

Shelby's Time

~ by Gary Marks

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Preface

My current theory, as I sit in a county jail cell, is that I travelled back in time into this life. But I can't remember how far in the future I came from, or why I came back here.

My sense is that I was sent here on purpose, to learn something essential. Something that was missing. And I may have recently stumbled onto a key -- a revelation I came to while sitting in the back of the police car.

But I can't be sure. I need to retrace the sources of my assumptions carefully.

For all these reasons, this memoir will not be chronological. (If the future was the past, it wouldn't make much sense to try.)

I shall begin in my mid-twenties, and will shuttle back and forth in time until that day at the river.

Rat Town

The Land of Opportunity

I landed my first job in a well-known section of the city they called Rat Town.

Rat Town was so-named because of the large number of both large and small rodents that dwelled within its borders.

Humans are habitual creatures. Therefore, we no longer minded stepping over various piles of garbage when walking down the street. But if one of the piles started to move it would still creep us out. There's no getting used to that.

One block away from my workplace, massive silver highways crisscrossed the sky like metallic latticework created by the insane.

The visuals changed dramatically as I walked into the musty-smelling echoey parking garage. Stringy goopy things left by odd flying creatures hung from the low beams. It reminded me of Halloween without the treats.

Down the dank cement stairwell dim fluorescent lights would be buzzing. This was the entranceway to my private office.

I was the chief accountant for a refrigerator warehouse. I was the *chief* accountant because, being the only accountant on staff, no one could object to the title. I knew it would look good on my resume. I also gave myself an occasional raise commensurate with my imagined responsibilities.

If my job had just been counting the refrigerators on the warehouse floor my job would have been easy. Because after six months working there I never saw a refrigerator leave or enter the building. Some of them were coated in cobwebs.

In the shadowy corners where the rats roamed and skittered and scattered, arachnids had become extinct. Rats eat arachnids. Rats would also eat the cockroaches, crickets, mealworms and ants. So actually, excluding the rats themselves, the warehouse itself was quite clean.

I lived on the south side of Rat Town before I made enough money to move to the north side. One thing I learned living on the south side -- if you leave your apartment to go to work at six a.m. and someone is approaching you while hunched over, talking to himself, with a hoodie covering most of his face, don't ask him if he wants to share a cab.

Seacliff

A Town With No Sea, No Cliffs

I love moving from time-to-time and becoming a completely different person in the eyes of others, until I believe myself to be what new people I meet believe me to be. It may have been one of the reasons I was flung into the past.

My new town was hundreds of miles from Rat Town and all it represented.

The name of the town was Seacliff, although no sea nor cliff lay within its borders. It was topographically as flat as graphene, and landlocked on all sides by a number of towns that didn't lie about their names.

What so many of Seacliff's pleasant but rather dull-eyed citizens failed to realize -- although the mystery would have easily been solved by a trip to the local library -- was that the town was named after a rich settler of yonder-year, Johnathan Joseph Seacliff Jr., son of Johnathan Joseph Seacliff Sr., an oil baron from southern Texas.

It's unknown whether or not Seacliff Jr. saw the irony in naming a flat sea-less town Seacliff. It's also unknown whether he had ever considered naming the town Seacliff Jr. — but I can't imagine it didn't at least cross his mind, from the little I learned about him. Otherwise, how would the future citizens know whether it was named in his honor, or in honor of his father, whom he despised, apparently, for having been extricated from his will.

Seacliff Senior left all of his money to his secret lover instead of his wife and namesake. The lover lived hundreds of miles

away in a desert-like, cactus-wild, hamlet called Rivertown. That's a whole other story I will leave to the infamous Rivertown family.

Anyway, I procured a job as bookkeeper and accountant for the Seacliff Hotel. I bought a nice black suit to look the part.

In the future there are no suits, by the way. Once in awhile, I remember things like that.

The Apparent Nonexistence of Trickster Clowns

Growing up in this, my past life, I am left with a number of salient memories. I remember I could see the rooftops of the neighboring houses from my childhood attic room. They would have looked quite beautiful if we had been living in southern France, or Italy, or Greece. But I grew up in a town where each roof had a rusty antenna and a number of missing tiles.

If I squinted hard enough I could see white bird droppings on the rectangular shingles. Some new. Some old. Many droppings were bespeckled with dark berries. These were gifts, like little bombs, dropped from the ugly birds of spring -- families of crows. They would caw all day and congregate on the telephone poles near evening.

I would stare out my window constantly as a young boy. Daydreaming would become my trademark. I was kidded about it mercilessly. Sometimes it seemed like I was living in a parallel world from my parents. Which I found out later, when I knew more about time, I was.

For example, my father might be in the car and ask me to run up to get his wallet from his bedroom dresser. I would happily go bounding upstairs, wanting to please him, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find it. I would search the entire room, befuddled but determined. I would eventually look under the bed, then dejectedly end up wandering around the bathroom in a final attempt to be thorough. Maybe it was in the shower.

When he turned off the car engine and made his way up the stairs to ask why I was taking so long, and why I was looking in

the shower for his wallet, I would explain to him I'd looked everywhere else.

Without speaking, he would point to his dresser, and, where just a minute ago the wallet was nowhere to be found, there it was in plain view. Thick, brown, leathery, stuffed with ones. There was no mistaking it.

The only assumption I could make at the time was that it was visually under the control of trickster clowns. How else could it appear and disappear at will?

It was around that time that my family realized I was not quite normal. I was a spacey oddball kid that seemed uninterested in school, or making friends, or wallet hunting. They spent many a worried night wondering what to do with me, contemplating how I would survive this world by the time I was twenty. They also kept insisting there were no such thing as trickster clowns.

White Whale Coincidentally Named Alice

In third grade, my parents remarried. But then in fifth grade my mom, Alice, died from something my dad didn't want to talk about. He was either heartbroken, or maybe didn't quite know what happened. Or maybe it was his fault. I never asked.

Anyway, each night, back when I was happily in third grade with two parents, just before bed I would look through a book my mom bought me. It was a book with pictures of different species of dinosaurs and whales, along with your garden variety of elephants, hippos, and rhinoceroses. It was called *The Biggest Animals Ever*.

In fifth grade, I began to have a recurring dream about a white whale that lived in a river.

Perhaps I was unconsciously calling up the anima spirit of Ahab, although I knew nothing of Moby-Dick at the time. Or likely, it came from the future, where white whales flourish. I named the whale, Alice, but I assured myself that it wasn't because Alice was my mother's name. That was a coincidence.

Alice would swim up to me and eat right out of my hand. She was so gentle. Almost like my real mother. She would sit with me on the rocks while I looked through my Big Animal book with her. Sometimes she would read me the descriptions.

She helped me with my math too, and to this day I believe that's one reason why I became interested in numbers and became an accountant. In fact, I think Alice told me she herself was an accountant in a future life. I didn't believe in future lives, or past lives, at the time. But what did I know? I was just a kid.

Anyway, Alice the White Whale was quite beautiful, and I assumed she, herself, would someday be added to *The Biggest Animals Ever* book, because she definitely deserved to be in there.

Proof I was Born in the Future

My mom loved airplanes. She was born in 1936, the year the first commercial flight flew across the Pacific Ocean. When my mom was a teen, airplanes turned into jets. When she was in her late twenties, they turned into rockets. On the thirtieth anniversary of Neal Armstrong landing on the moon, she died.

The last thing she said to me in the hospital, I remember quite clearly, was, "The future is yours, always will be, and always has been. You will do great things when you grow up."

