

SPIRITS IN A MATERIAL WORLD

by

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
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of  
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Creative Writing

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this short story collection to my father who recently suffered from a stroke. He was a writer of three books, journalist for a Korean newspaper and a social worker. He raised us to care about the world we live in and wanted us to make an impact that would better the lives of others. And I would like to dedicate this to my mother as well who was the strength of our family. She shaped our lives by teaching us to be strong and to be confident in our abilities.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**SPIRITS IN A MATERIAL WORLD**

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George Mason University, 2014

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This thesis is a collection of short stories that deal with grief or loss in some form and the many different ways these emotions manifest in people's lives. Following these short stories are three chapters of a novel in progress called "A Knight in Tin Armor."

## CHAPTER ONE - THE CONSUMPTION OF HAPPINESS

I have enough bottles of lotion to moisturize an army of mothers. If they came to my apartment, I could shield them from the onslaughts of environmental hazards threatening to dry their skin. Envelop them in a protective layer of health, softness and scent – the way I used to for my mother. Even when she was in the hospital, I would remove her loose gold wedding band and massage lotion onto her frail hands and feet careful to avoid the many wires and tubes attached to her skin. Her ring is now on my bureau among the sundry items littering its surface: a small red velvet gift box of earrings, photos of her, her lavender cashmere gloves, her silver comb, a silver tea pot, her statue of St. Anthony and many bottles of lotion.

There are echoes of my mother everywhere in New York. It's as though reverberations of her spirit have transcended the time-space continuum and while I am doing something mundane as crossing the street, she will appear to me as though she's still alive. When that happens, I feel compelled to find the nearest store. All those moments have been documented onto tiny paper credit card receipts which line the floor of my apartment as though they are seeds waiting to germinate into my next purchase. After each reaping, I place my harvests on full display in my apartment.

Lining my bathroom and bedroom shelves, standing beside my mother's many statues of saints are rows and rows of lavender, orange and pink plastic bottles. There are also several boxes of them in my closet and in a storage facility in Queens. At least fifty bottles line the bottom layer of the large towering pile of Home Shopping Network products in the middle of my living room - the shadow of which stretches out towards my windows when I flick the lights on.

If you opened each bottle, the scent of papaya, mango, coconut, passion fruit and pineapple would greet you like plumeria leis. All you would need is a hammock and a cocktail with a tiny white umbrella. My mother and I were once card carrying members of the Body Shop - a store which contrary to its name does not sell corpses.

If I had a therapist, she would probably ask when did I begin to buy lotion? I guess it started while I was dating my first boyfriend. I was a sophomore at Brooklyn College and he was a grad student, the TA of my Physics class. His steel-rimmed glasses winked in the afternoon sunlight and somehow I was dazzled.

On the few occasions we went out for dinner after the class was over, I always paid because he said that starving grad students trumped starving college students. I was young and naïve and thought a PhD in Physics was something to be admired. I let that overcompensate for a lack of personal hygiene.

After we made love, he'd clip his toenails. Over the course of three months, he left little clippings on my bed, my desk and on my black and white tiled bathroom floor. Maybe he considered them a gift. I'm not sure.



When his many compliments faded away, I was left wondering where they went. Maybe in an effort to resurrect them, I once stroked his acne scarred back and whispered, “I love you.”

He clipped a gnarly hangnail from his big toe and said, “Love is like gas. The sooner you expel it from your system, the better you’ll feel.”

Then his fingertips caressed my bare legs. He announced, “Your skin is very dry.”

I glanced down at my pale, scaly legs in the wintry sunlight that came in through the window.

I bought my first bottle of lotion the next day with the meager funds I earned as a work-study in the Economics department. At the store, I reached up to the wooden shelf and picked a white bottle of lotion the way you would pluck a furry coconut off a tree. Then in my dorm room, I coated my thin skin with Aruba Coconut Breeze to protect it from other barbed criticisms that came hurtling toward me.

I smelled like paradise.

For Valentine’s Day, I took him to an intimate French bistro on a cobblestone alleyway in SoHo. We were seated on the second floor next to the fireplace. I ordered the house salad with vinaigrette. Because I was paying, he ordered a bottle of Red Bordeaux and the rosemary rack of lamb with pureed potatoes. Sprinkled on top were truffle shavings. After dinner, I dabbed my lips with a napkin and announced that I was going to the Ladies Room. Then I walked past the bathroom to the exit. I called my

mother and told her what I did as my heels clicked against the wet concrete glowing in the bright moonlight. She replied, “Good. He deserved that.”

I still imagine him waiting there for me, his goatee transforming into a shaggy beard as he sips his wine, wondering where I am.

That night, I took the Q train to the Atlantic Terminal mall where I bought body lotions with names like, *Passion So Fruity*, *Manila Vanilla* and *Tahiti Sweetie*. I brought a bottle of *My Sweet Clementine* to my mother and felt like a hunter coming home with a prized pelt. She had just gotten out of the hospital. She peeled the label off the bottle and stuck it to her jacket like a lapel pin. Then she suggested that we go shopping as soon as she was strong enough to leave the apartment.

I painted my toenails a color called, “*Isn’t Life Mauve-ah-lous?*”

I changed my major from Philosophy to Business.

Later that year, I went home early for winter break. Two weeks before Christmas was my mother’s last chemo session. Her white blood cell count was closer to normal than it’s ever been before. It was a day to celebrate. We went to the mall - a place where the retail workers know us by name. In a store with a red checkered awning, pine wood floors and crates filled with candy colored bars of soap, she picked up a blue bottle with a silhouette of a palm tree. She placed a dab of the yellow lotion on the back of her hand and sniffed. A small sigh escaped her lips.

“Look Roz,” she said, “they’ve captured Hawaii in a bottle.”

She always wanted to go. She never did.

Later when she was back in the hospital, I taped up photos of Hawaii from calendars on her closet door.

That particular day, she took off her hat and asked me to massage some lotion onto her scalp because it itched. Her hair soft as downy feathers was just beginning to grow back. Her scalp was red, rough and dry. She always had very dry skin.

When I was little, she'd lift up her shirt and ask me to spread some lotion across her freckled back. The first few times, I squeezed a dime size amount on my fingertips and rubbed lightly, careful to not get any on her beige bra straps. Then I traced the outline of her scapula where the joints of her wings would be. I could almost see them.

“Your hands feel like little moths fluttering across my back,” she would say.

