bore you to sleep if you walk with me – I have nothing to say. I'm like a walking nap."

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

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

Chapter 19

Gabriel

The waves came up gently over our feet as we walked. The sand on this beach – Keawakapu – is marble white, like cloudsalt, crushed down to the finest granular equations, which the sea then rearranges by the hour, like quarks in a liquid electron accelerator.

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

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

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

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

She just found out that I had asked the bartender about her. But she didn't question it.

"Your ears are quite visually perceptive," is all she said. Then she added, "So what do you do when you're not selling birds?"

"I sell rides on very small waves. I teach surfing to kids and grandmas and tourists."

"That sounds like fun."

"It is. But that's not my real work. That's just my job."

"What's your real work?"

"I guess you could say I'm a freelance spiritual scientist."

She laughed aloud, "Now that's a job I've never heard of."

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

"Well, I just made it up -- here and now. But what I mean is, science breaks things down into comprehensible fragments. Spirituality searches for the unity of all things. So my career is, I guess, technically oxymoronic."

"And who pays for you to do all this oxymoronic thinking, if you don't mind me asking?"

"No one."

"Ah, so we're actually being paid the same salary. Same with my music... I guess we're just drifters, beachcombers."

"Dreamers," I corrected her.

"That's a much kinder way to put it. I'll try to remember that."

"Do you surf?" I asked.

"Never tried."

"Well, come down to The Cove sometime. I'll take you out."

In front of us we could see rain falling in the distance, ascending from gray clouds in vertical bands, curved by the wind. I stole a glance at her face -- soft ghostly sunlight. Her beauty unnerved me.

I looked away, over the tall palm trees to the east. Cumulus clouds cascaded out from Mount Haleakala. They billowed and curled into fanciful designs -- a dragon's head,

a gray locomotive, a wild running animal -- as they shape-shifted across the sky.

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

"Gabe." I was feeling the effects of some spell I had put on myself.

"Short for Gabriel?"

I nodded.

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

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

She laughed.

"And your name is?"

She paused for effect, or out of reluctance.

"Laney."

"Short for Elaine?"

"No. I was just named Laney."

"I remember the name Laney from long ago," I was searching my brain, trying to recall the time and place....

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

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

I nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As we walked back towards her blanket, the sun returned and began to dry us. We saw the rows of white windmills in the distance, perched atop the West Maui mountains, standing in a bright ascending line, like saluting ghosts. Flag poles that needed no flags. They were their own proud anthematic choir of raw energy.

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

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

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

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

“Okay,” Laney quietly said to the bird, “how much do you want for the wet blanket? A small fish is all I can afford.”

The bird finally flew off.

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

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

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

Chapter 20

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

His writing seemed to be missing both the enthusiasm and patience he was championing. He hadn’t brought her into the storyline yet. He wasn’t sure if she had a place in it.

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

He sat down on a mat in his sparsely furnished room and began to meditate, as he tried to do most days. But the attempt at silence was even harder to come by than usual. Reasons arose in his mind, good reasons, why he shouldn’t want another meeting with her to happen. Even if it evolved into what he thought he wanted. He might get to the point where emotionally there was no turning back, and then she could just walk away -- just like she did after their beach walk, without ever thinking about him again.

But after all the fearful visions played themselves out, the only conclusion he could come up with was the word, “Yes.”

Before he could inquire about what that could possibly mean, his reverie was broken by the ring tone of his cell phone. Calls were rare. Few people knew the number.

He looked at the caller I.D. and smiled. It was his friend, Rob McClellan. They had worked together as

professors at Cabrillo, a small community college in Santa Cruz, until Gabe was laid off because of a lack of funding.

They greeted each other with a bit of small talk, then spoke about Maui, and how lucky Gabe was to be living there. Rob, who taught molecular biology, began by telling Gabe about this semester's class, the worst group of students he'd ever had.

One student would enter the class with headphones on, and never take them off. One day, Rob stopped his lecture and walked right up to him and stood there, but the boy was oblivious. His eyes were closed. Finally, the boy looked up and slid one phone halfway off of his ear.

"What are you listening to?" Rob asked. He thought he might impress the kid, so he said, "Kendrick Lamar? Primus?"

"No," he muttered. "Who are they?"

"Okay, I'm waiting."

"It's my... economics lecture."

"Well, Jeez, that's great. But this is a molecular biology class."

"I know, I'm taping it on my iPhone so I can listen to it later."

Rob said, "Well, maybe I'm not understanding something here. But I think it would be more efficient for you to just start the day without recording the first class. Just take your headphones off and actually listen to the live feed. Ya think?"

"Um, maybe," he says, but the look in his eyes said that Rob didn't understand his way was just as good, if not better.

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

Rob said, "Maybe professors should just make YouTube videos. One video for each lecture in the semester. Maybe I'm wasting my time standing there trying to get through to them. In fact, maybe universities are just becoming an expensive scam outside whatever research is going on there. The whole classroom and campus concept is becoming outdated."

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

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

Rob abruptly changed the subject, coming to the reason for his call, "So Gabe, something really strange happened to me. You are my spirituality Petri dish, and as you know I'm a proud non-believer. So I want to run it by you. I was invited by a friend to see a lecture by this woman from India. She's a humanitarian, but some people call her a saint, like Saint Teresa. Normally I would have said something cynical about it like how my mother was a saint too, according to my mother. But the friend who told me about this lady was also quite beautiful, so I let her talk me into going to see her.

"But one morning at her apartment a few weeks later -- yes, I woke up there -- she showed me a film clip of her. A little video. At first I was like, I hope nobody sees me watching this. But then I shut myself up for a second and I became a little... I can't believe I'm saying this, but... do you know what this lady does every day, Gabe, while overseeing like hundreds of charities? She hugs people. She hugs people for free, every day, for 18 hours a day, all over the world."

"Does she ever play Cupid when she hugs?"

"...Cupid?"

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

"You met a girl? Tell me."

"Half a girl."

"Oh shit...you mean?"

"No! I mean she's half-fantasy. Walking with her on the beach was real, but the rest is in my head."

"Sounds romantic, coming from you."

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

"Well, this girl. I'll call her my girlfriend because I'm in an optimistic mood today. She tells me that seeing this woman, Amma, in the U.S. is like attending a mini-Woodstock. It's a big party. Lots of music. That was a big reason why I actually went. I mean, hanging out with a beautiful girl with live music. It's a classic kind of date that I'd never been on, having lived most of my life in Nerdland..."

"What's her name?"

"The Indian lady? I just told you."

"No, the girl!"

"Don't throw me off track, man! I want to stay with my petri dish experiment here. The hug I got from this Indian lady was cool. Free. No judgment. No frills. It just felt like she was able to get everyone there into this cool connected little bubble. Ten thousand people, Gabe, all hanging out in this calm happy place."

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

"As a molecular biologist I can't even get to the bottom of the *observable* world, so as far as some 'other world' is concerned, I'm dumb as mud, and always will be. But that's why I'm calling you – this is the wild part – one of her swamis is going to be in Maui in about a month. I met him. We only talked for a few minutes. But I have to say, he was a very impressive guy. And I thought, since he'd be in your neck of the woods, you might be interested in meeting him. Then you can report back to me – let me know if he has anything earth-shattering to say. You'd be like my spiritual scout."

"I'm not much of a fan of traveling swamis. I'm more of a spiritual loner. I'm trying to figure things out for myself."

"Well okay, but I'm just saying, here's your chance to ask questions to an actual swami. I've heard him speak. He's not a scam, Gabe. He's not your run-of-the-mill swami who wants your money and your girlfriend too.... I'd join you if I wasn't teaching. But I live in the real world, hanging out with molecules and one-celled creatures, and students who are sometimes dumber than one-celled creatures. Anyway, let me know if you're interested. I could try to set something up."

Gabe laughed, "Are you his booking agent now?"

"No. I'm not saying I can guarantee he'll meet with you. But you're in Maui. He'll be in Maui.... I mean, it's a pretty small place."

"It's not that small!"

"Well, no worries either way. I just thought it might be an interesting experience."

"Okay, I'll think about it."

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

Chapter 21

Laney

I was a little unraveled when I got back to my apartment. I sat down at the piano, but I wasn't ready to play yet. My hands wanted silence.

He was different. He wasn't the typical guy looking for a girlfriend. I never wanted to be somebody's "girlfriend." My mother was angry that my dad tried to domesticate her – into a mother, a housewife, a wife in bed. She wouldn't stand for it. So she got a job that had her on the road a lot.

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

The road was tough, she would say to him. She hated the cheap hotels, nothing good was ever on TV, she would say. How's the kid? Someday she wasn't going to work anymore -- as soon as the house was paid off.

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

Meanwhile, five minutes after she hung up, she'd give the all-clear, perhaps by knocking on the wall of an adjacent room... her boss of five years would come back into the room

with a new pack of Marlboros. He'd laugh. They'd laugh. They'd kiss.

I started playing loud dark chords, then stopped, kept my foot on the sustain pedal, and listened to the watery moonless sound until it completely evaporated. Complete silence appeared, like a sunrise.

I began replaying my walk on the beach with him. This person, Gabe, he didn't seem to be faking who he was. He was searching me out from the inside – I could feel that. I have no idea where he lives, or if I'll see him again – because there's no way I'd ever go to the bar just to see if he was there. It would be embarrassing if he wasn't. And more embarrassing if he was. Then again, it's kind of exciting to not know if I'll see him again.

But why should I keep shutting down?

Laney, aren't you sick of this? Sick of dead-ending this other life you could be living, if you were to try even just a little?

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

But I think if our paths cross again by chance -- we'll see. We'll see if I swim out to that place where there's nothing but the waterfall and a massive rainbow and bright stars above me. We'll see if I have the strength to hold myself there, or if I'm destined to be the kind of dreamer who drowns before the dream ends.

Chapter 22

Gabriel

I called Rob and told him if he could set up a one-on-one meeting with the swami, I'd do it. I had already come up with some questions. I promised I would report back to him.

In the past I had some pretty lame experiences trying to get answers from traveling gurus and expert authors and religious scholars teaching at colleges. But I still wanted to believe answers might possibly exist in some form that would touch me, reach me in some way. Not *the* answer, but at least *one* answer.

I respected Rob's judgment, exactly because he was always so cynical. And I did have a good opening question. If the swami couldn't answer that one, there would be no need to go on.