She had the strangest look on her face, almost as if she was revealing a secret no one was ever supposed to tell me.

I realized years later -- when I was *still* not doing great things, and still not growing up -- that the future, apparently already known (possibly because of the quirky nature of quantum time) -- had to be better than my awful boring past and present. But I still wasn't there yet. And time was moving too slowly to just wait it out.

As the Beginning Quickly Ends, the Ending Slowly Begins.
-- *The Future*

Life is filled with apparent coincidences. Exactly twenty years after my mother died, I met Amelia Adams.

Amelia was a stewardess for an airline that had a fleet of very old planes. It carried discount-minded passengers to distant islands like Fiji and Iceland, as well as offering a flight that only departed once a month. It landed on a small secret runway on the island of Tristan da Cunha, which is the most isolated land mass on earth. It was a must-see for some.

I met Amelia at the Seacliff Hotel. She was checking in after a long half-filled flight.

I had wandered out from my little dark hole the hotel called an office to look for a pen that worked. I saw her standing at the reception desk and was shocked by how beautiful she was. Some of it may have been me recognizing her from the future. Some of it may have been the uniform. She looked stunning and statuesque in her dark blue stewardess pants suit. Her dark hair was pulled back tight, so her entire face was framed in light, mostly coming from the hotel's recessed bulbs, which at 150 watts were far too high, but management didn't seem to care. Her TWA-red lipstick, recently re-applied, reminded me of the kind of model runway glamour that you only see in movies, or read about in books. You know those models I'm talking about -- sophisticated, aloof, fleeting, as they make the perfect turn and walk away forever.

But instead, she walked right over to me and smiled, just at the very moment I'd found an entire desk drawer full of pens.

I crumbled to my knees and went unconscious.

Fortunately, being a stewardess, she had been trained to fake some level of compassion when faced with fainting strangers. When I opened my eyes, I saw her face swimming above me.

She took me to the bar to get me some water, but I ordered a chocolate milkshake instead. As a rule, don't order a milkshake in a bar. It's like ordering a burger and fries at a sushi restaurant, or to be culturally fair, Unagi at a Burger King. But because I worked at the hotel, the milkshakes in *this* bar were twenty percent off.

As future recalls, she liked my awkwardness at first impression. I am admittedly shy, and six feet tall to the centimeter. She was also attracted to my unkempt look. I was unshaven that day. I was wearing my one black suit, rumped from eight hours of work, multiplied by months. Many feet below my rumped suitcoat were *my* feet, and the black sneakers I wore, which were kind of a trademark of mine. I wore black Vans or sometimes black Converse high-tops, with my suit. But purely for comfort, not for style.

She also liked the fact that, because I was so extremely nervous, I was content to listen to her continuous chatter regarding the trials and travails of being an airline stewardess without saying a word about myself.

She kept looking at me in an odd way, like, could this really be happening? A man who listens, and smiles at my sarcastic asides about the industry, and empathizes with my uniquely profound emotional pain?

She began to stay at the hotel an average of twice a week. So we would occasionally smile at each other. I swore to myself if she ever invited me again to the hotel bar I would ask her out on a date.

One night called me out of my dungeon and invited me to her room. She said her TV was broken and she wanted me to look at it.

I said, "I'm just an accountant. But I can call maintenance for you."

She said, "But I want you... to." Or did she mean "too?" Did she know how I felt?

I repeated, "So, the TV is broken?"

She said, "Yes, very."

I followed her up to her room on the third floor. Her suitcase was on the suitcase rack, unopened. I went over to the TV and looked behind it. There were a mass of wires tied in knots beneath wads of dust.

"I don't know what the problem is," I said.

"Keep looking."

She came up close behind me until I felt her body brushing against mine.

"Your TV is very nervous," I coughed. "That may be what's causing the jittery lines on the screen...."

When I turned around to face her she kissed me.

Why live with people who don't love you?

So you know how at least one person in every family loves the family dog more than all the other family members? I mean, perhaps in some families *everybody* likes the dog equally. But in many families the dog is introduced as "my brother's dog," or "my daughter's dog."

Well, in my family it was different. Because *no one* loved our dog, or even liked our dog. In fact, none of us could remember why we even got the dog in the first place, unless it was my father's secret way of trying to have us forget about mom dying. But if you think about it, it's an unreasonable expectation to put on a dog.

Other people in the neighborhood would proudly walk their dog, even in the rain. They would stand on the street corner sheepishly waving hello to their neighbor while little Fido shat on the neighbor's front lawn.

In our house, no one ever walked our dog. And when it came time for either me or my sister to feed our dog, it was always, "Hey, not me." Because, as everyone remembers, dog food back in those days was disgusting to smell, touch, see, feel, and even listen to when you're scraping it out of the can with a spoon that no one would ever want to use again.

"Well, not me either," my sister pleaded, "I fed him last week."

"So did I," I protested.

At that point my father would usually overhear us from the living room, slap his newspaper against the side of the sofa with a feathery whack, and scream, "Wait a minute, this dog hasn't been fed since last week? You can't do that! *Feed the dog!*"

"Which one of us are you talking to, dear father?" (We knew not to ask him why *he* hadn't fed the dog.)

"I'm talking to both of you! Now feed the damn dog before it dies right there on the kitchen floor. Because I swear, I'm not carrying him out of here if he dies! That's going to be *your* responsibility."

My sister and I hated responsibilities, so we started arguing about if he *did* die, miniscule as those odds might actually be, which one of us would have to carry him out?

Finally, as a team of two, we shuffled over to the dog food cabinet.

Our dog had its own segregated pantry -- cans of food, an old leash, fresh wash towels for baths he never got, a container of unopened dog soap, and a canister of Flea-Be-Gone, which some fleas mistook as something chemically similar to the fine sea mist found only at the tide's edge of a luxurious coastal beach. They would then, of course, freely copulate and multiply, as many of us would if we found ourselves with a significant other breathing in sea mist on a luxurious coastal beach. You couldn't really blame the fleas.

But on this night, when we opened the cabinet we discovered we had plenty of supplies, but were plumb out of dog food. We would no longer have the honor of shoveling a tin can of brown goop into our dog's plastic yellow bowl, which no one bothered to wash out after it was licked clean. Ever.

My father had to rush down the street in the dead of winter, with darkness quickly descending, with a wind-chill factor well-below ten-below, to get a can of dog food from Quick Stop, which took longer than expected, because he had to wake up the cashier and wait until the guy made himself a cup of instant coffee. By the time Dad came back inside the house and took off his big gray overcoat covered with stalactites, we knew we'd better be standing there in the kitchen with a can opener.

On the first day of spring that followed this dastardly winter, our dear dog ran away and couldn't be found.

Now here is one of the great mysteries in dog folklore. If you hate your dog, hate walking your dog, and don't even want to feed your dog, why would you be driving all around town looking for your dog if it voluntarily wanted to escape?

It's probably thinking, if I can just make it to the pound from here maybe I'll be saved from this living nightmare, not realizing that -- just like people -- if you run away from one nightmare you usually run head-on into another.

So there we were, wasting away a warm-ish spring evening, driving around town with our brights on, searching every alleyway, until, sure enough, there he was, sniffing some other dog's butt outside the town's only movie theater -- just like last time he ran away.

"Dad, leave him alone. He's having a great time. We're only going to hate him until he runs away again."

But no, Dad dutifully parks the car, sneaks up on him, grabs him from behind, and shoos the other dog away with his foot, while our dog is wiggling around in my father's arms like a giant furry fish, squirming, twisting, turning, trying to get free.