After I graduated from college, my mother was cancer free for the longest time ever. I moved to an apartment two blocks away on Ocean Parkway and came over often. My father celebrated by cooking a dinner of fried pork chops, green beans and a blueberry tart. Each night was whatever Mom wanted to eat night. He even surprised us by attending mass with my mother nary a grumble. I walked slowly behind them as they left church holding hands as the bright morning sunlight splintered off of cars parked on the street. My mother shifted the wig with her pale hand and smoothed the crooked bangs over her forehead. My father turned to smile at her and his face held such a youthful happy glow I felt as though I had transported back in time. A light, airy spirit flitted through me. I even nursed the hope that I would one day shop for wedding dresses with my mother. She once said that she often dreamt of that day.

I then dated an aspiring comedian. My best friend Sarah took me to the Velvet Lounge which was where I met him. He was attractive only in dim lighting.

He lived in a converted factory loft in Williamsburg and would practice a string of jokes in my presence. But he had a terrible memory and would often forget the punch line. “So then the woman said to the priest, oh wait, maybe it was the bartender. Anyway, she slapped him.”

I peeled a tangerine and dropped the leathery orange skin into the wastebasket next to his bed.

“Hello? Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not laughing.”

“I will. Just wait.”

“For what?”

“I’m storing up all my laughter so there will be more tomorrow. Laughter compounded with interest is always a better thing.”

I had just gotten a job as a financial analyst at an investment bank.

He kicked the wastebasket. Crumpled pieces of paper along with the tangerine peels scattered across his brown shag carpet.

“It’s like you never pay attention to me. I’m following my dream, the least you could do is support me.”

“I *am* supporting you. Trust me. Like a fine wine, laughter is best when it occurs belatedly. Only the most patient of comedians get rewarded.”

He broke up with me that day. I called my mother and she said, “What a shame. He was so inadvertently funny. Why don’t you come over? I got you something.”

I went to visit her that weekend and she handed me a package wrapped in glittery pink paper. She curled up on the sofa and stifled a smile behind the crook of her arm. I tore it open and grinned back at her. It was a book called “Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader.” The subtitle was “Life is Crappy.” She also bought me the DVD collection of season one and two of Seinfeld. We watched several episodes after dinner while digging into a bowl of popcorn my dad brought us. When she was in the hospital, it was the only show that could get her to laugh.

A year later, I got a new job at a credit card company and a raise. Things were looking up. So were my mother and the stock market. My title was Senior Analyst of Cash Management. Our company slogan was “*What’s in your wallet?*”

Those who were unfortunate enough to have our cards with all our monthly fees and high APRs ought to reply with a resounding, “*Nothing.*”

I once ran a report which captured our most profitable market. It was the Hispanic market. They did not read the fine print that said when the promotional rate expired, a new APR of thirty percent will be compounded daily. Marketing came up with the idea of charging them the highest APRs of all. The mentally handicapped came second only because there were so few of them. Their applications often came in illegible. One night, I stayed at work late until the janitors arrived. Then I took all promotional literature written in Spanish and sent them through the shredder.

That was how I met John. He regularly stayed late at work. He worked in Accounting and was going for his MBA.

“What have you got there?” He pointed to my arms weighted down by pamphlets and flyers.

“These have to go out tonight. I’m just delivering them to the mail room.”

“Oh. Hey, are you hungry?” he asked. I could not stop staring at his eyes. They were the color of the two carat blue topaz earrings that I saw at Macys.

“Starved,” I said and promised to stop sabotaging a company that brought me John. I’m not proud of that moment. But when I met him, I thought I was hit by a bolt of lightning. There’s a good chance it was the static electricity when he crossed the carpet to shake my hand.

I applied and enrolled in his program at NYU. And I soon learned that the sole purpose of an MBA is to teach students how to separate consumers from their assets. John was a star student. He approached both sex and bond amortization schedules with an animalistic drive that I found fascinating.

“Look who’s all sparkly and dewy eyed today. Someone is in love,” my mother said as she pulled out her sterling silver tea service from the curio cabinet.

“When are you going to invite him over for dinner?”

“Mom, it’s only been a month,” I said but there was the tell-tale happy skip of my heart. I cleared off the dining table and filled two large plastic bags with the boxed evidence of our many shopping excursions. Thin paper receipts floated down onto the

paisley carpet like the brittle leaves of autumn while she set down a platter of lemon sponge cake. Then I hid the bags in her bedroom closet. Betty, her former co-worker, was coming over that afternoon.

Betty arrived and exclaimed loudly when she saw the smudged ashes on my mother's forehead. She tried to wipe them off with a white hanky. My mother flushed and quickly left to get the whistling tea kettle.

"Honey, Christ already paid for your sins. You don't have to keep paying for them," called out Betty who was Baptist.

Betty was very concerned that we were all going to hell. My father didn't believe in heaven and that other place, well, he believed we already lived there. He had gotten the bumper sticker, "Hell is other people" but my mother removed it. That was the car she drove to church.

Betty turned to me and asked, "Did you know that Christ paid for your sins?"

"No," I replied. "I still pay for them with Visa."

A year later, my mother's health began to deteriorate again right before my parent's thirtieth wedding anniversary. They moved her to Intensive Care.

I was spending more time at the hospital. I dropped out of the MBA program. John and I argued often. Every time we fought, I bought something from the Home Shopping Network which was like my very own orchard. I could turn to it and pick out something succulent that sweetened a bitter life. John and I argued about marriage. I was ready. He wanted to wait until we were fifty. We were twenty-seven. After I hung

up on him, I bought the *Roll and Glow* portable faux fireplace. You hang it up anywhere in the room for instant fake fire.

One night, he never showed up at the hospital lobby as he had promised so I went home and turned on the TV. I ordered two packs of Shamwows which can hold up to twelve times its weight in liquid. The limited time offer came with a free bonus ShamWow mop. The lady on the phone only needed my credit card number and then it would be mine too. I felt an urgent need for all of it. Supposedly, you could drain an aquarium with that thing.

“The thing I miss the most is eating,” my mother said one evening. She had all her meals delivered through IV by then. My heart twisted inside of me.

“Why don’t you go downstairs and get something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“For me sweetie. I’d like to watch you eat. Get something really salty, real greasy and hot.” Normally, you didn’t bring food or flowers into the ICU, anything that could carry germs or allergens. But we both knew the nurses wouldn’t say anything if I did.

They had fried chicken in the cafeteria. I brought it up on a brown plastic tray. I used the plastic fork and knife and ate piece by piece under her watchful gaze. Her skin was slack and translucent. She was one third of her former self. She sometimes referred to herself as a spirit encased in fragile skin and brittle bones, a spirit lost in a material world.