After leaving a voicemail letting Rob know I was willing, I decided to go for a late afternoon walk then, pick up some food for dinner. Maybe I'd take a swim first.

As I walked out the front door my eyes were bombarded – the sky was flashlight yellow as the evening sun reflected off of the water. I thought about going back inside to get my sunglasses but I was feeling a bit lazy.

I descended the steps of my apartment just as she was walking by, carrying a small bag of groceries in her arms.

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

"Hi again," was all I could come up with.

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

"Imagine meeting *you* here," she said finally.

"Well, I live here."

"Oh!" she looked at the rounded alcove behind me.

"Not all of it. Just one very small room.... I was thinking about walking to the beach for a sunset swim."

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

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

She was looking through the glass door that led to the main hallway. The biggest apartment was at the end of the hall.

"No. A crazy lady lives in that one."

"My room is around that dark corner, all the way in the back."

"Oh. Sounds scary."

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

"No...."

"Oh. Well, that's okay.... Maybe I'll see you...."

"Okay. Just for a minute."

She followed me in. I was searching for my key. My cargo shorts had ten pockets. The key was always in the last pocket I dug around in.

"Black and white tile flooring. Looks Italian," she said.

"It's easy to clean the sand and saltwater off of it. Lots of surfers live in this building."

The hallway got darker.

"It's this room, here." I unlocked the door and went inside. She stood out in the hall.

"Glass of water?"

"Your sunglasses are on the table."

"I see that." I put them on and turned toward her.

"Positively Hollywood."

"No. Walmart."

She wandered in with her bag of groceries still in her arms, and walked over to an old beat-up table near the window. I used it for writing. Then she quickly inspected the wetsuit in my closet, the surfboard in the corner, papers scattered on the table. She said, "You live like you look."

"Like a total mess?" I looked around the room and tucked in my T-shirt.

"Yes," she said seriously.

I nodded.

I offered her cold sparkling water from the fridge, served in a plastic cup – an orphan's version of family china.

I couldn't tell if she was nervous or bored.

"Are you okay?" I said.

She put her hands over her eyes and breathed deeply. "This is the stupidest, most impulsive thing I've ever done." Her voice was shaking.

"Being here?"

"Yes."

"What's stupid about it?" I assumed she was going to leave.

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

I looked at her, puzzled.

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

Was she about to cry, or about to laugh? Sea-blue eyes staring, glistening.

I waited.

She nodded slowly, thoughts flickering, colliding. "You can come closer to me. But don't touch me."

I walked over to her and stood soldier-like, with my hands rigidly at my side. She laughed, then she put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me on the cheek, then pulled away.

"That was amazing," I said.

"Right."

"It was... amazing."

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Ah, I don't really know." I looked over to a small clock near my bed. "It's 5:06."

"What are you doing tomorrow at 5:06?"

"I'm really not sure."

"Meet me here at 5:06."

"I live here."

"I mean, would you *be* here?"

"Yes. In fact, I won't move."

She picked up her bag of groceries and quickly left.

The next night at exactly 5:06, I heard a soft knock at my door.

When I let her in, she immediately asked for sparkling water in a cup again. She sat down at the table. After I served it, she began asking me questions. Her tone was gentle, but the pace of the inquiry was puzzlingly rapid.

"What was your mother like?"

"I don't really know."

"Adopted, or did she die?"

"Yes and I don't know."

She looked at me quizzically.

"Yes to the first part of the question. I don't know the answer to the second part of the question."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Berkeley."

"Why did you come here, and when are you leaving?"

"When am I leaving? I don't know the answer to either part of that question. I can't remember exactly when I came. It was a few years ago. Maybe three."

She sipped her cup of sparkling water.

"How's your job going?"

"Teaching surfing at The Cove?"

"No, your other job. Your real job."

"Oh, spiritual scientist?"

"Yes. I'm glad you remembered the name of it."

"Terrible. I haven't found God yet. And neither has physics." Then I added, "But I might meet a swami soon."

"A swami? Do you think he knows what God is?"

"I'm hoping not. We'll see."

She stood up, waiting for me to stand up too.
She came closer to me and kissed me gently on the lips.
When I tried to put my arms around her, she pulled away.

"What time is it?"

"5:14."

"What are you doing tomorrow at 5:14," she smiled.

"I'm not sure, unless you're coming again."

"I might."

The following evening, right at 5:14, I heard a soft knock at the door and welcomed her in.

She asked for sparkling water again, and we sat at the table and talked for a while. This time I asked the questions, but she was very shut down. I sensed her discomfort so stopped and silence filled the room. Then she did the strangest thing.

She stood up, and took my hand until I was standing as well. Then undid the buttons on her shirt. She was wearing her dark blue bikini top underneath it.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No, I..."

"Take your shirt off," she said.

I complied.

"Is this fun -- for you?"

"Yes!"

"Okay."

She buttoned her shirt back up.

"Why do you surf?"

"It's fun. I feel happy when I'm surfing. It's like flying without being in a plane."

"So there's no deep psychological or philosophical reason then. That's what you're saying. You just surf and come home and eat and go to sleep. And that's it."

"Basically."

"That's spiritual?"

"Maybe, yes."

After a short silence she said, "Do you have any more questions for me?"

"Well, yes. I mean, I want to know everything."

"No you don't," she laughed. Then she said, "Can I come back tomorrow at around the same time?"

"Of course. Or stay...."

"As a spiritual scientist, you should know there is no such thing as stay. Everything changes."

That made me laugh.

Before she left she said, "I brought you something." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small stone and handed it to me.

"Look closely," she said. "See that little white streak at the bottom?"

"Yes."

"It's a bird dropping."

As I laughed again, she smiled back, and turned to leave.

The next evening, she brought guacamole and chips and a plastic tablecloth.

We ate for a while without speaking. Then she stood up. She reached out her hand and pulled me up from my chair, just as she did the night before. But this time we kissed. I put my arms around her.

"I think you have a gob of guacamole in your hair," she said.

"Seriously?" I swiped my hand through my hair.

"That's better. Now it's just an interesting green streak."

"I could put some guacamole in your hair too if you want."

"No you couldn't, you finished it. Scraped the bottom, in fact."

"I'm a bit of a pig."

She looked past me, out my window. "Anyway, keep the tablecloth. You need it more than I do."

"Okay. I'll provide the meal next time."

"No, you won't be able to."

I looked at her, was this the end?

"Because I won't be hungry in thirty minutes. That could be 'next time.' Will you still be here?"

"Of course!"

"Wait here."

"Isn't waiting and staying the same thing?"

"No. Nothing stays. Just wait."

Thirty minutes later she knocked softly. When I opened the door, I saw she'd brought her guitar back from her apartment.

Without speaking, she opened the case, sat on my bed, and played a song she'd written. The chords and melodies were beautiful but unguessable. She sang with a slightly raspy voice. The lyrics were strange and dream-like. Something about a mountain, a pool of water, and undertow.

Before I had a chance to comment, she came closer to where I was sitting and said, "Are you ready to not wait now?"

"Ready?"

"Yes."

She slowly put her guitar in its case, stood five feet away from me, and slowly undid the buttons on her shirt. She asked me not to move. She wasn't wearing her bikini top this time. She wasn't wearing anything. Then she put one hand on top of her shorts. Her other hand couldn't find the zipper at first, but then she found the grip and pulled it. She pushed her shorts to the floor. I looked at her bare hips, shaped like a small heart; the sparse blonde hair below her waist, nearly disappearing in the dim light of the room, seemed camouflaged against her skin.

"Can I come closer?"

"Okay."

I kissed her on the cheek.

She whispered, "Okay."

So I kissed her again.

She laid herself down onto my thin bed quilt and I laid beside her, keeping some space between us.

"Okay," she said again, almost under her breath.

I kissed her neck, her shoulders, her arms. But this wasn't the way she imagined it would be.

She pulled me closer to her until we were face-to-face.

"I think you're supposed to take your clothes off. Okay?"

"Yes, okay."

As soon as I undid my clothes she moved her body on top of mine and held my hands down on the bed, then nuzzled her nose against my neck.

I looked in her eyes and it scared me to death. Her irises seemed fathoms deep. And she wasn't looking away.

None of this squared with either of our core beliefs of protecting ourselves at all costs. Going slow. Never trusting.

"Look," she gasped.

A small bird had landed on the bedside windowsill.

"He followed us here," I said.

Then I looked at her. "He wants you too. You'll need to choose between us."

"It's a she."

We both laughed.

It was a different kind of laugh for me. It was free of pain. It was open to more laughter.

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

Then the birds stopped, as if on cue. The silence was intense. The sunset exploded into a thousand colors.

I listened to her breathing, calmer now, as profound and magical as starbirds singing from outer space welcoming a new solar system into existence.

I had always loved watching the formations of stars in the sky. But I never wanted to learn the names of constellations. I wanted the shapes and names to be mine, in some personal way. A purposely unsolved mystery. My mind was wandering off as the sky turned gray, then black.

"I'm enjoying being here," she said hesitantly.

She was doubtful of my response.

"Be here then. For as long as you want. I don't want to just hear your music through a window anymore."

Chapter 23

Laney

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

Chapter 24

Laney assumed any kind of relationship would compete with her music, compete with the time, the solitude necessary, and the commitment it takes to search inward. She assumed he would, of course, become jealous of the distance she needed from him in order to write. All the time she would spend not thinking about him. And she would eventually feel trapped and resentful of his jealousy.

But Gabriel was not only fine with the time she needed to spend by herself, more than that, he loved his time alone too. He never tired of hearing her sing and play. As a writer himself, it intrigued him how she could create such complicated stories and put them into such little pockets of time and space. With syllables restricted by melody. And melody having to surf with perfect balance above waves of harmony. She was not writing simple love songs, or childish hate songs. These lyrics were dreamscapes, metaphors, oddly constructed imagery.

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

"Nothing is finished."

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

He said, "It.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It might be a novel someday. Or just a journal too thick to burn with a match. I really don't know yet."

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

He pulled out a number of thick notebooks. "Start anywhere. It has no beginning." He went off to the fridge to eat whatever he could find in there.

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

"It's oxymoronic?"

"No. Some of it is great!" Then she added: "We make good counterpoint, you and me – Your lightheartedness despite all the unknowns, and my darkness because of too many knowns. We complete an emotional circuit. We fill things in for each other."