All the way home he's shaking his fleas on us and shedding his smelly hair all over the floor of the car, which to be honest, was already bordering on filthy. The last time we cleaned and vacuumed out the car was when my dad's date dropped her take-home spaghetti and clam sauce with extra garlic on the only part of the carpet that didn't have a floor mat.

This was the most perplexing moment -- as soon as we pulled into the driveway, our crazy runaway dog leaps out of the car window and runs toward the front door, barking to get in.

Why? Why didn't he just try to escape again? It's not hard for a dog to outrun a parked car.

Why live with people who don't love you, and are killing you with neglect, when you could be free, roaming around out there in the world, waiting for something better to come in the future?

That was not the last time that question would occur to me.

An Exciting Happy Amelia Story

The Crash

The reason Amelia and I got married, then separated and eventually got divorced, is not particularly complicated.

The passion that existed between us in the beginning felt like what some people, especially actors in movies, call love.

But as Alice the White Whale warned, warmth can wane, wildness can wilt. Wonder can wander into the weird wilderness of boredom, and land you off the screen, sitting in the audience, wondering why you bothered going to see that movie in the first place.

Amelia had flown off to have an affair with a man born in a faraway land.

I always assumed that if someone as sophisticated and beautiful to behold as Amelia were to have an affair it would be with a pilot, an airline captain, during one of her overnight stays in Iceland, where one could blame the cold and the need for someone else's body heat to keep from freezing to death. After all, there were many fine looking young captains freshly minted from the ranks of the Air Force.

Or perhaps, he would be a former test pilot who was also working for the C.I.A. -- someone who knew how to keep secrets; someone who was comfortable living a life of coercion and conspiracy.

I thought for sure, if there was to be indiscretion on Amelia's part it would be with someone of high rank and valor, or one step down from there, maybe a lower-ranked officer, a co-pilot perhaps. At least I could understand that.

But she fell in love with a waiter. An Argentinean waiter named Ander.

Ander was taller than me, more unshaven than me, more shy than me, and didn't wear ripped black sneakers. In fact, he wouldn't be caught dead in sneakers of any kind. He wore shiny black shoes made in Italy.

Ander had a rather goofy girlfriend named Lucy. Obviously, she was far younger than the archeologically famous Lucy. And far prettier, and wittier -- one would assume.

Present day Lucy also carried a constant supply of very good weed, pre-rolled in perfect white paper cylinders that looked like they were machine rolled in a Marlboro factory.

The four of us originally met at a small dinner party. As the night progressed, while Lucy and I were on the balcony overlooking the oily gray skyline, Amelia and Ander sat in a corner by themselves. Ander was listening, without saying a word, to all the trials and travails of Amelia's uniquely horrible marriage to me -- an unambitious accountant named Shelby Stone -- a clueless, relatively hard working black sneakered accountant -- while she worked on a slave ship that the passengers mistook for an airplane. And, she added, Shelby doesn't seem to give a crap about my dog. Imagine the abject cruelty of that.

I love dogs, cried Anders.

Lucy, meanwhile, came closer to me on the balcony to share one of her lit cylinders. As I was inhaling, her face was suddenly less than an inch away from mine, her dyed blonde hair mingled with my natural brown hair, and when she took the joint from my lips, it seemed as though her lips brushed against mine. I was stunned, quite alarmed, and very disgusted at her shocking lack of morals. But I liked the smell of her perfume. And the thought did cross my mind that if she ever wanted me to fix her TV I would at least have to try.

The four of us got together a number of times after that, at Amelia's insistence, and, as coincidence would have it, we would always end up huddled in opposite pairs. Lucy and I would light up and babble incoherently about forgettable things. And Ander would pretend to be enraptured by Amelia's complaints about work, marriage, my hatred of dogs, and the current state of air travel.

One day I received a very polite text from my dear wife saying that she was moving in with Ander, at least temporarily. I politely texted her back that I hoped she understood my lack of choice in the matter. But if that was her unwavering decision, please, take the dog.

So she did.

She also took as much of our money as she could, with the help of a very short, mean, fat, gray-haired, pipe smoking, recently divorced, divorce attorney named Bruce, who took half of our nest egg for his fee. The hours do add up.

Amelia and Ander left Seacliff on a bus headed towards someplace a bit more Argentinean, and most importantly filled with cafes in need of shiny black-shoed waiters.

As a post-script, a year later, Ander had an affair with a tango dancer. I wasn't particularly broken up about it. Amelia was left stranded on a loveless desert island. A cold netherworld located in the middle of nowhere. All communication between us ceased.

When Intuition Goes Up in Smoke

What I ended up doing the day after Amelia told me about her affair with Ander seemed like a natural human response.

I drove out to a hillside footpath in a town about ten minutes from where we lived. I then walked down the trail, far enough into the valley to be unseen by anyone resembling a human. Once I found what I thought was the perfect spot, I screamed at the very top of my lungs until I was too hoarse to make another sound.

Then I lit up a joint Lucy had given me as a Fare-thee-well, and smoked nearly half of it before assessing the internal damage.

Suddenly, I became aware that I couldn't find the joint I'd been holding between my fingertips. It had disappeared. I searched the ground for many a long second, fearing it might start a forest fire. Finally, my eyes saved me -- good old eyes. For there, far beneath me, I spied the joint sitting atop my black sneaker.

It was white and ghostly-looking against the night-dark cloth of my sneaker top, slightly tangled up in my crisscrossed shoelace, which single-handedly held the entirety of that small world together.

A thin zigzag of gray smoke floated upwards like an Indian smoke signal.

From my bird's-eye view, it looked like a long white sailing ship adrift upon an ink-black ocean. And the ancient ones were right. If it continued to sail in only one direction, it could, indeed, sail right off the edge of the world.

I wondered about all the people aboard the smoky little ship. Were they aware of the peril on all sides? Did they know that I couldn't be trusted? Were they getting married? Playing shuffleboard? Fighting? Breaking up? Having an affair with the ship's waiter?

I thought of Amelia sailing off with Ander and almost felt a tear fall, but it ducked back into my tear duct before it could splatter down from what would have been a great height when seen through the eyes of a tear... And what if it hit the ship?

I bent down and lifted the wayward joint back up towards the heavens, towards my parting lips, but I couldn't bear to smoke it now. I realized there could be people onboard.

I looked around to make sure no one was hiding in the bushes watching me attempt to not cry.

I knew no one was there, but there was no harm being more than one hundred percent sure. A few turns of the neck and twists of the hip was all it took, possibly even burning off a few unwanted calories in the process.

After satisfying myself that only crows could see me, I had an odd thought -- maybe I *did* want to cry. It might reveal something surprising to me, like a desire to live, for instance.

I wanted to cry into the wind to convince myself that the world could not, *would not* deaden me, or stop me, from... something out there in the future from whence I came. I wanted to SCREAM. FEEL PAIN.

Or, maybe crying could calm me, pacify my anxiety, teach me how to find peace of mind by focusing on the smaller subtler things, like watching the bee that landed on my sneaker, right next to a budding flower.

I wondered why it was not noticing that foot nectar was non-existent, and that a juicy blooming flower was growing just inches away. It made no bee-sense. Nor did it notice the giant *me* towering above it; nor would I have noticed *it*, if I wasn't looking

for a revelation of some kind. Bee here now, then bee flies off into the future, from where it too may have come.

The oddest thing began to cross my mind as I continued to think on these things. I thought it would be important to write all this down. Something about the thoughts I was thinking was making supreme sense to me, but I was beginning to lose the thread. There was no way I would remember all of it, or maybe any of it by the time I drove home.