She smiled when I finished eating.

“There. Don’t you feel better?”

I went home and threw everything up.

John broke up with me. He stated that our relationship had reached the point of diminishing returns.

I bought a new dishwasher.

The men, who delivered it, could barely fit it through the entryway. And there was hardly enough space in the living room to cart it to the kitchen. They gave each other bewildered looks. I tipped them and said, “Just leave it there.” And they beat a hasty retreat, relieved they didn’t have to install it and cart away the old one.

Not that I was planning on getting rid of it anyway.

\* \* \*

I only went on the date because Sarah insisted. Sarah has been my best friend since we sat next to each other on the school bus in second grade. She found a guy who was going for his PhD in Comparative Literature. His dissertation was on Zen in America focusing particularly on D.T. Suzuki’s lectures at Columbia and his influence on Ginsberg and Kerouac. I can see why she would think we’d be a match. I once told her how I wish I could have been there when Suzuki said to Kerouac, “Drink green tea not alcohol.” Suzuki was not impressed with either of the dead beats.

“His name is Josh and he also read Rabelais. You once said that a man who enjoys scatological humor has a lot of potential.”

I was tired. Sarah’s call woke me up. I gazed at my bed with longing. The weekends were when I liked to take my twelve hour naps.

“What’s his favorite story?” I finally asked.

“The little boy who wipes his bum with a goose,” she said without missing a beat.

“Okay, I’ll meet him.”

On my date’s left wrist were three letters next to a green arrow. As he talked, the green arrow pointed up, pointed down, sometimes it pointed to me. I asked him about it.

“My dad was an avid player of the stock market...” An avid golf player could end up with a few balls in the lake and pay for the mistake with chagrin. An avid stock player could end up in repo with his house in foreclosure.

“Those are his initials,” he said and lifted his wrist so I could take a closer look at the tattoo. “Matthew W. Frost. The day he died, the stock market was up.”

I never checked the stock market the day my mother died. On that day, I thought the world had stopped moving.

A few weeks later, we sat in his car making out until I couldn’t avoid taking him upstairs to my apartment anymore. His hands kept creeping up my back to unhook my bra strap.

Since Sarah had been to my apartment before, I thought it would be safe. He was standing behind me as I slipped my key into the door and swung it open. I didn't see the look on his face when I flipped the light switch on.

“Holy Shit!”

He squeezed past the large cardboard box housing my dishwasher. It sat next to the door and served as a foyer table with all my mail piled on top. He immediately went for the large mound of stuff in the middle of my living room. I called it my Mount Everest. He picked up the unopened boxes of ShamWows, Snuggies, Santoku knives and George Foreman grills. There were also things like the Awesome Auger for the garden I didn't have, Big City Slider Station for making burgers, The Ding King for the car I would one day have, the Tool Band-it – a magnetic armband that held your tools and several bottles of OxyClean. I mourned Billy Mays death by buying all the products he once sold.

Josh was drawn to my Roomba, the robot vacuum cleaner. It could never get very far with the lack of space in my apartment and all those shopping receipts littering the floor. But there was a small circle of wood flooring that was completely clear of dust. Josh put down the Roomba before moving on to the next item. He reached out and touched everything like a child in a museum.

“Really Roz? The Bacon Wave?” He held up the box to show me.

“Who doesn't want healthier bacon,” I replied stiffly. The Bacon Wave promised slices of bacon cooked to perfection in your microwave with less calories, less cholesterol

and less fat. You can cook up to fourteen slices at once. I had gained at least twenty pounds since John broke up with me. It was time I started dieting again.

“Ever heard of Edward Bernays?” he asked as he peered into my bedroom.

“No.” I stood in the doorway, blocking his path.

“He’s the guy who came up with psychological advertising. In the nineteen twenties, farmers were frustrated with decreased sales of bacon. Americans were on a health kick. So Bernays was hired,” he said and shook his head. I rubbed mine, he was making it ache.

Josh gestured wildly as he strode toward Mt Everest.

“Bernays surveyed doctors who said that it’s *healthy* to eat a hearty breakfast and he linked *healthy* hearty breakfast to “bacon and eggs.” He coined that phrase. Doctors didn’t advocate eating bacon, he did. Sales of bacon soared.” Josh threw the Bacon Wave back on my pile with a look of disgust.

“Do you realize that all this advertising you’ve succumbed to was started by the propaganda war effort?”

He picked up the large alarm clock in the shape of a cat. It meowed Beethoven’s Fifth symphony until you woke up.

I closed my bedroom door. We weren’t going there tonight.

“Back in the twenties, the government encouraged massive consumerism because it didn’t just help the economy but kept Americans too busy to engage in subversive activities. Think *communism*! But what’s the result? Folks like you with apartments and houses overloaded with useless junk. And our landfills! We’re going to end up with a

world so full of shit we'll all have to move to Mars.” Yes, he was definitely going to be a professor one day. He was very good at lecturing others.

I said nothing as he touched each item as if it meant nothing at all, as if it really was nothing but junk. It wasn't junk to me. Each product represented a different disappointment or rejection. I guess... if I was being honest with myself... I was an advertiser's dream come true.

“Roz, why buy all this crap?” He turned to watch me. I couldn't answer.

It was hard to explain. He never watched those infomercials late at night when the rest of the world was fast asleep except for me and the woman chopping the most perfectly sliced tomatoes ever. He would never understand my need for perfection in a chaotic world coming to you at one perfectly toasted burger bun at a time. They were all so seductively alluring. And if I just bought more stuff then I wouldn't have to think of the pain my mother endured those last days. How could he possibly understand?

That was the whole point. I didn't want to think. But if pushed to think of it, to analyze it, then yes, “perfect” was the operative word in every product I bought. Oh, that elusive idea that one product could make you happier, would provide for all your needs and lead you to a more perfect world. With each commercial, I felt a little piece of heaven floating towards me with free shipping and handling.

“Consumption was a fatal disease in the nineteenth century,” Josh said and smiled when he found my dvd collection of Richard Simmon's “Sweatin to the Oldies.”

“Now these are keepers,” he said with the dvds splayed out in his hands like a stack of cards. I did not smile.

“I’ve never met an intelligent hoarder before,” he then said. He must play tennis. That was a strong backhand.

“Hoarder is such an ugly word. I prefer Shopaholic. It’s cuter and no one will send you to therapy,” I finally said as I twisted strands of my hair between my fingers. He laughed.