Chapter 25

Gabriel

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

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

I watched waves forming: They begin as an integrated part of the open sea, but after their big breakaway moment, with a roar of independence, they rise up and roll forward ferociously, crashing to their destiny's end. A quiet sigh, a hiss, is the only thing left after their long journey is over. Like a final breath.

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

Beyond the sea the jade green islands of Lanai and Kaho'olawe sat before us like quiet mossy hillsclapes in the distance, filtered in blue mist, alive, electric.

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

Chapter 26

Gabriel

On this island, you don't live a normal life. First of all, if you drive straight for more than thirty minutes you start going in circles. Second of all, if you follow the circle long enough you get snarled up in volcanic rock that will rip a hole right through your tires. The rocks are unkind to everything they come in contact with – prickly shards of hardened black magma.

The rocks that live near the sea have been stubbornly grinded down by waves and salt-wind.

But the ones living far from the sea look cold and harsh, like a soldier without a family. They sit out in the scorching sun, on the edge of a mountain, morosely waiting for the millenniums to change them even just a little.

This is the way of loneliness. It hardens and creates sharp edges in the mind, rarely worn away by time. It's like dying before the end arrives.

Loneliness lies in wait, beneath laughter and love, until the laughter and love have moved on, pulled out to sea by the undertow. Loneliness lingers, unmoved, unmovable, at war with everything including itself.

To find the genesis of the lava that birthed these night-black rocks, and literally rise above it all, one would have to travel all the way to the top of the highest mountain in Maui – ten thousand feet above the ocean, to the peak of Mt. Haleakala.

Laney and I decided to make the journey.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ve never been this high in my life without being in a plane!” She said this loudly so she could be heard over the straining Jeep motor. I was gunning the engine to make sure we could make it to the top.

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

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

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

At nine thousand feet the air was far colder. The sky above us was blazing clear and clean, but all around the sides of the mountain thick clouds whirled about.

Even though the sky above us was crystalline blue, occasional rain skittered sideways, carried by a great crosswind, and sprayed misty drizzle onto our faces. and onto the windshield. Laney was laughing at the sky. It was showing off tricks she'd never seen before. She was giddy, speechless.

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

The Jeep pushed its way up to the summit parking lot. When we arrived, it looked like we had landed on the moon. We were bundled up as warmly as our sparse gear allowed. It was forty-five degrees with a cold crosswind.

We took a long descending path called Sliding Sands down to a valley of pastel volcanic cones. The entire landscape was streaked with layers of color, with a backdrop of golden brown. It looked like a desert of petrified rainbow.

We walked halfway down the crater and found a rock to sit on with a clear view across to the other side of the

mountain. There we were, sitting together on a boulder on the edge of outer space. No clouds above us, just diamond bright sky, a small laser white sun, with occasional wild wind gusts breaking the immense silence.

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

This is what the world might look like ten years after a nuclear war. But the irony was, this was a reverse nuclear war – a volcanic eruption spawned this land, and then life, thousands of years before us.

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

There were no birds, voices, car engines, planes, or flying insects of any kind -- there was nothing to hear except the ever-present hum of nothingness. Pure silence. Our ears were cold, pulsing. The air was very thin. There was no one else on the path. And no one in the valley of the crater. It seemed like we were the only two living things inhabiting Earth.

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

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

At one point we looked over the mountain and saw nothing but blue in all directions, including downwards. We

didn't know if what we were looking at was sky below us, or ocean, There was no way to see where they merged. It was as if we were staring at a vast blue mirror turning in on itself.

Chapter 27

Laney

Our drive back down the mountain at sunset was slow and winding. As the night took hold, our mood turned as somber as the sky.

Gabe became unusually quiet, even for him. We could feel ourselves circling back down into the commonlanders' world, with the clouds ablaze above us -- pastel colors leaping from cloud top to cloud top, as the sun died. Gravity pulled at the wheels. Gabe steered us down without ever touching the accelerator.

All natural light finally disappeared and poured blackness upon the Earth. Pin drops of electric lights dotted the valley floor.

We were still above it all, but feeling the division, the misty threaded bridge between human minds and the quiet pureness of the sky.

Back up where we were, it didn't need us. It didn't need life. We were useless invaders.

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

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

That is a most incredible thing to me: that we can find love, and find peace from that love, and from it become so happy that we let go, sink back down into our true selves, and succumb to the fears that came long before. And as a distraction from those basic primal fears we wish to avoid, we seek more. More love, more stuff, more things to distract our thoughts and senses. More and more.

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

More. And more.

But there is nothing, no one anywhere, in control of it all. There is no master plan for the world, or for us. We cannot stop *anything*, and no one will ever volunteer to stop, even if we could.

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

Need pushes the flames higher. Until in every present moment, the entire human race gathers around the ritual of the fire, the blaze we created, dancing, shouting, howling, fighting, crying, praying, chanting the word, “More.”

1

Chapter 28

Laney

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's fine. It's not a problem."

"Here's my first question," Gabe paused, trying to compose the words just right. "I know you've been meditating for many years, for hours a day. I've meditated a little, only for a few years. I've been on my own personal search for truth and spiritual understanding in my own haphazard way, nothing like you. So my question to you is, with all the thinking we do about God, or no God, and the meaning of life, how can you be sure there's any such thing as actual 'truth' outside the chemical hallucinations of the human brain?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, that's right. But, please understand this carefully, the question is the trick."

Gabe nodded slowly. A curious smile followed.

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

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

"Okay, yes, I see what you are saying. But in that case, I have to ask you more directly about your thoughts about God, and having faith that God even exists. I can't access that kind of faith. I don't know anything about God, if it's a Him, or a Her, or a Rainbow, or Nothingness. Or what God expects from us, *if anything*, and why He set this game in motion in the first place. I mean, why would a God even

need to set anything in motion, or leave anything to chance? What's the point if God is all knowable and beyond the need for things like pleasure or satisfaction. Why would he feel the need to teach us lessons, or expect us to become better, or pray to Him , if we are a part of Him? Why would He bother? So, if I can't know any of those things, how can I ever find the kind of faith you, and all truly spiritual people in the world, seem to have?"

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

We thought it was a curious thing for a swami to say.

He sat back in his chair and touched his fingers to his short beard. He was very patient, and his voice was soft, "I don't know anything more than you do about the mind of God, or even if there is one! I'm on an inner search for the truth, just like you. But, you see, all the original masters of every great religion have all tried to teach us the exact same thing that my guru, Amma teaches – to have love and compassion for all living beings. To forgive ourselves, and others. To not be attached to outcomes, only to our own responses to the outcomes. To follow our best intentions at all times. And to dedicate some of our life to selfless service - - which is why Amma is a humanitarian, and not just meditating in a cave alone in the mountains back in India. Jesus said these same kinds of things over and over again, Buddha said them, as did Krishna, the Hindus, the Jains, and Moses, and the Torah, the Bible, the Koran.... It's an impressive list of masters and scriptures that for some interesting reason still have relevance to this day for people all around the world. It's all the same message. All the same.

“Therefore, if your mind can find enough optimism each morning when you awake to at least try to act with any of those good intentions, even when it’s very difficult to do, then you have faith!”

He looked at us. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

We both nodded.

He added, “Spirituality is really quite simple. True spirituality does not require a leap of faith. It doesn’t require reading, or translating ancient religious texts. It’s as clear and obvious as the day. We just make it more complicated than it has to be because we don’t want to do the work. We don’t want to put in the effort it requires after we know the answer!

Gabe laughed and said, “I see that.”

“The mind.” he pointed to his own head, “is the greatest salesman and scam artist alive in this world. Because it can sell you almost anything, it can talk you into the craziest things, or convince you to not do something that’s important for you to do, just by promising you something outrageous, like happiness forever, or great riches, or true love, or revenge, or peace of mind. It has so many appetizing things on the menu. But the ingredients are all made of poison.

“Because, once you go after the carrot on the stick, the mind never keeps its promise! Never! There is no lasting happiness. No peace beyond a fleeting few seconds here and there. Because then the mind says – well, this turned out okay, but you still need *this* other thing too, to be truly full, truly happy, or, we need to be with *this* one over there, or *that* dream has to be fulfilled next, or, that war needs to be

won for us to exact revenge, or that new Guru might know the real answer, because this one doesn't seem to.

"We believe our thoughts again and again, instead of saying, 'I've been fooled by you my whole life, and look where it's gotten me. It's time for me to move on. There are more nourishing things that will bring me to a place of peace and true happiness."

I thought about Gabe and me – our blossoming love for each other, and realized our minds were also “selling us” this type of love we shared. We had now come to expect things from each other, rather than just giving to each other. Our love would change in time – for better or for worse, and expand out in all directions, to become both weaker and stronger, and uglier and more beautiful. All of these things! But there was a deeper place, a deeper love Swami was pointing to. If we connected to that love, what would happen?

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

Gabe remembered a question he promised he would ask for his friend Rob: “Swami, do you know who Stephen Hawking is?”

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

“You did?” Gabe exclaimed. “That's amazing! Why did you not follow that path?”

“Well, I was spending all my time looking at these computer images of the heavens. But I started to wonder -- what would happen if we found what we were all looking for, like other life forms on distant planets? Ants or little

frogs jumping around in sulfur gas or methane lakes. Or maybe other alive things, 'beings,' that are closer to human, or 'conscious,' if we can all agree on what that word means.... And then maybe we also found out exactly how and why the Big Bang happened. And that maybe there are other universes forming when you go to the other side of black holes. All that must be proven by math, of course.

"But then I realized that finding out the truth about these things, and having the math make sense, wouldn't make me any happier or content, in fact, it wouldn't change anything inside me at all. It would just add more questions, in fact. So I needed to discover something else. It wasn't out there. Even if we had a telescope in outer space a thousand times the size of a galaxy, we would just become more and more distracted by more questions. The more we see, the more blind we become to ourselves sometimes.

"So I decided to explore what I suppose is the opposite of astrophysics. The inner galaxy, with as few distractions as possible. And, it's been equally as difficult. But that's okay."

"I see. But, well, I still have to ask this question for my friend!" Gabe smiled. "And now I'm even more curious to hear your answer.... Swami, in Stephen Hawking's book, *The Universe in a Nutshell*, he says he believes that we are living in multiple dimensions simultaneously, possibly with multiple potential outcomes. The past, present, and future could all be happening at the same time. Our consciousness falsely believes in the linear passing of time, and a single history of ourselves in each moment, 'this moment.' But he says it's possible that in reality we are multi-temporal, multidimensional beings. Do you think that could be true?"