I also knew there was no way I was going to drive anywhere in my current condition.

Another thought bubbled up that I wanted to write down. It had something to do with why Amelia and I broke up, aside from the obvious reason. There were subtler reasons. I had to remember those most of all. The subtler ones. The mistakes I made.

But that was going to be tricky, since so many choices I *hadn't* made might also have turned out to be mistakes. How would I ever know?

In fact, taking a moment to look back on my life, was anything *not* a mistake? That was the question. That was the cosmic question I came to: What isn't a mistake, eventually?

"Go back down to the car and get something to write with!" I demanded to myself. But would that also be a mistake?

Suddenly a new idea flashed before me -- one I had never considered before. Maybe I should decide to go absolutely counter to my instincts to see what would happen. Since everything could be a mistake, maybe to get on the right path I had to do the opposite.

So I turned around and walked away from the car, due north, until I came to a literal fork. There are a plethora of figurative forks, but literal forks were rare.

I had to choose. But choosing was what I always did. So I decided to go back to the car, in order *not* to choose.

The one thing I didn't want to do when I finally got to the car was drive back home in my condition, so, counter to my originally planned activity of writing things down, driving home was exactly what I did.

Two blocks into my counter-intuitive experiment I accidentally ran a red light and smashed into the back of a police car. A brand new Ford Taurus, to be precise, with a big rack of robin's-egg-blue lights bolted to the top.

I can't remember why I didn't notice the red light hanging in the sky at the intersection. To be honest, I don't think it was there, until it was. Trickster clowns were *real*. But that would be hard to prove in court.

The cerulean blue clad policeman, who kind of *looked* a little like a clown, didn't even have to activate his big rack of lights to let me know I was in trouble. In fact, I may have terminated the lights' ability to activate since the back of the police car looked like the face of a bulldog after being punched in its face.

By the time I got out of my car to see if the policeman was alright he was already approaching me, moaning about his back and cursing, which, honestly, an officer shouldn't do. They need to set a better example.

I mumbled a few choice words about him looking just a little bit like a clown, no offense.

I was then summarily handcuffed and taken to jail.

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Revelation I

My time in the Seacliff County jail went by quickly -- there were so many fun-loving, crazy-assed, completely wacko beings to get to know in such a short period of time. With all the terrific food, new friends offering me a free smoke, and *so much more* -- why would I ever want to leave?

A day later, they put me in a lineup as a decoy for someone who had witnessed the murder of a local politician. They were calling it an assassination, which means the politician was important, at least to the local townsfolk. The motive was unclear. Police suspected it could have been random, possibly part of a robbery.

The timing of the assassination was unfortunate for me, because it was exactly the day and time I was incommunicado, getting stoned out of my mind with a bee and a titanic-sized joint.

Of course, the witness immediately picked me out of the lineup. I was certainly the murderer. He wore black sneakers just like mine, she exclaimed.

I started screaming, these are *Vans*. *Everyone* wears Vans! They took me away and put me in a private cell.

The public attorney assigned to my case was an ex-con who had studied law during his decade in prison. He told me not to worry. He could totally relate to my situation.

I told him I didn't think so, *because I didn't do it!* He smiled and whispered, "Exactly! I didn't commit my crimes either," wink, wink.

He was obviously crazy. So I took the small amount of money that Amelia's attorney, out of an act of irrational good will, had left me after the divorce, and hired a private lawyer.

A month before the trial someone looking vaguely like me was caught robbing a house in a rich neighborhood while wearing a pair of black Vans. The witness immediately changed her mind and tapped him as the murderer. Eventually, I was set free. (They later found out he didn't kill the politician either. Then again, who ever really finds the *actual* people responsible for a political assassination?)

One sleepless night when I was in jail, hidden from the world behind those infamous cold black bars, trapped, locked away, senses deadened, I looked back into my past and thought about Amelia, and had a true revelation about love:

The concept of "falling" in love -- started out as a figment of some poet's imagination around the time of Tristan and Isolde, and ended up centuries later being debated and carved up in divorce courts world-wide.

Because love does not, by itself, learn to grow and fly like an eagle or a dove. It's a fantasy about the future. It's a hope. It's a child's dream. It's a bad movie. It's hype. It's hip hype -- a great lie to tell friends while you're holding hands with a ghost. Or someone who soon will become one. But *everyone* knows that!

Here's what the revelation was --

Love is a seed that almost no one ever has the time to water. But if anyone *would* dare to try to water it, to actually give, to humble themselves to it, to be brave enough to stare into the eyes of another person and accept all we see, *all* of it, then, maybe, eventually, *potentially*, love would come alive. And then love *would* actually exist.

Looking back, talking about these things didn't really make me a lot of friends in jail. But when have I ever made friends?

Salmon Ella

I met Chelsea a few months after I got out of prison. The first thing I asked her was, "Are you from the future?" She said, "Of course." I told her that was exciting, and could she take me back there with her? She kissed me and promised she would.

We fell in love in ways that were not about love at all, and we both knew that from the beginning. I would call it more like a sensual riot, a physical revolution that took over the castles of rational thought, and slayed the King of Words.

Aside from eating, running, sliding, diving, and clawing at each other like the desperate animals we truly were, the sounds we made during our first weeks together created a simple language all our own, translated loosely to mean either: *more; good; mmm, IDK, IKR, or OMG.*

This went on for some time. All fall and winter, actually. Then came spring.

As an April Fool's joke, Chelsea bought me a dozen novels to read, hoping they would teach me how to talk. But I loved our wordlessness. I realized words were too often serpentine temptations to visit Hell without the ability to buy a round trip ticket. But to please her, I read the books she gave me.

The most impressive book of the lot was a surreal comedy called *Salmon Ella*. It was about a beautiful pink female fish whose female friends fought and climbed their way to glorious motherhood, only to be rewarded with death.

But Ella, independent thinker that she was, met a different fate.

The book was couched in metaphor, making fun of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and its author.

A Cliff Notes version of the book might go something like this:

Ella fell in love with Albert Canoe, a depressed writer who hardly ever got out of his boat because he was afraid to plant the seeds of any of his dark thoughts on shore.

Ella tried to bring him out of his funk by teaching him to dance. Except Ella had no legs so she taught him at great sacrifice to herself. Because she wasted precious time doing the *Come On, Get Out of The Boat* dance for him, she remained childless, but in doing so, stayed alive. Proving that acts of kindness are occasionally rewarded.

The ending was a bit sad, however: Ella eventually got impregnated by a slimy friend of hers named Joey, who begged her to do the Get Out of the Boat Dance for him, even though he's never been in a boat. She swam upstream to tell Albert the happy news, but along way she was tricked into exploring the sharp end of a Lamiglas X-11 fishing rod. Which goes to prove that even the rewards for acts of kindness are temporary.

Chel-sea on Land

I told Chelsea everything about myself. So, of course, she eventually asked me why was I so convinced I was from the future? I told her that long ago, I came to the realization that it's where what we call the soul is. But I didn't know how I knew.

After I was put in jail for slamming into a police car I came to realize that when we talk to ourselves, as I tried to do on my smoke-filled walk, we do so in the present moment. We talk and talk and make ridiculous mistakes and come to ridiculous conclusions almost by the minute. We are usually saying, and thinking about, repulsive or impulsive, or irrational things.

But when we stop and listen. When we shut up and really listen, there is an inner voice that thinks things through from a future perspective, that's when things make sense.