He picked up the small red velvet gift box on my living room table where I left it that morning. When he opened it to reveal silver and crystal chandelier earrings, I snatched it out of his hands.

“That’s enough,” I said as I pushed Josh out my front door.

“Roz, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. I was just shocked. Can I see you again?”

“No,” I said. I closed the door on his stunned face and locked it. It was really a shame. He was the kind of guy my mom would have liked because he lacked an inner filter which she always felt was the sign of an honest person.

I listened to his footsteps echo down the stairs. He paused on the second landing. Maybe he was staring up at my door wondering if he should come back up and try again. Not that I would have let him back into my apartment. But he didn’t bother and instead continued his downward spiral leaving me to mine.

I glanced down at the earrings in my hand. To this day, I continue to fool myself into believing you could capture beauty in a box. The crystal and silver shimmered in the light. They sparkled like a spirit caught in a glass bell jar. The silver was beginning to tarnish though no one has ever worn them. I bought them for my mother a week before

my father called and told me he was bringing her back to the hospital. I've kept them in their little coffin ever since.

I placed the earrings back in their home, nestled against the black velvet where they will continue to corrode.

Somehow they seemed safer there than out in the real world with me. Out here, there were so many ways to lose the things that are precious to you. One hundred ways and more.

I went into my bedroom and put the velvet box back on my bureau next to the pile of my mother's things. On that pile was also a sympathy card from Betty which I couldn't bring myself to finish reading. I never got past her first line, "I've cried every morning since your beautiful mother left us..."

A year ago, my father prepared a large cardboard box of her things to donate to Salvation Army. In it were her fluffy yellow big bird slippers that were grey and matted along the soles like a mangy old dog, red and white checkered oven mitts, all the Hawaii coffee table books I bought her, wool sweaters covered in pills and her blue bathrobe. He even included my mother's contingent of saints. I called them Catholic action figures with non-moveable parts.

I worried about my father. He was not the same jocular man of my childhood. His cheeks have hollowed out and he never talked to anyone anymore. I told my father that I would take the box for him since his back hurt. But when I went to pick up the box next to the refrigerator, I glanced at the saints.

They were crying. Under the bright florescent kitchen lights, moisture glistened along their carved wooden cheeks.

Years have gone by and I still think of that moment. I wondered what they saw when they looked down upon us. We were a pair of nomads - my father with his moat of stoicism and me with all my stockpiling.

I went into my father's bedroom and ushered him to the living room so he of so little faith, could witness the lamenting saints. Their eyes wet with tears and their raised right hands, waiting for our bowed heads to receive their benedictions.

"Your water bottle must be leaking." He scratched his chin then pointed to my blue Evian bottle which I had tucked into the corner of the cardboard box.

I sighed. I should have known that would be his interpretation.

In mine, they were crying.

I took them all home, the saints, Mother Mary and Jesus. They now stand on my shelves, blessing my many bottles of lotion.



## CHAPTER TWO - IN THE LAST SYLLABLE OF RECORDED TIME

As she approached the restaurant, the knot in her stomach tightened and she felt nauseous. There was something about the way the light from the restaurant streamed out onto the concrete that reminded her of a stage. Her brother's former fiancée, Martha, planned this dinner with her friends months in advance then called Diana daily until she finally said, "Fine, alright, I'll come. Jesus Christ! I need to get caller ID." She then marked the date on her calendar with a jagged red X even though she knew that Martha would call her not just the day before but also the day of to remind her. She was thirty years old, ten years senior to Diana, but behaved as though she was closer to fifty. When she lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, she could almost hear Martha's disapproving sigh.

Through the front door, she spied Martha sitting on the leather bar stool in her favorite beige skirt suit with the flared hemline and beige pumps. Her hand fell away from the steel door handle as she tried to see Martha through her brother's eyes. Her honey brown hair was twisted up in a tight chignon, a few curls escaped to frame a long rather homely face. Her legs in cream colored stockings were primly crossed as she sipped her martini. Cream was Martha's favorite color. Could you even call cream a

color? And what kind of person would choose to wear something so bland? Diana grimaced. There was something about the way she was sitting like a schoolteacher or librarian with perfect posture that made Diana want to knock her over, to jostle her up. No, she didn't understand what her brother ever saw in her. *Why Jim? Why?* Martha was the exact opposite of Jim's larger than life presence that radiated charm: his loud bark of laughter, his handsome face which could mimic a wide range of expressions and emotions rendering them all so ridiculous, his perpetually crooked tie and tousled hair. Although ever since he was laid-off, his face took on a drawn, tight expression. He had lost the plumpness in his face along with his joviality.

A frigid breeze threw back the red hood of Diana's jacket and she shivered as she caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the window. The dim acetylene street lamp behind her harshly exposed the black curly mess that was her hair. She had tried combing it before she left her apartment but she kept hitting snares so she gave up. She was wearing her only button up white shirt with the red wine stain on the sleeve that she couldn't get out no matter how hard she tried and the wrinkled khaki pants that she randomly pulled out of the laundry basket. The streets were empty, most people preferring to be home wrapped in a layer of warmth and comfort the night of a big snow storm. But Martha was like the post office, neither rain, sleet, nor snow could stop her from keeping an appointment. The air had that frosty quality of stillness before snowfall quite similar to the inside of her freezer where her cookie dough ice cream sat, all alone.

She squared her shoulders as she watched Martha glance at her Cartier watch. She whispered to herself, "One, Two, Three, Look up." And as if by magic, Martha

looked out the window, her features relaxed into a smile as she greeted Diana with a beige colored wave, a glint of gold on her wrist. It was a wave that strangely filled Diana with melancholy, like the wave of a person on a faraway ship sailing off to sea who was getting smaller and smaller before vanishing into the horizon. Despite all of Martha's efforts and her brother's last wishes, Diana felt the chasm between them growing larger and larger as each day passed. Instead of smiling back, she closed her eyes briefly and whispered, "Jim, this is all your fault."

There was no place to hide and it was too late to turn around and make a run for the subway station. So she braced herself and opened the door. The scent of something cooking in rosemary and red wine greeted her and her spirits lifted ever so slightly. The décor of the little restaurant was an eclectic mix of Greek, Roman and Americana. Then she suddenly felt depressed again. She had a feeling that Martha had selected this place for its eccentricity, hoping it would make Diana feel more comfortable. It was as though the owner couldn't settle on a single theme and so blended them all together. And yet the effect remained polished, subdued and sophisticated, an elegant mishmash, with modern sleek black furniture and dark wood floors. Diana felt the muscles in her shoulder and neck tense up as she walked toward the bar.