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

A moment skipped by, he didn't add anything to his comment. And suddenly we all burst out laughing.

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

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

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

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

There was so much left unsaid.

Chapter 29

Gabriel

Early the next morning I woke up with a strange new feeling. I couldn't shake it.

The impact Swami's words had on me were more than philosophical. Suddenly, I found my thoughts no longer being affected by my past. What happened long ago happened. But none of those things were happening now. I didn't need parents to love me and take care of me *now*. And Laney was not Jaimie Sutton.

I learned to surf, in part, to escape all of those memories -- to make it through the danger, the emptiness I felt, and come out of it alive and exhilarated.

But I was only challenging my body, not my mind.

I had to let the past go now.

I was an orphan. I survived it.

Jaimie made me feel worse about something beautiful. Laney makes beautiful things out of the ordinary. And I feel it too. We share it.

This new feeling this morning was free of ghosts. Free of fear.

I took out my notebook and began to write, not knowing what I was going to say before the words appeared:

Laney, I'm not an orphan when you're with me. I actually feel like I'm part of the world when I'm with you, instead of apart from it.

The truth is, I want to stay with you. I know nothing can stay -- everything changes. But the truth is, I love you. The even wilder truth is, I think I want to have a child with you someday -- and then set it free to be a force for the good in this world! I want to be part of a real family for once, not an adopted one.

Every night when we're together, the stars come down closer to where we live. They whisper all sorts of crazy things.

* * *

That was the scariest thing I had ever written. I thought about ripping the page out of my journal and burning it so she wouldn't accidentally see it one day. What if she did?

How long are you supposed to wait to tell someone something like this? How would she respond? I feared the worst. Everything we created could die in an instant. A crash of two realities that suddenly no longer fit together.

I thought to myself, just be quiet and love her day-to-day. Close your notebook now. You're wasting time. The wind is picking up. The waves are calling.

Chapter 30

Laney

Gabriel is a wildman. The reason he came to Maui was to surf big waves. The reason I came to Maui was to escape to a distant island to get as far away from reality as possible.

There is the difference between us right there! Our two different universes in a nutshell.

There are some really big waves here. Waves so big, not even Gabe would dare try to surf them. They might be considered tidal waves in some places – at a beach called Jaws. The waves there can rise as high as fifty feet before they slowly begin to curl and fall, exploding in slow motion like the detonation of a tall building. The only way to ride them is with a loyal experienced crew – including a jet-ski partner to fish you out, and a helicopter pilot to drop you *on*. Only super stars like Laird Hamilton can ride these deadly giants.

Fortunately, Gabe is not *that much* of a wildman. But he likes to take me there to watch the masters. He wants me to experience from a distance what it might feel like -- the rush of putting your life on the line at the top of a million-pound waterfall, like a bomb about to go off.

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

One day he came to my apartment unannounced. I almost didn't recognize him. He looked stunned, as if he'd been beaten up in an alleyway – the pupils of his eyes were dilated, his hair was full of sand, his thick curls were drooping around his eyes. He would get the shakes from time to time when he tried to speak. He was in physical shock. The story came out slowly over the course of hours:

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

After his second ride of the day he paddled back out again. As he looked out to the horizon he began to sense a really big swell – it looked like a twenty-foot wave, maybe bigger -- a rogue -- he said to himself.

He knew he couldn't surf it, it was way too big, so he took a deep breath and went under it right at the moment it was roaring above him.

It takes about thirty seconds for someone to come back up to the surface after going under a twenty-footer. Fins can get torn loose. Clothes can get ripped off. Wrist bands can break. Bodies can break. Boards can disappear, or get split in half and can end up a quarter mile away, sitting on top of a ridge of lava rocks. And as you're rising back up to the surface you can become severely disoriented, not knowing if the direction you're floating in is up or down.

Sure enough, Gabe's board had been ripped away from his rubber arm strap. Once he made it back up to the surface

he was hyperventilating from having been underwater for so long.

He started to swim to shore, but he sensed something was happening behind him -- a stirring up of the water under him gave it away. He heard the beginnings of an ominous sound. When he looked back he realized another twenty-footer was forming. He was going to have to go under again. It began to roar, like something about to be shattered -- like a dragon inhaling, is how he described it -- and rose up higher than he even feared.

He almost ran out of breath this time as the wave created a powerful undercurrent. He fought to escape from the vortex. When he finally surfaced and saw the sun swirling above him, he tried to focus on not passing out.

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

He said to me: "I was thinking: 'This isn't a lot of fun right now.'"

I shook my head in disbelief and started to laugh.

Meanwhile, just as he was trying to figure out how not to die without having more 'fun,' he sees a jet ski coming out from the beach, but it's angling *away* from him.

Gabe said, "So I was thinking, wow, somebody must be in trouble out here. Maybe I can hitch a ride in too if I can get his attention."

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

The boat steered all the way around another twenty-foot wave until the lifeguard saw an opening and sped directly to where Gabe was. The lifeguard scooped him up and delivered him onto the beach five wild bumpy minutes later.

A few people watching from the beach start to applaud when the jet ski made it back in. Gabe wondered what he did to deserve applause. Then he realized, as reality set in, that they were applauding the lifeguard.

He replayed the scene over and over in his head while lying on the beach, trying to make sense of what just happened. He looked out to the horizon while still laying there and saw another twenty-footer exploding in the distance like a thousand pounds of dynamite. He was out there, in... *that!*

Then the thought crossed his mind -- Or am I still out there? Was this the way people died -- rising out of their bodies watching the ending from what they think is a safe place?

He had the shakes as he drove himself home. His old junker car gave everyone the shakes when they drove in it, being that it had no shocks to speak of, and the roads he often traveled were not well-maintained.

But these shakes originated from inside. He felt like he was trapped in a freezer on an eighty degree day. He was sweating and shivering all at the same time. He'd almost died, and he knew it. He could *feel* it. Death was still right there beside him.

A few days later, I asked him, "Did you even, just for one second, think about God when you were out there thinking you might die? You are a spiritual scientist, after all. That was your one big chance to 'sense' something."

He said, "Yeah. I found the answer. It was clear to me. It was obvious: Twenty-footers are God. And when I came face to face with God, I heard a booming voice in my head say to me, 'Your surfboard is a toothpick. You are an ant's

antennae. Deny my existence and you'll be vaporized into sea foam. If you make it to shore alive, make sure you tell all your ant-sized friends that it won't be because I cared about you one way or the other. *I am the wildness beyond knowing!* Now **GO!** Go home. And spread the word!"

Chapter 31

Gabriel

I wanted Laney to record her songs someday. I promised myself I'd help make that happen. Because the songs needed permanency. They needed a completion point. These songs belonged in the world.

I used to go to her apartment to hear her play. I'd bring a book, convincing myself that I'd lay on her couch and read while she played and sang. But I would always end up glued to a chair next to her, listening to her voice. I would follow the new lyrics carefully, and would be mesmerized by the uniqueness of her melodies, and the progressions of the chords she chose.

She *did* sound exactly like she looked – beautiful, quirky, reluctantly electrifyingly sexy, with a hidden passion behind those cool wave-blue eyes – too deep to ever fully penetrate.

Later we'd fall asleep together in her small bed – I remember those sweet nights in her room, bodies touching while we slept – a maze of wild dreams would come, set to her music -- so many noctilucent illusions of "us."

* * *

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

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

She presented me with a turkey sandwich that she had picked up from "Joy's Place."

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

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

Then she untied the strings on both sides and let her bikini fall to the floor. She knew I loved to see her do this. She made no attempt to hide herself from me. She came closer after taking off her swim top, and kissed my neck and said, "After..." Then headed off to the shower.

I sighed and waited out the long minutes, the way one might wait for the second bottle of wine to be served at a great restaurant. My world was simultaneously starving, drunk, and utterly at peace.

Neither of us owned a TV. We didn't have most of the things people have for daily distractions. We didn't own laptops (especially not her... computers were vampiric – she had devolved back into the swirly dark-brown and white-lined world of pencil and paper). No iPods, no iPads. No iWatches. I couldn't afford a computer. I owned an old flip-phone and a small CD player. She had no phone at all. This was Maui, after all. A tropical island. We were Bohemian freaks living a secluded fantasy life together. Why would we want any contact with the outside world anyway?

So when my phone rang I wasn't going to answer it. Everyone I wanted to talk to, or had the slightest interest in, was in my apartment at this very moment, naked, wet,

glowing from the sun and salty from the sea. I wanted nothing about this scene to change.

But so few people knew the number... and she would be in there a while. My curiosity won.

I heard Rob's voice on the other end of the line. He said Amma was going to be in the San Francisco area around Thanksgiving. He was willing to treat us to the airfare if Laney and I wanted to come see her. We could sleep on the floor of his hotel room for free — that way he could meet Laney, and we could meet Amma.

It was a very generous offer since the money would be the main hang-up. Teaching surfing was not exactly making me rich. But I was able to pay my rent and fill my fridge. Spending a few days away would be no big deal. I thanked him and told him I'd talk to Laney about it.

When Laney got out of the shower she was dripping wet, not having bothered to towel off. She covered me like a silky wave. It was like being cooled off by a soft human sponge. Her hair was like a slow-motion waterfall dripping onto my face. Her face was as bright and haunting as a rainbow.

Our time together on that late afternoon felt more intense than usual. The sun was hidden behind the clouds, and the grayness in the room made things feel a bit stark and brooding; a bit lonely. We needed each other. We swam far out into each other until we slowly drifted back.

Time passed. Pulsing stars arrived at our windowsill. Their white snowlight covered us as we fell asleep.

Chapter 32

Laney

Gabe is such a physical person. He loves to run, swim, surf, dive off fifty-foot cliffs into the ocean, anything that challenges him.

One day we were shopping in Paia and he got roped into a playing basketball with a bunch of raggedy kids. I sat in the shade and watched for an hour as he played full court in the heat with baskets that had no nets, with elbows flying, and curses uttered after every missed shot and every bad pass. He played until he won their respect. Everyone hugged him goodbye.

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

Really, I've never been a body-focused person. I worked in the computer world in a dark back office. I played guitar and piano in a shadowy back room that no one but Gabe ever knew existed, until he dragged the piano into the living room one morning.

I can sit for hours on end without needing anyone. I read alone. I think and write alone. I never cared about soccer or volleyball or kissing or dating. I live in my head.