I told Chelsea, some people believe in past lives, I believe in a future life. A life that talks to us and guides us, warns us, about the things we are doing and thinking, here. It's time traveling back to us in this life, in the highest sense, for the best of reasons.

Unlike Amelia, who never took the time to listen, or ask me questions like that, when I told Chelsea she immediately understood.

Chelsea was smart, funny, and younger than me by a good many years. She laughed louder than me, and had bigger browner eyes than me -- brown as dark roasted coffee grinds, with orange speckles inside them that reminded me of a magical sky I once saw at sunset.

Outside of work, she liked to wear baggy clothes. Her milk chocolate hair was cut short enough to frame her impish face; a face that was sweet enough to beguile strangers and friends alike.

I met her when she came to work as the concierge at the Seacliff Hotel a year after Amelia flew off with Ander. Chelsea's job was to steer the already disappointed patrons of this less than stellar establishment to any one of the three less than mediocre local restaurants that had somehow survived time, and taste, and Trip Advisor. Each one was a bit too far to walk, but not worth the cab ride.

She did warn some of them that all the *good* restaurants were way too far from the hotel. Had they ever eaten the pesto pizza at Il Fornaio di Monterosso in Cinque Terra? Or the homemade grape sorbet at Berthillon in Paris? *Those* were good restaurants. But too far away.

The patrons would leave the concierge desk with grins on their faces, and duly warned about the local fare.

That was her job, basically -- to lower expectations. Statistically, customer complaints dropped fifteen percent while she worked at the hotel. Management felt well over half of that statistical drop was because of her.

This sparky but realistic attitude was pretty much the way Chelsea approached love as well. She realized that lowered expectations were going to be critical for long-term success.

One other thing about Chelsea -- she loved stories, in fact, she loved anyone who could tell her wild, stupid, entertaining stories on any topic.

So, on our first date -- after telling her about Rat Town, and babbling on about how life itself was a lot like Rat Town -- a tidal wave of nothingness frozen into a permanent nightmare -- then explaining how, because I got stoned and watched a bee, I ended up being hauled off to jail by a cop that looked like a clown, only to be wrongly accused of murdering a local politician because my sneakers matched that of the killer's -- Chelsea instinctively felt she had found the person she'd been searching for.

After those first nights of stories and convincing her there was indeed such a thing as time travel if we stopped long enough to actually to listen, our words were gratefully reduced to moans and laughter, and we created wild stories in another language one could only call ecstasy.

On the Go, SBASEBALL, and Mescal Cat

As with all relationships worldwide, we slowly got bored of each other.

So after a full year of gorging ourselves with each other, we searched for some kind of distraction.

I began secretly looking at water balloon apps on my phone, wanting to play out a fantasy I had when I was young of dropping a water balloon out a window directly onto the head of an unsuspecting passerby from a great height. Believe me, this would take tremendous timing. I was intrigued. But a bit wary of causing harm. The site warned me about concussions when the mark was hit from a great height.

When Chelsea found out about this fetish of mine she disapproved. She said, why don't you focus on self-improvement. Maybe take a collage class at the community college? I told her I majored in collage at college, but became an accountant because I thought it would be more creative.

She said, okay, then why not take a drawing class? Which made no real sense. But I imagined what it would be like to draw Chelsea someday. Not a photo-realistic kind of representation. But an abstract. Something that would stand the test of time. So I decided to try it.

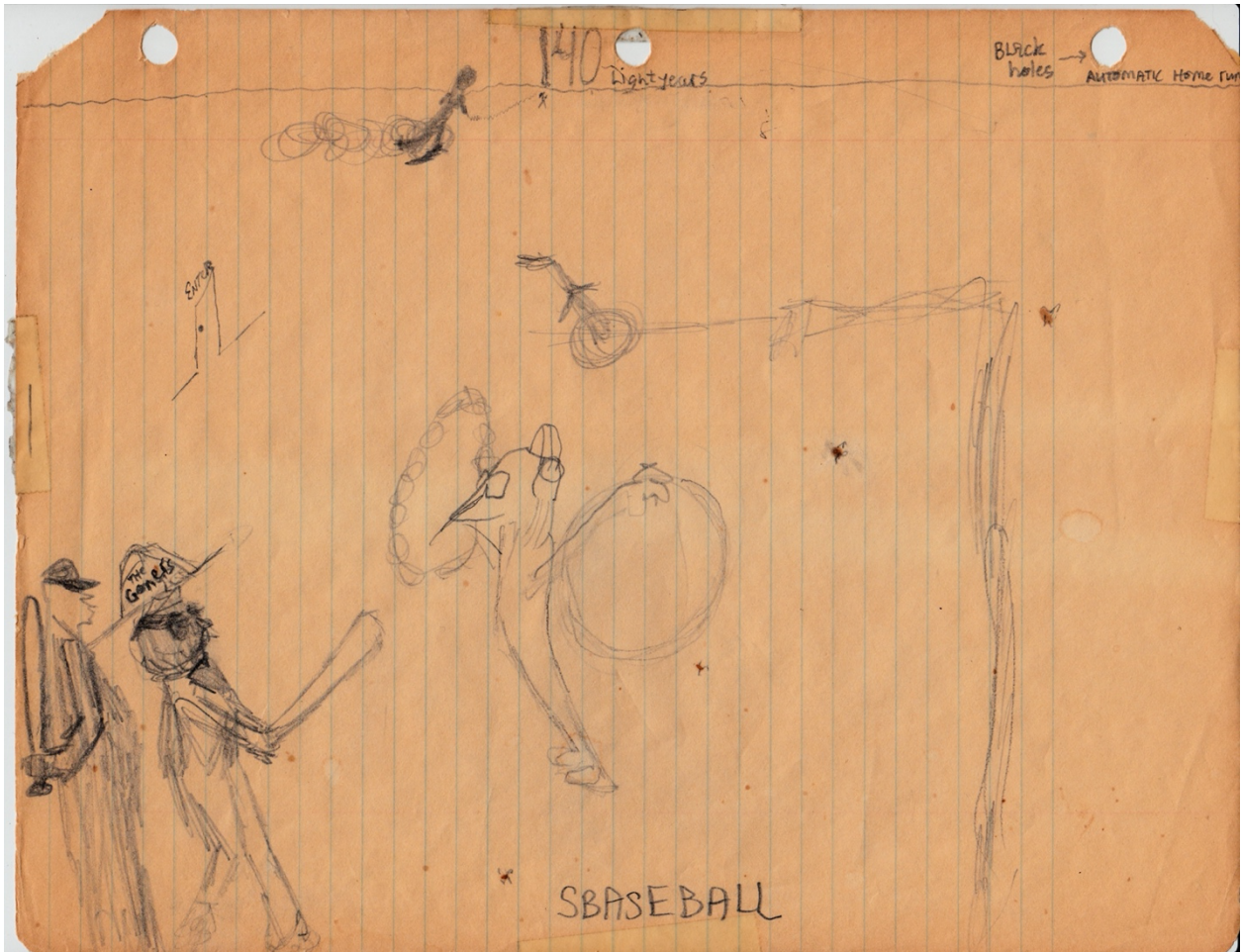
The professor at the community college that offered the only drawing class within a one hundred mile radius of Seacliff was a stoner. He had shaggy hair and a short beard, glassy eyes, and a rather long neck, which he kept covered in a jazz-black turtleneck. It was his signature faux-bohemian look -- which conveniently covered what he secretly felt was his biggest flaw -- his neck. (More specifically his overly large Adam's apple.)