Martha stood up erectly with her arms slightly outstretched attempting to reach out with one of her awkward hugs. Diana walked right past her and sat down on the bar stool next to her. Irritation flickered over Martha's features but then she quickly recovered and dropped her arms. Diana used to love to ape Martha's mannerisms to her

friends as they sat around in a circle smoking a joint. Among peals of laughter, she'd stand up ramrod straight and attempt to hug one of her friends with stiff arms.

“So where are they? These illustrious friends of yours?” Diana asked as she leaned against the bar. She turned to the bartender and ordered a gin and tonic.

“They'll be here any minute now. Janice is coming from a board meeting and Laura texted me that her babysitter just arrived. Janice knows a lot of famous photographers and could maybe introduce you to some of them. You might be able to land a job or at least an internship. And Laura works at Hallmark. She's a good contact for you also.” Martha's motherly tone grated on her nerves. Oh, what she was sacrificing for this woman! She could have been at home watching TV. When her brother used to talk about how Martha was a sweet girl, Diana would reply, “And sweets give you cavities, rots your teeth.”

“Uh-huh.” Diana cast the bartender a grateful look as he placed her drink on a scalloped edge ivory coaster. She picked up her drink and raised it in the air for an imaginary toast.

“I'm even on time.”

“I'm very proud of you,” Martha beamed a little too brightly. Diana sighed before drinking then tapped the blunt raw edges of her fingernails against the lacquered black counter. She paused as she noted how her black nail polish matched the gleaming surface. She looked up at the line of liquor bottles on the cherry stained shelves. She was already contemplating her next drink to help ease the gloom of her martyrdom. Then something caught her eye. Nestled between a green bottle of Midori and Jack Daniel was

an ivory double headed bust of Janus. She stared at it and whispered, “Tell me Janus, what do you see? What do you see?”

She finished her drink and squeezed her eyes shut as she fought the urge to leave the restaurant. She imagined confronting Martha and telling her to never call her again then walking out without even saying goodbye. She envisioned the satisfaction she’d feel to see on Martha’s crestfallen face. But the pleasure quickly evaporated. Her brother’s words haunted her. The last night she saw him alive over a year ago, he had pounded on her door and said he wanted to chat. He burst into her apartment stinking of alcohol and asked her for a cigarette. She rubbed her eyes sleepily as she handed him the pack that was lying on her dining room table. She had just come back from a party and was in bed falling asleep when he knocked. She thought about unrolling the sofa bed so he could crash in her living room but she was too tired to get up and get the blankets. It was three o’clock in the morning.

Tendrils of smoke left his lips as his brow furrowed.

“Hey Diana, will you do me a favor?”

“Yeah, I guess. Depends on what it is?” She sat on her sofa in her flannel pajamas and hugged a pillow to her chest, stifling a yawn.

“I know you never really liked Martha but if I went away...”

“What do you mean? Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, I’m just saying if something happened to me, will you try looking after her. You know, be her friend.”

“Seriously, what are you getting at?” Diana regarded him suspiciously. He had helped himself to a glass from her cabinet and poured himself some whiskey from the flask he always kept in his jacket pocket. Then he sat on the dining chair, his long legs stretched out before him making all the furniture seem smaller than they actually were. His red rimmed eyes held that weary look ever since he lost his job. He sported a deep six o’clock shadow which she could just imagine made Martha very unhappy.

“Nevermind. I’m not going anywhere. We just got into a huge fight and she’s over at her parents for a couple of nights to cool off. She’s mad I won’t go with her to her friend’s stupid party on a yacht. But let’s say I broke up with her or something, you know if I leave her. Will ya just reach out to her once in a while? See how she’s doing?”

“I don’t know...”

“Aw, come on. I’m not asking for a lot.”

“But she’s a real pain in the ass.”

“I know she is. But she’s a good person and you guys would be good for one another. You’d learn from one another and stuff.”

“Making me be friends with her defeats the whole purpose of you dumping her. I was kinda looking forward to the day you dump her so I won’t have to see her anymore.”

“What do you have against her?”

“She’s always acting like she’s Little Ms. Perfect and she’s constantly telling you what you can do better. It really gets on my nerves. And why can’t she just let up on you instead of being a constant nag?”

“It’s just an act, Diana, she does it to hide all her insecurities. And deep down she’s just trying to help. She thinks she’s making a difference in another person’s life.”

“Well, if you’re defending her then why would you break up with her? I mean seriously, don’t get my hopes up for nothing.”

“She’s not a bad person.”

“Fine, then marry her. That’s better than forcing me to be friends with her.”

“Please, I’m just asking for this one thing.”

“Why?”

“She has to put up with a whole lot with me. I’m not the easiest person to get along with.” His face held that haggard expression she had gotten so used to. He rubbed his forehead with both hands then looked up at her.

“And she really likes you. She has ... a difficult time connecting with people. She’s not like you. You’ve always had a close, tight-knit group of friends but with her, even the few friends she makes, those friendships don’t tend to last very long.”

“That’s because she’s fucking annoying.”

“Come on.”

“And she can’t seem to see people beyond their job titles or bank statements. I just don’t get why you guys are even together. She’s so different from you. What about Cindy? I really liked Cindy. You guys were really happy together.”

“Cindy dumped me because she kept pushing me to get help. She called me an alcoholic, that I use alcohol as a crutch to escape problems in my life. That was fucking annoying.”

“Right,” she said hesitantly then she decided to let that one go. Considering the mood he was in, she decided it wasn’t the right time.

“All I’m asking is that you be nice to Martha. She’s not that bad.” He sat back in his chair with his legs spread out. He gave her his famous puppy dog look, the one that charmed all the ladies.

“Whatever. Fine. Alright.”

“She may act tough. But you’re the tough one Diana, you’re the strong one. And if she can’t handle me leaving, she can turn to you.”

“I really liked Cindy...” He ignored her comment and looked past her, out the window at the night sky.

“And one more thing...”

“What now?”

“Look after Mom for me.”

“Jim, what the hell is this about?” She sat up.

“Nothing. Nevermind.” She felt a flash of anger because he had been acting like such a wet blanket these days and she really just wanted him to snap out of it. She was also tired. When he left, she felt incredibly depressed. Every interaction she had with him those days depressed her.