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

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

I'm not as messed up as my mother. At least that's true. I know I would never have a secret affair for seven years. I would never live a life of lies, and spew out pain everywhere I went, like octopus ink, darkening everything I touch.

I have tried to be the opposite of all I remember her to be. But I am acutely aware she is a dark part of me. I have to stay vigilant.

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

Psychotherapy apparently deals with the genesis of things -- how, why, and when these soul-diluting events occurred. We become aware of why we act and think the way we do. But I needed answers to bigger questions. Like *why* does God allow things like that to happen in the first place? What's the point? What's the message? He likes to watch us play, and win and lose, get wounded, shot, bludgeoned, suffer and die? If God is the Holy Father, he should be arrested for child abuse! I don't respect what He's putting us through. He knows that ultimately most of us won't be able to handle it. It's like throwing your three-year-old overboard in the middle of the ocean to teach it to swim.

Swami had a lot of good answers to Gabe's excellent questions. And because of that meeting, I have been meditating a bit -- trying to. It's hard. All the dark things in me surface quickly. Silence is nowhere to be found. I'm just supposed to watch the thoughts without judging them.

Eventually peace will come, they say. But that wave of peace is far offshore. The swells don't ever reach where I am. I live in the murky still-pool of myself.

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

Can he meditate and find peace behind barbed wire? And forgive the torture? I mean, really!

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

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

He'll show up with friends unannounced sometimes, surfer buddies, accompanied by take-out bags of warm enchiladas and chips and hot spiced salsa and cold beer.

Or he'll come to me alone with a single droopy flower and a kiss, and we'll race out to the beach for a sunset swim, and watch the green water slowly darken to indigo as the clouds turn electric red.

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

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

His loud five knock rhythm came a little earlier than I expected, and the door opened. He was with his surfer buddy, and the surfer buddy's new girlfriend.

“Hey, what’s up?” he crooned, with his moon eyes and his quick smile.

“All good,” I sighed, “I’m ready to rock.”
And off we went into the night.

Chapter 33

Gabriel

The present moment is actually a separate dimension from space *or* time. Because now doesn't exist on a clock.

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

But it's not possible. Some essential clarity evaporates. Like trying to remember a touch. Nothing can bring back the fullness of it.

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

But then, the emotions would flatline, even in the present, especially if I tried too hard to stay in it.

The attempt to capture something beautiful kills it on the spot.

There is nothing we can do but free the lightning from the bottle, and behold the instant as it speeds away incomprehensibly fast.

* * *

Back to the starkest of realities -- Laney and I were both burning through the money we had far too quickly. Her savings came from her computer tech days, mine from my one year as a math professor and then teaching surfing

lessons to kids and spunky grandmas on vacation at The Cove.

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

Back to the ground war – Laney, seeing the money drain from her bank account, and inspired by my new financial concerns, began occasionally subbing as a waitress.

She worked less hours than me but made a lot more money, mostly in tips. Kids don't tip surfing teachers very much. Nor do the spunky grandmas. But of course, I don't look like Laney either. Maybe if I had a face that could be on the cover of Vanity Fair Magazine, and eyes that looked like God painted them with sky-colored paint, then I'd get tipped for teaching surfing. Until then... no.

One day as I was finishing up teaching my last surfing lesson of the day, Laney showed up wearing her swimsuit. She held out three twenty-dollar bills and asked me if I was the guy everyone kept telling her was the best surfing instructor on the island. She called me "sir."

I took the money with a "Thank you, ma'am." I played along without breaking the role. It seemed to be what she wanted.

I got her a beginner's board from the shop and laid it on the grass. I taught her the basics for ten minutes until I felt she was ready.

The Cove is perfect for beginners. You can stand up in the ocean two hundred feet out and your head will still be

above water. The waves are a foot or two high. They come in like clockwork, then break gently onto shore hundreds of feet later. I helped her catch a few beginning waves by pushing her board forward at just the right moment. She was getting frustrated, falling a second after she stood up, over and over again. I told her not to worry, it was really hard to learn to balance on the first day. But she was getting flustered, losing confidence.

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

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

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

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

"Do you help all your female students like this?"

"Only the ones that can't stand up on their board after ten rides."

I saw a decent wave coming, slipped off the board, and held it still, "Okay. Get up! *Get up!* Go, girl!" I gave her a perfectly timed push.

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

“Bend your knees!” I screamed. But she was too ecstatic to listen, or care.

She finally fell backwards off the board. She came up shouting, “Woohoo!” Her arms were raised in victory.

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

“Smith...Brah Smith.”

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

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

We swam around like eels, chasing each other from wave to wave, until the sun was gone.

We were lucky that night. Sometimes sunsets are just a blinding yellow ball falling below a cloudless blue horizon—like a lone king reminding his subjects he’ll be back to overpower the sky again tomorrow. But this night, a few cirrus clouds that looked like vapor trails drifted across the West Maui mountains and reflected luminescent streaks of orange and purple. The sun bowed gracefully beneath the horizon like a beloved queen, emitting, at the last moment, a soft green light. It burst from the edge of the sea like a photo flash.

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

Night arrived, pouring ink over the sky’s canvas.

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

“And now, ma’am, may I assist you to my sun-warmed chariot to get you home for your evening bath?” I whispered.

“Please, Brah, straight away.”

The chariot was a flatbed truck I’d bought for \$700 a few months back – days after the previous \$700 chariot fell apart.... As with all junkers, this one had its quirks. The passenger door didn’t open, for instance. So Laney had to climb in from the driver’s side. The passenger side window was cracked -- well, smashed actually.

Whenever I looked over at Laney, her profile was backlit in a halo of fractured glass that looked like a silvery spider web. She was the beautiful golden butterfly that escaped.

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

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

“This truck reminds me of people,” she said, still shivering, arms folded to keep herself warm.

“Okay....” I sighed. I knew some Laney-ism was coming.

“Broken down, smashed up, unreliable, barreling through the world without stopping at lights because there

are no brakes, all of its insides about to crack open and fall apart and die... but somehow the adventure stumbles on, until the road ends somewhere."

"And what happens when the road ends?"

"Well, we'll see. There's no end in sight this evening."

We usually had to decide whose apartment to go back to. We both had a change of clothes and a toothbrush at each place. But my place was where we went to have sensual time, and sleep in. It was closer to the shops for breakfast, and nearer to a small local store to replenish our groceries. Her place was where we would both write, usually in separate rooms. She would practice piano. We would read separately. Sometimes try to meditate together.

Tonight she wanted to go to her place. She felt "something odd" coming on. Often that meant a new song was brewing. If she started to write I would sometimes think up a reason to go back to my place to give her space. She would rarely ask me to leave, but when I offered she would rarely ask me to stay.

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

When she began scribbling down some words in her notepad, I took my leave.

Chapter 34

Laney

My music has taken on another dimension of power lately. I've been getting more technically proficient at the piano. And my intuitive knowledge on the guitar has been coming back to me, even though I don't play it as much as I'd like -- I keep getting stronger rhythmically, and my left hand knows where to go. I'm exploring open tunings.

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

I also wrote a song on piano a few days ago called: "The Messenger." *It's not about Gabe!* It's about a beautiful black bird that comes to warn a town of imminent danger. The only way to save the town is to teach everyone who lived there how to fly. But it takes faith for humans to believe they can fly.

The townsfolk gathered to discuss why they should even try to fly. And why they should listen to a strange bird. They were sure they'd all die trying. By the time they decided to vote on the idea the mountain above the town began to vibrate and shake and all their debating and arguing was washed out to sea while the bird flew away.

Chapter 35

Gabriel

The day we met with Swami at Laney's apartment, he said to us, "Religion can sometimes be a poison disguised as a medicine. Not because a particular religion is the wrong religion. But because the congregation, or the devotees, misread the instructions on the medicine label. They poison themselves with the very thing that was created to help heal them. We need to learn the language the instructions are written in."

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

Laney and I were picked up at the Oakland airport by Rob and his girlfriend, Colleen. By the time we were on our way to the hotel, night had arrived. The conversation was lighthearted from the start, Rob made sure of that. I could tell Laney liked them both.

The Oakland freeway was a blur of asphalt and blinding car lights. Heavy trucks were rattling by us at eighty miles an hour.

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

We pulled into a huge dirt parking lot packed with cars. Then we hiked up a narrow path for about a quarter

mile until we came to a large structure on a hill, echoing with live Indian music.

The huge wooden building in front of us was Amma's central meeting place -- the San Ramon ashram. A banner over the ashram entrance said: "Embracing The World."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She hugged Laney for a longer time than me, rubbing her back with her small dark hands, rocking her ever so slightly, whispering, "My darling, my darling, my darling." She looked at Laney and tears formed in Amma's eyes. As if she were seeing an old friend, a sad friend. It was almost as if she hadn't seen Laney for a hundred years. And as if she knew all the dark thoughts that burdened her.

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

Laney burst into tears.

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

When we got to the side of the hall I shook my head in amazement and started to laugh, but Laney continued crying.

The crying got more intense as the minutes passed. We were led to the side of the stage to watch Amma hug others. One of Amma's helpers saw Laney crying and brought her even closer to Amma, to watch and stay in her presence.

Laney cried on and off for the rest of the time we were in the hall, as we saw a thousand people, then a thousand more, get hugged, and whispered to, and given a chocolate kiss before leaving her embrace.

Chapter 36

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

Breaking News: Truck Driver Performs Heart Surgery on Doctor

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

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

“One night she was driving down the highway to work when her car broke down in the rain. She pulled over to the side of the highway. This was before the invention of cell phones, so she sat in her car considering what to do next. At that moment an old beat-up truck pulled up next to her car and a very large unshaven man dressed in old tattered clothes walked toward her. He offered his help. But he looked shady. She tried to quickly assess the situation. He looked like a bum, or maybe a thief. She realized he might be after her money, or worse.

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

warm inside my truck.' Feeling like she had no choice she got in the front of the truck where the heater was blowing, and he closed the door behind her. She then watched him work for over half an hour in the pounding rain until, to her surprise, he got her car to start. When she got out of the truck to thank him she offered him all the money in her wallet, three hundred dollars. She insisted that he take it, saying it was the least she could do. But he refused any of it, saying he did not help her expecting money. 'I stopped to help you and didn't expect anything in return,' he said. 'Accepting your money would ruin my intention.'