Near the end of the semester, he asked each of us to draw a series of three drawings stoned out of our minds, or for the elderly who disapproved of such a thing, at least pretending that they were stoned.

I worked hard on my three drawings, and was so proud of the result I have kept them under lock and key to this day. Yellowed and old, smudged and faded as they may now be, they still represent the best of times.

Here they are, in fact....







Mescal
cat

My professor agreed I had talent.
But in the end, he strongly suggested I try writing novels
instead.

Chelsea and I were eating at the Seacliff Cafe, at the very edge of town, minding our own business, when we met Zander Matthews Allaudin.

He was our waiter, but seemed uncomfortable with the role and shed it immediately.

"What are you guys doing here?" was the way he greeted us. He had never laid eyes on us before. The cafe was rather empty since the food was awful, but we were only there for coffee and the coffee cake.

I, myself, didn't like coffee. My taste buds interpreted it as a totally irrational thing to ingest. Some odd permutation of liquid dirt. (Dirt being the victim of slander.)

But desserts, especially coffee cake and coffee ice cream, were delicious to me. Go figure.

Chelsea smiled at Zander and said, "We have traveled here from a faraway future land, young man, to choose from the vast array of world-renown specialty desserts in this establishment. An establishment, that quite frankly does not exist in the not-so-distant future."

Zander played right along. "Coffee ice cream is my sincere suggestion, malady, with great effort I shall retrieve it from a magic carton stored in the very back of the Seacliff Cafe industrial freezer. We have been awaiting your arrival for a very long time."

He kept staring at her as if to say, *Please think I'm funny – because I would like to lick your shoulders*. It was almost as if he were saying this out loud. I was a bit turned off, but still willing to stay and eat the ice cream. The voice of the future may have come to a different conclusion.

Chelsea heard none of his overtures. She was deafly committed to me at the time.

Zander was waif-like, and in reality quite innocent. He was simply a young waiter in a clean white shirt looking for a good tip. His tall frame was paper thin, almost bony. He had a middle-eastern look, but with an inconsistently-long Western nose. He had overly-large, eternally startled eyes, almost as if he'd just seen a ghost and then the ghost snapped a photo.

On our walk home, Chelsea finally told me about the time before I came along. She had been in a relationship with Ernest, the hotel receptionist (who, in direct contrast to his name, was the biggest liar I had ever met).

I lost a bit of respect for Chelsea for having gotten involved with someone like him, even though it was long ago, and she had doubtlessly grown wiser.

Of course, she had also lost respect for me, and long ago forgiven me, for having gotten involved with someone like Amelia.

All in all, it helped solidify the fact that we were both equally unworthy of each other.

We never went back to the Seacliff Cafe because everything was incredibly inedible. But Zander became a friend of ours.

He would come to our apartment to listen to me play guitar. He was the only living human I was willing to play for, because he was the only human who actually seemed to like listening to me play.

He would say, "Play more, play another, play it again." I was always happy to oblige.

Chelsea would usually be out taking a jog, or buying new shiny bracelets for her work apparel.

Zander, always the witty one, also came up with a nickname for me. Instead of Shelby, he called me, "Whatever Shelby, Shelby," mocking an old song he thought said, "Que sera, sera, whatever shall be, shall be."

But actually, the song was about the future, and he got the key word wrong when connecting it to my first name. The actual lyrics, I discovered later, was, "Que sera, sera, whatever *will* be, will be... the future's not ours to see..."

I should have Googled it long before I did.

Back then, during that golden time of friendship, I came to like and trust Zander. The three of us planned a big summer picnic by the river one weekend in the future.

We would invite other friends to join us. It sounded like great fun. We would dedicate the day to honoring spring and middle America -- sharing food, sharing time together, pretending all was fine with the world. Zander smiled at me as we talked about the details of the picnic and said to me, as he has so many times, "Whatever shall be, shall be."

The River

There was a river in the sea-less cliff-less town of Seacliff. It's where families would go on summer days. And where lovers would go with their umbrellas in the summer rain.

The winters were lonely. People would stay huddled in their homes and build fires.

In the spring, only birds gathered at the water's edge. They would flap their wings and shiver as they hunted for food in the cool morning air. They'd peck at each other, smooth each other's feathers. They would mate.

The summer was a joyous time when human spirits would awaken. They'd come to the river's shore to picnic. They'd gather for music concerts while swimming in the shallow rushing waters.

In autumn, the entire town would be sucked back inside their heated homes, hibernating back into a dreamless place.

Leaves would separate from their birth stems, caught in the updrafts. They'd fall. They'd quietly crash. They'd become water-soaked at the river's edge; translucent in the end. Evolving with time.

Winter would soon return.

Spring awaited it's turn to re-arrive, over and over.

Life on the river is circular.

The Dream

I had a dream about Chelsea.

We were sitting by the river. It was midnight. I remember her skin glowed in the moonlight. We began to shiver so we covered ourselves in blankets. When we kissed, a storm hit suddenly, and the earth turned dark and lush. Stars darted in and out of clouds. Things grew; rain fell. There was water everywhere; we were surrounded by it.

I couldn't speak. I just kept listening to her heartbeat. Waves of joy and sadness; connection, loss. River swirling beside us. I suddenly realized I was in a dream. I was in the future. I tried to come out of it, but I couldn't lift the wave of energy off of me.

Chelsea's wild eyes were looking at me, and past me. I whispered, "Are you okay?"

"Of course," she whispered back. "You knew I would be."

Her answer confused me, but I was held captive, frozen in future time. Images melting; accelerating before me.

She added, "You know other things too."

"What do you mean?"

"You know we don't make it," she said. "You know we aren't supposed to be together in the end."

The mind gathers up fragments of dreams, concepts of death, and time, and compiles them into an hour glass called reality, until the hour glass runs out, and we actually wake up. To this.

A Brief History of Murder

Murder can happen quite spontaneously.

The concept of murder is quite new, when seen through a 500,000 year perspective.

Unless you're going to believe the bit about Cain killing Abel, then the first known murder was discovered by scientists around 430,000 years ago. It was during the Middle Pleistocene epoch. Scientists analyzing the fragments of a skull belonging to an early Neanderthal male found that he died of blunt force trauma. Possibly a rock being smashed on his head. It was deemed murder because of an equal and similarly blunt force discovered on both sides of the skull.

Murder, however, can sometimes become hard to quantify. For instance, take Thou Shalt Not Kill.

Except during war?

Even when you're the one starting the war?

And what about killing animals?

And what about killing your dreams?

Everyone has reasons to kill.

We Know What We Do.

But murder can also be quite subtle and controversial. It's not always a matter of guilty or innocent.

For instance, God's commandment, Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's House.

What if your neighbor goes ahead and covets the girlfriend living in your house, for instance? Exactly how pissed off might you get that one of the holy commandments was broken?

What if we're all still part Neanderthal, and instincts take over, and every once in a while things get a little out of hand?

The Perfect Summer Day in the Future

Unlike Captain Ahab and his crew, I was afraid of the water. I hated to swim, in fact, I could hardly keep afloat. I would never consider swimming in a lake, ocean, river, or pool.

It all started back in the suburbs, way back when my sister and I lived in the attic. Oh, by the way my sister's name was Alicia. She died a few years after my mom did, but for different reasons. I think it was heroin. Although others say it was cocaine. Still others say it was heroin *and* cocaine.

Anyway, we had a neighborhood pool, and because I was afraid of the water, my dad insisted I take swimming lessons from the local teenage lifeguard, Bart, who unbeknownst to my father, was sadistic, as many teachers quietly are.