“Did you get my birthday present?” Diana cringed as Martha’s high pitched voice assailed her. The camera Martha sent her for her birthday, the one with all the bells and whistles was the top of the line product that all aspiring photographers ached for. It was sitting on the floor in her bedroom, under a pile of dirty laundry, unopened and



untouched. For a brief moment, Diana wished she could be grateful. She wished she could feel something. She also wished her brother never showed Martha her photography or her paintings.

“Yes I did.”

The door opened, letting in an icy, brisk breeze in the small restaurant as Martha’s friends walked in. Diana took one look at them and briefly regretted wearing sneakers. The stick skinny one called Laura, gave Martha a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She was wearing a white cashmere sweater, neatly pressed beige silk pants, matching pumps and her wrists and hands sparkled from all the gold jewelry. Diana raised her eyes toward the ceiling with a pained expression as the two of them exclaimed loudly how great the other one looked.

“Did you lose weight Laura?”

“Yes I did! It’s this new diet I’m on...” Diana muttered under her breath, “It’s called starvation.” Martha’s smile became a little strained as she pretended not to hear Diana.

Janice stood off to the side in her black pants suit and dark red pumps. Her blond hair was raked back in a severe bun and as her green eyes quickly took in Diana’s attire, they widened ever so slightly. She was cool in her greeting.

“Martha, why did you choose this place?” Janice asked as she surveyed the restaurant with a frown.

“It’s so... odd.”

“I thought we could try a new place, thought it might be fun.” Janice didn’t seem to agree. Her lips pursed as though she had just bitten into something quite bitter.

“And why Brooklyn of all places? It would have been so much easier to meet up in the City. Laura and I had to take a cab to get here,” she drawled.

“Well, heaven forbid! How awful that must have been for you!” Diana blurted out as they were all seated. Janice shot her a malevolent look. Martha cast uneasy glances around the table.

“Well, isn’t it nice to branch out a little and experiment?” Martha said cheerfully with a wide smile plastered on her face. She didn’t say what the true reason was but Diana knew. The restaurant was close to Diana’s apartment and gave her one less reason to bail. She felt another flash of irritation.

Martha turned to Laura and said, “Remember Holly who came out to lunch with us last week, the VP of Sales?”

“Yes! A lovely girl,” Laura exclaimed then patted her lips lightly with her napkin.

“She just quit! She announced to all of us during our monthly sales meeting that she is taking a year off from work and traveling the world! Isn’t that insane? In this economy, she’ll be lucky if she finds anything at all when she comes back. I was shocked. And I thought she was a bright girl. It really is not a smart move.”

“Martha, has it ever occurred to you that if someone doesn’t do something you agree with, it doesn’t immediately put them in the wrong?” asked Diana.

Laura who had just lifted a fork to her lips with a single leaf on it, nearly choked. She turned slightly pink as she coughed and drank water.

“No Diana, it’s not that I think it’s wrong. I think it’s unwise.” Martha folded her hands and looked at Diana as though she was a child who refused to wash behind her ears.

“Can’t you just be more tolerant of other people’s life choices? Must you pass judgment and assert your opinion on every little thing a person does?”

“I am very tolerant,” Martha replied with the sort of top quality steel in her voice that ended discussions. Diana said nothing as a busboy came and refilled their glasses of water.

As the waiter took their entree orders, Janice stared at Diana as if at an animal in a zoo. Diana tried to ignore the stare, focusing on buttering her bread and taking small bites then drinking her water. When the waiter left, Janice leaned forward with her sharp elbows on the table and said, “Diana, I hear you need to find a job. It’s good that you’re finally getting your life back in order.”

Diana was about to retort that she did have a job but the words died on her lips as she glanced around the table. These ladies wouldn’t consider dog walking a “real” job and she didn’t think she could tolerate the pity in their eyes if they knew she picked up dog shit for a living. Plus, she was still upset about losing her biggest client, Susan, a wealthy single woman who paid her a ridiculous amount for walking her pampered Bichon Frise, a rather unfriendly dog named Muffin. On Diana’s first day, Susan handed her a typed list of specific requests. Number five stated that Muffin was never to be

exposed to second hand smoke even outdoors. Diana regularly broke this rule while sitting on a park bench watching the pigeons gather around a tin of bread crumbs left there by a homeless woman. But one day Susan had left work early, came to the park and caught Diana lifting the glowing red ember to her lips. Susan narrowed her eyes as she marched toward her and Muffin. The dumb dog sat up wagging her tail, attracting even more attention. Diana hastily threw the cigarette on the floor and covered it up with her foot. But it was too late. She had the worst luck in the world.

“By the way, I’m sorry about your brother. That’s *so* tragic.” But there was something about Janice’s tone that didn’t seem sorry at all. It was almost confrontational.

Diana immediately stiffened and shot a look at Martha who refused to meet her eyes. Laura cast nervous glances at both Janice and Martha. Janice seemed completely oblivious to all of this.

“Yeah, I’d really rather not talk about it,” Diana replied. Laura was attempting to silence Janice with a look but Janice waved her hand as though dismissing all of their delicacies of feeling.

“But that must have been a really difficult time for you. Weren’t you the one who found him? I can’t imagine what that must have been like.” Janice continued, her eyes piercing through Diana as though she was some curious surgeon who was probing and poking a patient’s heart with a scalpel. She could just imagine what Janice would have been like as a doctor. Everybody, this is what an aching heart looks like, an emotional wreck. Come, come take a look. Diana was furious.

“You can’t imagine can you? You want to know the details don’t you? He shot himself and bled to death. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Diana, please.” But Diana couldn’t stop. Once she said those words, the memories she had been trying block out of her mind came flooding forward. Her heart raced.

“There was a huge gaping wide whole in his cheek. I didn’t even know he had a gun! By the time I got there, it was too late.”

“Diana, please. It was an innocent question.”

“No Laura, it wasn’t just an innocent question. She wants all the gory details. She wants to know exactly what happened and how awful it was so she can tell all her friends about it.”

She turned to Janice with a fierce look and said, “It destroyed our family. It destroyed me. That’s what you want to know, isn’t it? You want to know how I’ve been coping don’t you? Well, it really sucked.”