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

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

"But a few minutes later the waitress doubled over in pain. The doctor could see she was going into labor. So she insisted that the waitress get in her car.

"Taking her by the hand, she guided her carefully in the passenger seat and drove her to the hospital. Once there she escorted her through a maze of nurses and administrators, telling them it was an emergency, and took her directly to an

empty birthing room. Then she helped another doctor deliver the baby, which came quickly.

"After the baby and mother were safe and the baby lay in the mother's arms, the doctor quietly paid the hospital bill for her. She then came back to be by the new mother's side to look after her.

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

"While the doctor left the room to get the new mother some food, the husband rushed into the room, having come straight from the bank. She told her husband the story of this amazingly kind doctor who had possibly saved her life, and the life of their baby, and who then paid all the hospital bills without asking for anything in return. The husband was amazed.

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

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

Chapter 37

Laney

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

Black birds warning of danger unless we all learn how to fly. It was trying to steer my soul far above the volcanic madness of my mind, and this world.

The foreshadow was about my time with Amma. Being around this person felt like a re-merging with my *real* mother – not my blood mother. My *real* mother. I can't even explain what that means.

And now, I am faced with a heavy choice.

One I would never wish to make.

Because I have a dark secret I have never told Gabe. A terrible truth that would crush his spirit and quite possibly even end his feelings of love for me.

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

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

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

I don't want to start a family. Families are deadly....

I didn't even want to be anyone's girlfriend or lover, but I just couldn't resist him. I wanted to see if I could fly, *just one time*, but he captured my heart in the most unexpected way, and I wanted to fly like that again and again.

I know how lucky I've been to experience love with him. Of that, there is no doubt.

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

My mother unplugged me from the evolutionary grid. I've wandered so far off that trail it would take me a lifetime just to get back to where she threw me off.... I don't want to create another orphan.

Gabe and I have been living on a shooting star. But there is a lie that's come between us now. I don't want children. And I know he does.

I accidentally read it in his notebook one night. He wanted me to read something he'd just written. He handed me his journal and the page just fell open by chance in front of me:

"I want to have a child with you someday and then set it free to be a force for the good in this world! I want to be part of a real family for once, not an adopted one."

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

When he is a father someday, with somebody else, he will no longer be an orphan in this life; not ever again.

He needs to find someone someday who has his future in mind. Who wants the whole thing – *everything* that sane people want.

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

I feel something swirling around in my stomach.

I feel me slipping away from this time-bubble I've been in with him.

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

Chapter 38

Gabriel

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

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

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

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

I glided on my back for a while and looked up at the sun with my eyes closed and inhaled deeply. It was good to be home.... I wiped a few strands of hair out of my face... and then I felt something odd happen.

I thought of Laney and suddenly felt lonely. For her. What was she going through? Her mood had darkened lately. I wanted to help her. Because I didn't feel

disconnected from the world anymore. Laney was my connection... to everything. I wanted her to get back to that feeling with me.

I was determined to get to the bottom of her discontent, and get us back to wave riding -- surfing in this cool wildness. Waves washing us clean every day, thousands of miles from the madness.

Chapter 39

Laney

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

A few days ago I met up with the man who hosted Swami's visit, John Allen. He connected me to a woman who had been to Amma's ashram in India and lived there for a time. The woman said the ashram is located in a province of India called Kerala, on the Malabar Coast.

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

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

"I guess I'm becoming curious," I replied.

Chapter 39

Laney

I stand between the safe shore and a tidal wave, where crossroads live, where the pretty games end, and the choices become all too clear.

Over there, lovers kiss and laugh and surf, and *over here*, I know that after the wave crashes and recedes, whatever remains living will crawl away just barely alive. With no hope left for the future. They will all crawl away in opposite directions.

If I were away from here, at the ashram in India, with space and time to think, to learn about myself... if I could just find a way to purge this lonely constant brooding – purge it – that is what happened for one instant when Amma hugged me... that was the very first time my mind was clear and happy, teary with joy, full, complete, because suddenly, *there was nothing to worry about.*

Chapter 41

Laney

I realize Amma is not a God, not an angel, not a good fairy, not a fortune teller, not a medicine woman. She wasn't trying to redirect, or change me, or convince me of anything. She is just a mirror. She showed me in her ten second embrace where pure love existed inside me. It felt like one quick tearful explosion of joy. She hugged me without trying to make me a better person, without trying to make me happier, without trying to change my future. She hugged me for no reason, without reason! That's what made it so intense.

The irrationality in that moment scrambled my cynicism and coldness. Like what happened to the doctor in the story. I couldn't help but feel it.

At the ashram, maybe I would have to face myself, but this time without fear. I might learn how to finally forgive there. Forgive mother. And father. And forgive myself for the way I am.

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

Gabriel *is* the sweetest person imaginable. He has a future. I know he does. He deserves a future, where he gets to become whole.

And so do I.

Chapter 42

Gabriel

“That's just great, Laney. *India!* With no idea of when, or if, you might come back!”

I continued shouting at her, “Maybe you'll stay until you've become one with nothingness! Maybe you'll learn how to love *everybody* and nobody all at the same time! Maybe you'll live for a thousand years and become the 'Saint of Perpetual Confusion.' Or maybe you'll find your true calling, decide to come back, and start a school for the heartless and eternally fucked-up. Teach them how to really take it to the next level!”

Anger. *Rage!* I felt like she had just given me a hand grenade, pulled the pin, and walked away.

And an orphan was reborn, as an orphan often is, amidst darkness and chaos.

“You want to go to India to meditate, and study scriptures, and serve the poor? Okay, I get it. These sound like very noble things. But I will tell you what this is really about, Laney, whether you want to hear it or not. This is about recreating the nightmare your mother injected into you. *You're repeating it*, not changing it! You're immortalizing her by leaving me -- the only person on Earth who loves you. Just like she left your father, and then left you. Your mother has finally won!”

She shot back, “My mother ran away for her own selfish reasons! She was living a lie, and finally got sick of it.”

"Your mother injected darkness into everyone who tried to love her. It tore your father apart like a bullet to the head. And now you're aiming the same gun at me."

"*You're the one aiming the gun, Gabe!* You're trying to blackmail me into staying with you by sanctifying living on the surface of life. Mr. Spiritual Scientist. You want to just keep surfing above it all. You're an *orphan*, Gabe. Why the hell would you ever want to dig into all that shit? *I get it.* But still..."

"You get *what?* That, unlike you, I'm a spiritual fake?"

"No, you're *worse!* You're a spiritual coward! You're afraid to do the work."

"Laney, being with you feels like spirituality is supposed to feel -- beautiful; happy! Isn't that the end goal of all the spiritual work? *We can already have that!*"

"But where does that lead us in the long-run?"

"There is no long-run! There's just us, together. *Here.* That's all."

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

"Okay, yes! *Yes!* Of course, I wanted to have *everything* with you! Is that what you want to hear?"

"No! Because, *I don't want that!* I love you. I do. But I don't want that kind of life with you. Because I don't want that kind of life with *anyone.* I have no capacity to even consider it."

"You're chickening out, Laney! You're destroying what you helped create with me, what we became together. In the name of what? Self-healing? Compassion? You think

compassion and peace of mind is *out there*, across the ocean, on the other side of the world, in India, in isolation, living in an ashram? *What would Amma say to that?* You think she would tell you that's real love? Running away? Do you think she would say you can use isolation and meditation to build a wall to keep the world at arm's length? When you finally help someone who is hurt, or homeless, make sure it's *no one you know!* Or you might actually feel something."

"Look, Gabe, love is something that comes more naturally to you."

"Really?"

"Yes, compared to me! When we met, you at least seemed comfortable with it, understood it in theory. But I...."

"Love isn't theory, Laney. It's *here!* It's *us!* You *feel* it. I know you do. There's nothing more to understand about it."

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

She said it stoically, but then started to cry, "And I'm sorry. I really am. But I have to do this for myself. *Please* forgive me. You are the last person in the world I would ever want to hurt. When you're near me, it feels like sunshine filtering in. We surf over the days. It's beautiful, it's fun. But when I'm alone, my mind goes to all these places you can't see. You have the potential to become a whole person someday. Me, I don't think so, not now, not yet, there are just too many disconnected pieces."

Chapter 43

Laney

He told me he didn't believe me, then stormed out of my apartment. I went to his place late that night. I knocked on his door softly, like I always do. My secret code to let him know it's me.

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

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

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

The only thing he left behind was his cell phone. There was no way to contact him, no way to know where he was.

He left me with the memory of his tears. But over time I would remember the rest. I had to move on now.

He would have been pulling at my heart from three blocks away until I left. I'm not sure I would have had the strength to do what I needed to do for myself if he had stayed. Gabriel had been kind enough to make it easy for me.

I left for India the following week.

Chapter 44

Gabriel

Time and time again, I tried to persuade myself to get on a plane to India and join her. She was there at Amma's ashram at this very instant. Maybe we could learn things together. But the only reason I would go would be to eventually beg her to come back with me. I knew that clearly.

I was too trapped in the physical, sensual world. Too addicted to this new idea that love actually existed. I had temporarily come to believe that it wasn't an illusion, wasn't just a word. I let myself be tricked by my senses, and my desire see love as something good.

Was I now simply afraid of falling back into my *self* and finding nothing of value there? Yes, of course. Of course.

Now that I'd had a taste of her — the taste of her salty ocean skin after our evening swims, and of her mouth, it had the literal taste of honey and milk with a hint of peach -- some combination of these things at different moments, different times when I kissed her.

And from tasting all those things, and going deeper still, I had been ecstatically merged into an "us."

I fantasized about our child -- having *her* eyes, growing up strong and street smart. And Laney and I growing old together, the three of us, or four, or five! I could smell the holy perfume of two souls merging and growing, and the smell of a beautiful family meal cooking on the stove on a

holiday night. So many things I had yet to experience with her, or anyone.... Orphan dreams.

I breathed in our time together. And I heard her songs, which ripped brooding holes in my brain. And I heard her stories, as she pried her own memories loose. Which, in turn, moved me closer to her so I could forget mine.

Now that I had tasted and felt all of that – I needed to find a way to stay alive.

Chapter 45

Laney's journey to Kerala was difficult. Much of what she saw on the way there was not pretty, not spiritually obvious, not as she had imagined, but instead filled with desolation, people poorer than she had ever understood poverty could be, and pollution so thick it was hard to breathe.