He loved to scare the hell out of little kids. He would scream from his perch, "Stop running!" "No jumping!" "No diving!" And if some kid didn't obey Evil Bart -- especially if he was forced to blow his ear-piercing whistle -- he would ban the kid from the pool for the *entire* day. Even if it was a hundred degrees out.

For me, that would have been a best-case scenario. I hated being in or near any body of water, be it a lake, ocean, river, or pool.

Nonetheless, he was being paid to teach me to swim, so he stood behind me with his hands on my shoulders. I readied myself to be pushed in at the count of three -- ready to sink down into the cold, chlorine-thick, piss-filled pool, then emerge angrily, buoyantly, crying silently, and begin flailing my way to the other side of the pool farthest from Bart, gulping in every breath I could manage, any way I could, as he commented on the franticness of the freestyle strokes he was trying to teach me.

My main problem, technically speaking, was not being able to turn my head to one side to breathe. I had too much fear of swallowing water.

My secondary problem, technically, was that no matter how hard I kicked and windmilled my arms, my body would not move forward. It was as if I were tethered to the wall of the pool.

I also had an irrational fear that someone was going to jump in and land on top of my head. Falling unconscious, I would quickly spiral down to the bottom and die there. Or, if not found dead in a pool, I would likely someday die in a lake, ocean, or river.

Certainly, the Seacliff River qualified as one of my potential death traps. But I was gloriously unafraid; older, wiser; blissfully intrepid and confident.

Chelsea would have her arms around me when we were there. Supporting me. Encouraging my exploration of the rocks and trees and hills -- each curve of shore and bend of bay, bubbling before me, calling to me, awaiting me, and one and all, on this perfect summer day in the future.

From the Foot of the Mountain

Zander's life was analogous to the Myth of Sisyphus.

This Greek legend, as most literate and civilized readers know, is about a man, actually a King, who was punished for his crafty deceitfulness. He was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again just as he was about to reach the top.

Looking at the bright side, Sisyphus, translated from the Greek, had nothing to do with being a "sissy" (which was a term created in the 19th century by the British). Sisyphus was, by that time, mythologically long dead. (Until 1942, when Albert Camus resurrected him and the myth in his now famous book.)

Fortunately, by all historical accounts, Sisyphus did not have a lisp. Because saying Sisyphus, or The Myth of Sisyphus, would have amounted to pure torture if he did. Maybe even worse than pushing a rock uphill forever.

Anyway, the reason why Zander's life was analogous to the myth of Sisyphus was, every time Zander tried his hand at something, he would get to a certain level of success and then fall back. No matter how many times he kept trying, the end result was failure.

When he was a kid he was a top teen tennis player. He played tournaments every weekend. He got better and better until he was nationally ranked in the top ten in the "Not Yet 18" class, and ranked 10,822 in the world, just above Santiago Fa Rodriguez Taverna. But during a match with Taverna, Zander hurt his shoulder attempting a wicked topspin forehand down

the line, and had to have micro-surgery on his supraspinatus tendon.

During an attempted comeback, he realized the surgery didn't quite take, so he had to have it done again. After that, he lost his one hundred sixteen mile per hour serve, as well as the ability to hit lobs. He never fully recovered. He tried to learn to play lefty, but that left him woefully frustrated and unranked. In fact, he was regularly beaten by unranked twelve-year-olds at that point.

Years later, he found a girl he fell in love with, a seventeen year-old Italian girl named Kay Sera DiMarco. This is why he called me, "Que Sera Sera." It was in memory of her. They spent a fortnight together, and she agreed to marry him when she turned eighteen. But their future imploded when the entire DiMarco family moved to Nigeria to take advantage of the cheaper currency. They bought a huge white mansion just outside the capitol of Abuja.

Zander tried to keep in touch, but she eventually stopped all communication. He rationalized that it was because she probably forgot how to speak even broken English, and now only knew how to speak Yoruba.

Finding himself back down at the bottom of the mountain again, he tried his hand at learning guitar. This is why he loved to hear me play. After three years of intense practice with a world famous Flamenco master, the same shoulder he'd hurt in tennis started acting up every time he put his strumming arm around the wide body of his used Yamaha.

It was as if he was somehow touching a human body inappropriately, and God was forcing him to back the hell off. God teaches subtle lessons. No one listens.

Back down the mountain he slid.

Finally, he went to school to study law. His other love. But in his senior year, he couldn't keep up with the workload while

holding down two jobs, so he had to drop out after unsuccessfully trying to give up things like food. Once again, he found himself at the foot of the mountain looking up.

He was still looking up from the foothills of the mountain when we met him. There is a name for hitting bottom around these parts. It's called being a waiter at the Seacliff Cafe.

One day, he mentioned to us that the breakfast rolls were so stale they were like miniature boulders.

Looking back, it's clear that he had, in some odd way, not just tied his past into the present by calling me Que Serra Sera and listening to me play guitar, but had unconsciously seen a vision of his future demise.

The Great Picnic

The day of the great picnic finally arrived.

We invited a number of friends, but the only one to show up was Zander himself. He usually worked on weekends at the cafe, but he'd found a sub.

The sun was high, the water was clear. The flow of the water bubbled downstream with the ease of a slow-moving train.

The wind was in between breaths. The clouds were thin and streaked, like jet fumes from an airshow.

After eating coffee cake, brought from the Seacliff Bakery, Chelsea, wearing a very thin bikini, with every intention of swimming after our meal, fell asleep.

Zander excused himself and went for a swim downstream.

I wandered over to a group of children playing. One brave girl was wearing a red whale-patterned swimsuit. I recall it all so clearly now.

The kids were laughing, running around like electrons, daring each other to jump in the river and swim out to where they could barely stand up.

"Touch the bottom, touch the bottom," they yelled.

"No, you."

"No, you!"

No one went in.

"The water's too cold," said one of the boys after touching the water's edge with his little foot.

I sat down nearby and watched them play.

After a while, they saw me watching, and for some reason they all gathered around and sat cross-legged in front of me.

"Tell us a story, Mister," one girl said.

So I told them a river story. The one about a salmon named Ella, and her boyfriend Albert Canoe.

I told them Ella tried to teach Albert how to dance because he was a somber old grouch, but she didn't have legs because she was a fish. The children began to giggle and squeal.

Realizing I had children listening, I changed the end of the story.

"In the end," I said over the ruckus, "a big rock fell and...." They became quiet, "almost crushed her, but she had a very hard hat on her head that Albert had given her for her fifth birthday, and the rock bounced away and went off to kill somebody else instead!"

"Yay," the children clapped.

"Tell us another story."

But I was distracted. Salmon metaphors began racing through my mind. If Chelsea was Ella, and I was Albert, Chelsea was spending her time trying to teach me how to dance, but I just couldn't learn, wouldn't learn. Following the next chapter of the story -- metaphorically, who was Joey, Ella's slimy impregnator?

I had been away from Chelsea and Zander too long and I was starting to feel a knot in my stomach.

The children continued clapping, "Tell us another story, Mister. Another, another," they began to chant.

"Not now. Maybe later." I forced a smile.

Then I added as a dare, "Now who's going to swim in the river? *Who?*"

"Not me, not me," yelled identical twin boys.

"I will," said the brave young girl in the red whale swimsuit, and off the others tromped to see if she really would, really could.

Perhaps if she jumped in, they would too.

The Kiss of Stone

When I returned to where Chelsea lay sleeping I noticed Zander had returned and was lying right next to her.