Ever since her brother’s death, Diana felt every sorrow and felt every pain magnified to the point of extreme aggravation. A little boy at the mall calling for his mom would reduce her to tears. Perhaps she was still overly sensitive. Perhaps she needed more distance. She sometimes used alcohol to numb the pain. She remembered waking up the morning her brother shot himself, blinking in the blinding sunlight. She felt that something was wrong and yet she couldn’t pin point exactly what it was. Then she thought of her late night conversation with her brother. His vague responses, his blank stare and she thought how irritating he was when he acted that way. She didn’t

think it was urgent to go to his apartment and check on him. After all, he was a grown man and could take care of himself. She had gotten used to his morose ways. By the early afternoon, after she spent the morning running errands, shopping for groceries and dropping off the mail, she decided to stop off at his apartment. She called him several times but he didn't answer. That was her first inclination that something wasn't right, a niggling feeling in the back of her mind. So she walked over there. She knocked on his door and there was no answer. She felt anxious as she searched in her bag for a spare key. She couldn't find it then she remembered he kept a spare under the mat which she always chided him for doing. This was New York, you can't trust anyone.

She picked up the key and unlocked the door. When she saw her brother slumped over on the couch, her first thought was he had drunk himself to sleep. But then she noticed the blood, it had collected in a large pool on the floor where it mingled with white feathers. Sunlight streamed in through the broken blinds. He had held a pillow next to his cheek to minimize the sound of the gunshot. Feathers clung to his blood stained cheek and the gaping hole there. Even if she had wanted to scream, she couldn't. Someone had knocked on the door behind her. Jim's neighbor, a retired librarian, stood in the doorway.

"Diana is that you? I had been knocking on Jim's door all morning. I heard a loud bang last night. It sounded like he knocked something over awful."

"Diana?" She reached over and fumbled with the eyeglasses hanging from a plastic strap around her neck. She strained to see the blurry figure in front of her. She finally pushed the glasses onto her nose and stepped toward the sofa.

“Oh my Lord!” she whispered. “Diana, you stay right here, let me call the ambulance. Oh Jim!”

Diana picked up the pillow and squeezed it tight in her arms, releasing a fist full of down. The feathers floated toward the floor as though dancing in the sunlight. Behind her, a door opened in the hallway, the sound of dinner cooking reached her ears, the clatter of a pan hitting the stove, the rustle of a plastic grocery bag and the sizzle of frying onions.

Had she walked into someone else’s room, a stranger’s room, she probably would have reacted rather than this paralyzing numbness. She would have screamed or shouted out in horror. But this was her brother, someone she knew since she entered into this world. He took care of her, helped raise her. To embarrass her, he told all her friends how he used to change her diapers. She could only stare at him in disbelief as though she had walked into a dream that she knew she could wake up from.

Then she reached down and clutched his bloody hand. It was cold.

In the restaurant, Laura reached over and placed her hand on top of Diana’s. She shuddered and yanked her hand off the table. Then she stood up, put her coat on and left.

The frigid air hit her flushed face as she pushed her way out of the suddenly stifling restaurant. She blinked back tears. With effort, she willed away the image of her brother’s slumped body. She forced herself to think of anything else. She looked up at the sky. Big white snowflakes began to fall, swirling through the air, hitting the wet concrete and immediately melting. She always thought how sad it was that something as beautiful as a snowflake was so impermanent. She imagined herself as a small flying

insect and how she'd have to zoom past those falling shards of ice. And she would have preferred that over the emotional mine fields that came with human interactions. How nice it would be to be a hermit in the woods. She heard Martha's heels hitting the pavement behind her.

"Diana," she called out. "I'm sorry." Diana turned around and stood for a moment staring at Martha. The anger welled up inside her.

"I didn't think Janice would say anything."

"How could you tell her? Why would you even tell her something like that?"

"Janice is a really good friend of mine. She wants to help you too. Diana, you need to get a job or at least go back to college and finish your degree. It's time to join the land of the living. You can't stay this way forever. As hard as it is, life goes on."

"That's easy for you to say." Diana pictured the ever widening gulf between her and Martha, the thin lines of obligation snapping. She had that image again of Martha on a ship, her glittering cruise ship life, drifting farther and farther away from her and she deeply resented this.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's as though his death hasn't even affected you."

"Just because I hold it in, I keep it together to take care of my responsibilities doesn't mean I don't feel the pain of losing him. I loved him."

"Did you really?" In that split second before the words left her mouth, she knew she was making a crucial choice, down that infinite decision tree pathway of life. She could have stopped herself and gone in a different direction. But she could feel her grief



gathering strength within her, like a snake rearing back its head before it lashes out for the final kill.

“Martha, why don’t you admit the truth? If you really cared about him, you would have gotten him some help. You didn’t say anything about his drinking because you didn’t want to do anything that’d risk not getting a ring on your finger. Now he’s not here anymore. Good job.”

Martha took a wobbly step back as she leaned her hand against the glass window. For the first time, Diana noticed the crow’s feet along Martha’s eyes, the years etching their way across her face. A few moments passed by in silence as the wind swirled the snow around them coating their hair white as though they had suddenly become old ladies.

“If you really did love him, he would still be here,” Diana finally said.

Martha paled and looked as though she had just been slapped. Without a word, she turned around and went back into the restaurant. For a brief moment, Diana was grimly satisfied with the look of pain on Martha’s face. But it left as quickly as it came and she was filled with regret. She turned to walk back home. She felt this urgent need to blame this all on someone. And she knew Martha was the easy target. She was so tired of blaming herself. The snowflakes clung to her cheeks and lashes as she blinked away the tears. In her mind, she went over the million and one ways she could have changed the past. She could have paid more attention to the signs. She could have reached out more.

All her various scenarios led to different endings, happier ones. The night he knocked on her door, she imagined a past where she got the blankets out of her closet and made him sleep on her sofa despite all his protesting. She wasn't too lazy to unroll the sofa bed and get him towels. In the morning, she'd make coffee and they would have joked about how drunk he was. She would have found out about the gun and what he was planning to do and she would have gotten rid of it then he would have promised her he'd never do anything so foolish. But when she woke up from this reverie, the outcome was always the same. Her mom used to say, "The world is filled with should haves."

On most days she was able to go through the motions of living. She got herself out of bed, brushed her teeth, checked the mail, even paid the bills on time and made jokes that got her mother to laugh mostly at Martha's expense about her anal retentive ways. Her mom would shake her head and say, "That girl needs to make her peace with chaos because we're surrounded by it. You simply can't control every aspect of your life. You'll go crazy trying." Diana would smile and reply, "Amen" then she'd help her mom into her wheelchair and take her to the park for some fresh air. But then there were the other days.