But Kerala itself was beautiful. Amma's pink ashram was nestled against the edge of the Indian Ocean. The grounds of the ashram were buzzing with activity, all ultimately aimed at serving others. Her instincts about Amma were right. There was nothing fake or dark here. All the volunteer work was focused on Amma's dozens of worldwide charities.

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

Laney felt lost at first. She was accepted and honored for coming, given shelter, and then put right to work helping send medical supplies to Amma's non-profit hospital in Cochin.

She felt the loneliness of not having an identity anymore. Her music and songs made no sense here. There was no piano to play. No guitar. She put her voice away, reserving only the broken edges of it for chanting.

As much as everyone seemed to care for her as a human being, and fed her, and made sure she knew where the meditation hall was, no one knew her, or cared if she stayed or left. Staying or leaving was her personal choice, and no concern of anyone else's.

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

After months of doubt and restlessness, she felt a strange inner joy slowly growing in her. Time was altered. She was able to understand with a clarity she never experienced before, that people hardly ever do anything *to you*, they just do what they do. There was nothing personal about it. That included her parents. They were just being themselves. Their craziness wasn't aimed at her. Nor was it caused *by* her. Nor was she destined to be who they were.

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

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

One day she fell into a deep reverie, fully awake, meditating on the darkness and sorrows of the world. She let all of the darkness wash over her like a tidal wave – the nightmares of war, the Nazis, the ugliness of the Iraq war, the mean-spiritedness of so many world leaders. The

betrayal of trust. Then she thought of all the people who had wronged her in her life, including her mother... and with great effort, with a tremendous leap of inner faith, she forgave them all. Because there was no other sane choice to make *except* to forgive them and let go.

She learned how to surrender back into the present moment.

For precious occasional moments she felt what it was like to be free of *everything*. But then she was pulled back down to earth again. It was time to join the others and get back to work.

Chapter 46

Laney

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

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

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

Chapter 47

Gabriel

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

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

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

"No."

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

"Obviously not, if you have to ask."

He waited for me to say something more. So I told him.

First, I went back to Berkeley to see my adopted parents, who I found out after ringing their doorbell, had moved without letting me know where they went.

"Like father, like son," he intoned.

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

"Gabe, I think you should try to contact her, just once, just to see if maybe her thinking has changed. It's not easy being there. The work is hard. Constant selfless service. Kerala is the hub of all of Amma's charitable work. Plus there's hours a day of meditation. The heat is endless. And I hear the rooms are like mouse holes. Mats for beds. And Gabe, I want to let you know, people do couple up there, with Amma's blessing. Amma is not telling people to live a life of celibacy. Only she and the swamis are renunciates. I am telling you this not to make you think she would ever want to get involved with someone else, but to say that she will see that being with Amma, and being with you, are not mutually exclusive. Amma loves children and honors family

life. If Laney sees Amma accepting and welcoming couples and family life, maybe at some point she'll reconsider what she really wants. The ashram eventually finds a way to kick out all but the most ferocious devotees."

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

"How do you know she would kill you again? Maybe your assassin is actually making you stronger, along with herself."

Chapter 48

Gabriel

I decided, at Rob's urging, to go to the San Ramon ashram to see Amma during her next visit there. This was one of her major stops on her annual U.S. summer tour. San Ramon was only a 45-minute drive from Berkeley.

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

But I also wanted to seek out the swami we had met in Maui. I really had nothing specific to talk to him about. I was just following an instinct.

This was also my way of saying farewell to California. My plan was to go to Amma's event, then hop on a plane (with the money I'd made from a few odd jobs over the last six months) and go back to live in Maui permanently. I came to realize that was my true home. I missed the beaches. I wanted to surf the waves again. Plus, the thought of living through a rainy winter in Berkeley was not appealing in my present state of mind.

As I walked up the sloping path to the ashram hall, my footsteps slowed. I saw Swami in his red robe, talking to a few people who surrounded him. He smiled at me as I joined the circle of people.

"Maui, yes?" he smiled.

I nodded and smiled back politely, amazed at his ability to recognize me after so long, especially knowing he had seen and talked to hundreds of thousands of people since.

"Laney's friend. The Laney at the ashram in Kerala?"

He knew her by name now.

He saw through my silence to the pain. He nodded. "Would you like to take a walk with me? I have to be back inside the hall in an hour, but I need to stretch my legs."

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

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

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

"What is it like at the ashram in India?" I hoped I wasn't interrupting him. It sounded like a stupid question when I said it aloud.

"It's not an easy life there. It's not for everyone."

He said no more. I had a feeling I shouldn't say anything relating to Laney directly. It didn't seem appropriate. Moreover, he was based in the U.S. and visited the Kerala ashram infrequently. It was doubtful he knew much about her in any personal way.

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

He chuckled, "No!"

"Even for just a few seconds?"

He laughed harder. "No!"

He slowed his pace and looked at me: "But that's not the point of meditation. It's not the goal. Amma is an enlightened being, but she is not something, or someone, we

can aspire to be like. Believe me. She was just born like that. She just exists as she is."

"I've been meditating for only a few years, but still, nothing extraordinary ever seems to come of it."

"The fact that you are meditating despite what you just said is in itself extraordinary." Swami exclaimed. "Good for you! And Amma says, 'never underestimate the progress you are making.' You know, because it's usually very subtle. It's like being aware of the air we breathe, and then asking it 'what now?'"

I laughed. That was exactly what it felt like sometimes.

He became silent for a while, then said quietly. "You love the girl."

"Yes. I did. Before." I stopped myself from saying more.

"Love cannot end. Not really. Not the essence of it."

"I understand." But I thought to myself, this feeling I have for her *must* end. I can't handle it as *essence*.

Then he said. "Let her lead the way."

I absolutely *didn't* get this point at all.

He realized it, so he added, "If you can forgive her, and allow her to be a permanent part of you, she can lead you to deeper places."

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

"The girl, she is your teacher. I mean actually, your thoughts and memories of the girl are your inner teacher. You get to choose how to frame the images. You can use your deep longing for her to go deeper into yourself, because the love you had with her was real. Was it not?"

I tried to digest what he was saying. But then he added, "Or, you can become darkened from it, for no logical

reason. I see you are at a mental and emotional crossroads -- one way leads to true love, and the other to attachment."

"I'm confused," I said.

He stopped walking again to face me directly. "People can be attached to money, or a car. But that's not love. And, if you don't allow her to teach you the difference, then you will be carried further out into the darkness, because love to you will become as mundane as your desire for the car. You want it. You need it. You have to have the Mercedes, not the Volkswagen. And you're angry if you can't have it. And depressed. You deserved the Mercedes. But someone else bought it the day before. And so on. And that kind of thinking would be *your* fault, not hers. So which is it? Love, or attachment?"

"I think I still love her...."

"Of course you do. But what did you learn from that love? Did you learn *to* love? Or did you learn to mistrust change?"

"Both. I guess I loved her too much."

"Or, maybe not *truly* enough."

"I can never love the way you are describing it, Swami. Maybe sometimes, when I look up at the stars, every once in a while I get some mystical sense of.... "

"Way out there, where Stephen Hawking lives. Okay. But that kind of love is just observing energy held together by mathematical equations, or a mystery that can't harm you. You felt something deeper after meeting her -- what was that? The choices we make each second, in our own minds, teach us all we will ever know about connecting with love in this lifetime. God, stars, love -- they are inseparable -- they will all lead you to the same conclusion.... Yours."

Chapter 49

Laney

I remember the first time I entered the main courtyard of Amma's Kerala ashram, hot and sweaty, with my backpack pulling at my hips, I felt a warm buzzing feeling.

I have experienced this a number of times since. It's not really explainable. Words make it sound quite insane, actually. Let's just say I felt I had come to a place that was unworldly.

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

At first blush, ashram living seemed very quiet. A 4:30 a.m. meditation would be followed by charitable work -- seva -- until nightfall, interspersed with private meditation throughout the day.

But as the days went on, I was put to work more and more, and given more serious responsibilities. I was becoming an integral part of Amma's version of Santa's Workshop.

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

One job I had every Saturday was taking care of the ashram's children. I couldn't understand why Amma would give me that job. The irony was obvious. I wondered if it was obvious to her as well. I was very resistant at first and tried to get out of it, but the staff insisted I would be good at it, and reminded me that Amma suggested it, and after all, it would only be for two days a week. I taught them English, and led them in simple chants.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I said, "Yes, the food is much spicier at the California ashram! I like it better that way. But it's still delicious here."

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

I smiled, "It's great! Big crowds when Amma shows up! Lots of hippies dancing around! It's a celebration."

Nadasri was silent for a while, then she whispered: "And, I like the smell of the incense here." She looked straight at me, "But I also like you, Laney. You're really nice. I'm glad to have met you. I feel a special spirit connection with you. I think we were meant to meet for some reason.

That sounds a bit crazy when I say it out loud. I'm sorry. But it's a strong feeling I have."

"It's okay. But, what do you think the reason might be?" I felt a sudden chill come over me.

"I think I know. But I'm not sure I should say it."

"Please do!" I pleaded. "I won't judge you in any way, no matter what you say."

"Alright. Well, honestly, I just have a sense there's something else you're meant to do, in your life. Not here."

"Really? What's that?"

"Oh, I really don't know...."

I'm not sure why I asked her at that very moment, but I said, "What does your Indian name mean? Does Nadasri have an English translation?"

"Yes," she replied. "One who brings auspiciousness through sound."

I was a bit stunned. "Do you play music?"

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

Chapter 50

Laney

These “coincidences” that seem to happen at the ashram all the time, I try to just let them come and go. I have no way of knowing what is really going on here. It’s like I’m being tossed around in a dreamy non-dream. I’ve let go of the controls.

Sometimes when I’m walking back to my room after my morning meditation at six a.m., one bird singing from the rooftop, the sun just beginning to erase the blackness with a hint of gray, I think back to Maui, to the other side of the planet from here. There were hundreds of birds singing outside his window. Early morning, and at sunset. They were like a choir – singing a hundred different verses of the same song all at once. Like prayerful chants echoing out from the trees.

Chapter 51

Laney

My six-month anniversary of coming to the ashram was a watershed time. I was meditating and chanting for hours every night... always waiting to find another magical opening, another key to set me free. Freer.

But lately I felt exhausted, mentally and physically. I'd hit a wall.

Many wonderful things had happened to me here. Great things. Mystical things. But a deeper reality began to set in, and it wasn't helping move me into a more peaceful place.