I hid behind a boulder nearby.

He looked around to make sure no one was watching, and when he thought he was alone with her as she slept, he kissed her lightly on her bare stomach. Then he slipped one side of the bottom of her bathing suit down to her hip bone and gently kissed her skin there. Very slowly, very gently.

Chelsea began to moan and laugh. She touched his arm. Did she know it was him, or think it was me?

She awoke fully and looked at him.

He looked at her and began smiling.

Her fingers slowly found the top of his head and she began to caress his long curly hair.

He became excited and kissed her.

She returned his kiss.

They looked almost as if they had begun dancing together, lying there, moving their bodies together. Hands exploring, bodies gyrating.

"Heeeeeeeeeey!" I screamed, racing from the boulder at a reckless pace.

They were startled.

I was running full force downhill. I felt like I might outrun my legs and fall. Zander stood up to defend himself and held his hands out to stop me. But I was gaining speed, I was out of control. I crashed my elbows into his upper body, mostly to prevent myself from falling into the river, since I'm afraid of lakes, oceans, rivers, and pools.

He lurched backwards, stumbled over an exposed tree root, and hit his head on a rock.

My momentum carried me past him and I splashed into the water a few yards away. It felt cold and slimy. Too real. Too intense.

I thought about swimming away in anger, but I couldn't swim. Luckily, the water was shallow where I was. If I went any further out I would be getting in way over my head.

So with my black sneakers soaked through to their very soles, I emerged, part river, part frightened child, my tears merging with the freezing river water, now dripping from my face.

I wanted to run away. Never see Chelsea again. Start over. Or end it all. Go back into the future and never return.

Chelsea ran over to him, then screamed, "*What did you do?*"

"Don't you mean, '*I'm sorry?*'" I cried.

"*What did you do?*" she screamed way louder, almost beyond the pronunciation of the words.

I looked closer. Zander wasn't breathing. His arms were spread wide open. Red rose-colored water began to trickle downstream.

Chelsea immediately ran off to the car to get her phone to call for help.

I forced myself to look closer. Zander, a.k.a, Sisyphus, had once again almost reached the summit of his fantasy, just as Chelsea was about to say yes, don't stop, but fate had pushed him back down the mountain.

How would Chelsea describe what happened to the police? I had already been accused of murder once, long ago. This time I was guilty.

I looked fifty-yards upstream and saw the children playing, squealing with youthful delight. They were unaware of our catastrophe. Nothing was wrong in that dimension of space and

time. We were far away phantoms in another world. They simply assumed that their grown-up futures would be as sun-bright and joyous as this day. What if I had stayed with them there instead of returning?

I watched to see what they would do next. The brave girl in the red whale swimsuit was waving from the middle of the river, shouting for everyone to come join her.

Then she saw me from a vast distance and motioned for me to come in too. She waved and yelled, "Swim on over. Swim on over, Mister."

But I swam not, being afraid of lakes, oceans, rivers, and pools.

When Colors Disappear

The sun began to set, turning the sky a whispery pink. I was unable to stop shivering; soaked through from the river. I felt disoriented. As if suddenly no further future existed. I was watering away.

I saw the face of my sister, then my father. I couldn't remember my mother's face.

I couldn't remember the name of my family dog. Was it Mandy? Andy? Ander? Zander? It was a mixed breed. He was trying to escape by scampering up Dog Mountain. Was the movie theater up there at the summit? Was he trying to get back to her -- the beautiful brown female Labrador he adored in his dreams?

Then suddenly he starts to lose his grip, his long paw nails tear at the ground as he skids down, stumbles and tumbles and skitters down towards the river bank. He hits the bottom, head first. My father is there, and drags him back home.

Two revelations came to me. One was that the name *Zander* was the name Ander with a Z in front of it. Both Zander and Ander were waiters. But they didn't wait. Neither of them waited. They both took love away from me and destroyed my faith in it.

But... was that really possible?

That was the second revelation:

It wasn't really the loss of love, or the thought of a stolen future with Amelia or Chelsea, that upset me. Love couldn't be taken away from me, because it was never love to begin with.

That's what upset me.

There had been no deep attachment. No true bond. No ability to deepen, grow, show myself, know myself better, or know Chelsea, or anyone, for that matter.

My wet ears unplugged for a moment.

I heard a wind gust rattling the leaves.

I heard the river running fast behind me, splashing, hissing, flowing relentlessly towards the distant ocean.

Then, by a commodious miracle of recirculation, through oceanic mist, cloud bursts, and staggering falls down mountain sides, this very same water would return, to refill this very same river someday.

It might take a thousand years.

But the bond was real.

A true bond never totally disintegrates or dies. I realized that the river runs, and changes, and broadens over time -- and like the river, a mysterious evolution of soul and self with another *was* possible. But it was never going to be a straight path. Love lives a swirling river's life.

Given the chance, love diminished by time could flow back around stronger, deeper than ever, surging, swerving, brimming with new energy, if we just took the time to care. To try. To forgive. To humble ourselves to everything, to look into each other's eyes, absorb all the coldness and betrayals, the hurt and doubt. And trust whatever was meant to be.

Otherwise, we could drown in the shallows before even trying once, hesitant to reach out, afraid to swim out, unwilling live it out.

And I could forgive that, and forgive him. I could forgive all things. All the unraveled crazy moments. I could even forgive all the things I couldn't remember, or didn't want to remember. I could forgive Chelsea, if she gave me the chance.

A wailing sound cut through the air. A police siren zigzagged up and down in pitch. Pulsing higher in intensity. Getting louder. Closing fast.

The sound had color. Red became light-orange, then yellow, then white, then silent white. I took a breath and felt calm. I surrendered.

I wasn't surrendering to the siren's call. I was surrendering to everything I had ever thought, said, felt, or done. Because none of it had worked; all my calculations had turned out to be wrong. I would have to start over someday. Try harder, if future time allowed.

Night was falling.

The sun, having set, turned the sky a muted gray.

All color disappeared.

Que serra serra

Words died.
The revelations rested quietly in me, like mist.
Like a shroud.
Memories became feeling.
Memories, fantasies.
They are nothing really.
I wouldn't need them anymore.

I heard a car door slam a few feet away.
Someone was walking towards me with hard footsteps,
boot heels crackling against the river pebbles.
I felt his breath near me.
"It was an accident," I said in a soft steady voice, eyes closed.
"Yeah, *everything's* an accident," the officer barked.
He asked for my name, but I remained silent. I was trying to
think about the revelations I'd had, something about bonding....
What would happen to Chelsea?
"I said, *what's your name, kid?*"
"*Whatever...* Shelby, Shelby!"
"Shelby *what?*"
"The future's not ours to see.... Que serra serra."
The officer gave me a shove.
I tumbled into the back seat of the patrol car. The door was
slammed behind me.

A Wide Expansive Mystical Place

I looked out from the back seat window, through my tears, beyond the cascading hillside, to the rushing river. It was rising fast this time of day, pushing up against the shoreline.

It would be a long journey from here, with no end in sight, until the end simply appeared as a new beginning -- a wide expansive mystical place.

Two herons landed together on a free-standing boulder. They jumped closer together until their feathers touched.

Children were leaving the park, picnic baskets empty. They were holding hands with their parents. Holding hands so tightly.

The wind picked up. The grass began to sway. I could almost smell summer in the air. The color was distant yellow. Like the memory of a kiss.

I finally saw, no, I *felt*, the truth, flickering in the sky's remaining light.

Everything was aglow.

~ *The End*
GM