There seemed to be only a Great Maze leading to endless trap doors, until they too, one at a time, turned to mind-dust and tumbled away. True emptiness. And not all good emptiness.

I would turn my face to the sun, only to find more mazes in each beam of light, temporary answers that come, that reveal more trap doors.

Notes scribbled in pencil on a small notepad to remember the maze I just made it through, they are like little poems about traps. Which then become word-traps. Ego traps. I should throw the notes into a fire each night.

But I resist. They're *my* notes. They're like little poems that remind me of... an inner voice starts laughing at me:

"Why do you write anything down in the first place? It's *all* ego. Every thought is ego. Why not see all thoughts for what they are, once and for all? Child sculptures. Clay worms.

"We think can *discover* something, we can be a Rodin, or a Camille Claudel of the thought-world. No. Clay worms is all we will ever create."

These particularly unkind thoughts keep circling around me like a vulture.

Swami warned me not to look for meaning when I meditate. Just *be the meaning*. Day by day.

But what does that mean *exactly*? Why don't these people just write an instruction manual?

A voice eerily like my mother's starts to scream at me,

"Meaning is not here! You can't 'be the meaning' either, because meaning doesn't exist. It's a ghost in a haunted house! Like you.

"You are looking for perfect endings that complete the circle of you, little girl? That's not going to happen! Ever. There is no circle. There is no completion. Didn't I teach that to you before I left you? You are like a slave hoping to find freedom, until you become even more of a slave to the idea of finding freedom! You're like a deaf person trying to hum the songs that sparrows sing.

"Did you ever notice that 'meaning' has the word 'mean' in it? There is a very good reason for that. The reason is, the fact is, well, I'll let you find that out in time, like I did.... And you will find out. You can't hide in this place forever. And you can't hide the me in you forever either. Amma can't save you. I'm still here. STILL HERE!"

My response to my mother's words:

*You are just as much of an illusion as freedom is.
You can no longer touch me, or enslave me.
You have lost the power to even get me to respond to what
you just said.*

As soon as I thought *that* thought, and knew it to be true, her voice fell away, screaming down through one of the trap doors we were standing next to. Not all trap doors are bad.

Her words turned into a puff of smoke as she disappeared. I started to even forget what she said.

I slept well that night.

And in the morning, after meditation, the sun rose pink again over the ashram gates.

Chapter 52

Laney and Nadasri were having a conversation at their favorite place to rest and chat -- a shaded wall near the entrance. They were eating a small lunch they had packed. It was mid-June. Amma was away – in San Ramon on this day, in fact.

Suddenly Laney spotted a child in the courtyard. He was a western boy, speaking to his parents in English. The parents seemed distraught.

He was awkward, geeky looking, with thick glasses and very short, almost fully shaved red hair.

Nadasri saw Laney observing the boy.

“That boy is very sick,” Nadasri offered. “They came from America for Amma’s prayers a few months ago. Now they live in town and come here sometimes to meditate together.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Laney asked.

“I don’t know. But I don't think he'll be alive much longer unless some miracle happens.”

Laney was wearing a white sari, her golden hair falling across one side of her face. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She tried to wipe them away before Nadasri observed them.

Laney looked like an angel sculpted in silhouette, from where the boy was standing. He stared intently at her for a moment. He became curious about the look on her face, so he came directly over to where she sat:

“Are you a friend of Amma’s?” he asked happily.

“Yes,” she laughed.

Laney hesitated while the boy remained silent. He was still staring at her with his wide sunken eyes. "Are you a hug maker too?"

"Yes, I can be... Do you want a hug?" Laney asked.

He walked into her arms immediately, no hesitation. She noticed his muscle tone was soft and spongy. He was thin and cold to the touch.

Laney closed her eyes and tried to hug the boy the way Amma would have.

She pulled him close to her body and waited in the silence, not knowing what to do or say next.

His voice was muffled in the fabric of her shoulder. He whispered, "I've been a little scared... about dying."

Laney rocked him and held him closer. She felt a sudden jolt -- an electric current of pure love pulsed through her body. She began shaking from the power of it.

She thought of saying, "Everyone is scared of dying." But that wasn't right. *That wasn't the answer! That's not what he needed from her.*

She felt him begin to cry. His face turned hot.

She silently screamed out to God, "*Please, please help me! Please tell me what to say!*"

Then, in a moment of supreme clarity and calm, she knew.

She felt a stillness come over her. She let out a long sigh and kissed the top of his head. Then she held his face in her hands until they were staring into each other's eyes, inches apart.

"Do you want to know a secret about dying?" she asked.

"Mmm hmmm," he nodded his head, with tears streaming down his face.

Laney whispered softly, "*There's nothing to worry about!*"

This is what she knew to be true in that moment.

The boy's face softened. He looked up at her with his brown eyes brightening into a wet glimmer. He cocked his head slightly and smiled a crooked-toothed smile. "I guess that's true."

But now Laney started to cry, although it was the last thing she wanted him to see. She held him tightly against her chest again, so he wouldn't see the tears, but he felt her weeping.

"Why are *you* crying?" he asked.

"Children make me cry sometimes," she said.

"Want some?" he said.

"Some *what?*" She wiped her tears away with her sleeve.

"Children," he said indifferently. "Want some? We're pretty nice!"

"That's true," she said.

He stared into her eyes, waiting for her answer.

"Maybe, maybe someday. We'll see."

Chapter 53

Gabriel

I remember a beautiful walk Laney and I took in Hana last year.

We decided to try to speak only about what we saw right at the moment we experienced it. No words or thoughts about the past or future. Or about us. Or the state of the world.

We wanted to experience “the top” again – the high state we were in at the sky's edge, atop Mt. Haleakala. A place where thoughts stopped, where understanding the beauty of the present moment became an internalized thing.

We began to point out the beautifully strange angle of a tree limb, or the sounds of gravel mixed with sand crunching beneath our shoes, and how small, yet complete, each piece of gravel was unto itself.

We stopped for far longer than we normally would to look at details -- the flowing of the stream -- watching the ripples momentarily alter the image of the shapes of the stones beneath it. And the leaves being carried like heart-shaped boats downstream.

"Leaf boats." she whispered.

"Stream sailing." I whispered back.

We listened to the water, how it changed sound when parted by a boulder in the middle of its path.

We stopped to marvel at the strange but brilliant activities of insects, working hard in organized lines between two shadowed rocks. The entirety of the mini-

ecosystem we were observing seemed like a universe of highly coordinated activity.

Then, without saying a word to each other, suddenly knowing speech itself was pulling us away from the direct experience, we both dropped into a state of wordless observation – the colors, the river rocks, the sky of whipped cloud, the smell of salt and seaweed as we passed the entrance to a black sand beach -- all took on a life of their own.

We came to a bamboo forest -- a thousand thin white poles alive and clacking together intermittently in the wind. Like living wind-chimes.

At the end of the trail, there was a waterfall crashing off a cliff hundreds of feet high.

The memory of the waterfall might fade one day. But my memories of Laney were endless. She was like a stream that had become my lifeblood.

The memory of her existence, even now, a year later, many months after she left, made me feel more alive.

This is what Swami meant.

This is what I knew had to happen -- the merging of memories until it formed love at its core.

Otherwise I would eventually drown under the weight of trying to forget.

Chapter 54

Dear Laney,

I hope your internal adventure is taking you to beautiful places and keeping you safe. I am here, back in my old apartment in Maui. I surf during the day. I hold you close to me each night.

I want to tell you what I've learned as a spiritual scientist since you've been gone:

I've come to a single conclusion, finally.

Something amazing is going on, Laney. Something amazing. Far bigger than this world. Despite the meaninglessness that has haunted me, and surely haunts all the orphans that have come to be known as the human race – we have all inherited something beautiful.

Scientifically, the high probability is that in the end, the Earth will wander off and blow away as the sun dies.

But, if there is one thing that I ABSOLUTELY DON'T CARE ABOUT, and refuse to worry about in this lifetime, it's that! Or what happens after that.

“Don't ask that question!” -- Swami's answer to my original question --that is the greatest answer humankind could ever hear. It's the answer to so many questions, and worries, and fears.

Anyway, here is my message to you, as I watch the sun rising this morning, and I think of another day without you; and at the same time feel you here beside me, as you will always be:

*The sunrise isn't just atmosphere.
No one understands what the beginning means.*

*Sunsets aren't just the end of days.
Not all endings end.*

* * *

Gabriel held out no hope of a reply.
He wasn't even sure she would ever receive it.
Sure enough weeks passed, no response came.

Chapter 55

Pulsing stars, intensely bright, shined outside his open window each night. The moon sometimes appeared like a beacon over the ocean.

His bed was next to the window, the same bed Laney slept in with him for so many nights.

A childhood memory flashed by -- a young boy lost at a carnival that was closing down and getting ready to move on to the next town.

Tents were being dismantled. Rides were being folded into their banged-up metal beds. Night was coming; the breeze was turning into a chilly wind.

The boy was looking for his adopted parents. They were lost in conversation with a couple they knew. He had wandered off unnoticed. He half-hoped they would forget about him and leave him there, cold and lonely as he may have been. He was ready to break away from them, even then. He had no true mother to connect him to warmth, or compassion, and no true father to teach him about the world outside.

He would have to teach himself those things.

As he returned from this reverie, his eyes refocused.

He looked out and upwards, and felt the immensity of a million stars blazing -- they seemed to have crept closer to his window ledge.

He took a deep breath. His mind slowed down. He felt Laney's presence deepen his mood. An intense warmth

awoke in him. He saw her face so clearly, and felt in that one moment all the love they had shared. They were connected through time and starlight all the way to this place.

He felt compassion for her life, her choices – she was his orphaned other.

He forced himself to keep his heart connected to her image now, seeking more, *beyond* the pain and irreconcilable emptiness.

What unfolded was a surety – that the love was real. She loved him. Even now.

How did he get to this starlit place from the empty run-down carnival's end where he had existed for so long?

Through her.

He imagined seeing far out into space, far beyond his present vision: a universe of stars appeared, shaped like a bird with its wings spread. It was flying away, uncaged, expanding at the speed of light.

Chapter 56

Just before midnight, half-asleep, Gabriel imagined a small bird landing on his window ledge. A visitor, he thought. Maybe it's brought me a message.

As he held his arm out straight, like a perch, and waited quietly, his reverie was broken by someone softly knocking at his door.

The End

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