After she got home, she threw her keys on her dining table and ran her fingers through her hair. She tried not to think of the pain she caused Martha. Outside her window the flurries of snow fell furiously, whiting out the dark night sky. She walked to the kitchen where there were three cups lining the edge of the counter. One wine glass, one shot glass and one tall plastic cup for water. When she used one, she'd rinse it then place it back on the counter in that exact order. Lately, she had been forcing herself to

choose the cup for water. But that night was a shot glass night. She grabbed the glass and bottle of Tequila then walked into the living room.

She picked up the old, worn video cassette on her coffee table and put it in the squeaky VHS player. She had been watching this homemade video over and over again because she so vividly remembered the event. She was about four years old. Her brother was performing in a high school play. When he got on stage to say, “The Queen, my lord, is dead,” she jumped out of her seat, her heart pounding as she ran up the aisle. The audience members glanced curiously in her direction. Some smiled as she shouted “That’s my brother up there! That’s my brother! Hi Jim!” The bright stage lights were blinding. She remembered desperately wanting to climb onto the huge imposing platform to hug her brother. She needed to get to him. She tried climbing up on stage but her mother had rushed to grab her and carried her back to her seat. She turned around and with her arms outstretched, she watched her brother standing in the spot light. He seemed to glow. He fell out of character for a brief moment and laughed.

He had told her once, “Remember that time I was in that play and you ran up to the stage, shouting my name? You were hollering at the top of your lungs!” He chuckled then said, “You made me feel like the most important person in the room. It was so cool.”

Diana would rewind the clip, where the video camera her mother was holding was pointed to the red carpeted floor. The shadows of men’s shoes and women’s shoes jostled into view as her mother carried her back to her seat. She had struggled for a little while. She heard her mother’s soft voice attempting to placate her. Someone on stage

was saying in a deep baritone, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools...”

As the TV screen darkened, she heard the shuffling of feet, then she heard herself saying as a little girl, “No Mom, I’d rather be with Jim. Let me go. Let me go up there,” while her mother whispered, “hush, hush,” before the tape rolled out into blackness. She remembered the way her mother held her tightly so she couldn’t break free again to run up on stage. She finally relinquished herself to her mother’s steely embrace. Instead, she settled back in her seat in the shadows and watched her brother perform in a play that was beyond her comprehension.

### CHAPTER THREE – LIFE LESSONS

Here are some things I've learned. People who leave you don't come back no matter how much you might hope that they do. You're better off just letting go of that hope real fast otherwise it will turn into something ugly, bitter and mean-spirited. Here's another tip, when you do the laundry, always remember to clasp the bibs on the back otherwise the Velcro will stick to your clothes and might tear a blouse you were hoping to wear to an interview. I've learned that I don't need hope but I always carry a washcloth in my purse for when my baby spits up, drools or has a runny nose. And a pacifier is handy too.

Those are the items which line the bottom of my purse along with a tube of lipstick that's now crusted over from lack of use. The need to maintain appearances is long gone. I've come to understand that a man who needs to see me in make-up will not take well to waking up at three in the morning for a crying child. And they sure get pissy when you cancel on them at the last minute because junior has a fever. Then you never hear from them again so I ask myself, what's the point?

Whenever I drop off Rose before I head to work, my mom will say to me, "Honey, you've got to at least put in some effort."

"I'm trying the best that I can," I say.

“No you’re not. You look like death run over.” She pulls Rose’s chubby arm away from where she’s reaching up for grandma’s reading glasses. She’s already broken two of them. I offered to pay for them but we both know that ain’t happening. Not until I get a new job.

There are a lot of things I need to buy once that happens. In my mind, I already spent several of those paychecks, all on the baby. I wish one of those things I could buy was a father.

I still remember what Dan Quayle said about a certain television character that she was “mocking the importance of fathers by birthing a child alone.”

He was also the man who told a twelve year old at a spelling bee that the boy misspelled potato because he left out the “e.”

“The future will be better tomorrow.” That’s another quote of his. He also said, “I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy, but that could change.”

When I think of Dan Quayle, I’ve wondered if maybe he weren’t just setting himself up for a career as a stand-up comic and somehow he got waylaid into becoming a politician because he looked good. Then Bush called him up, asking him to be VP and he said sure, that’s something I can do to pass the time while I build up an audience. I’ve been waiting for him to make an announcement like, “Hey, now that I’m done with the White House, come see me on the road. I’ll be performing at the Berkshire Tuesday night.” Maybe that was his goal all along but then people took him way too seriously, got real angry with him and he just gave up on his dream.

My husband was always wanting something different, something more out of life.

One time, he told me he wanted to be a zoo keeper. But I told him while I was washing the dishes, “Izzy...” His name is Ezekiel but we all called him Izzy. “How are you gonna take care of all those animals when I can’t even get you to change a diaper? Do you know how much poop you have to clean up in an elephant’s cage?”

He turned to me and said, “You’re a destroyer of dreams Maggie. That’s what you are.”

He then took a swig of his beer and turned the tv on to watch Jeopardy. He always gets all the answers wrong but then pretends he knew what the right answer was all along. He’s like the supposed prophet in my mom’s church who after some natural disaster will stand up and say, “Yeah, I knew that was going to happen. But God told me to keep quiet so you all can learn something by it.”

Sometimes I would indulge Izzy and pretend I believe he’s this wizard of Jeopardy. It was better than arguing with him.

In high school, I knew girls who used to call Izzy’s house just to hear him say hello. Then they’d hang up. They stopped talking to me after we started dating. I think they thought I told him. I never did.

But to this day I keep telling myself, I should have gone for the brains.

After years of trying to become a famous guitarist who never practiced, Izzy ended up becoming a Maytag repairman. He’d come home complaining, “Those washing machines are a piece of shit. And these women calling me all day? They think I’ve got nothing to do because of those stupid damn commercials.”

He got riled up so much that he lost his job one day.

“I ain’t gonna come in and fix that piece of crap. Just throw it out,” he told an old lady on the phone.

He then left. He decided he had enough of me, Rose and especially Maytag. We had all Maytag appliances because of a special discount he’d gotten from work. That night the dishwasher started leaking. He didn’t even repair it before he left.

I found out he was gone when I came home from work. His side of the closet was completely wiped clean. The only thing he left was his Maytag repairman uniform with his name embroidered on his front right side pocket, Izzy, in blue thread.

To this day, I feel like Maytag owes me. One day I’ll write them a customer complaint letter.

“Dear Maytag,

The poor quality of your appliances has led to the dissolution of my marriage. Please stop selling such pieces of shit.

Sincerely,

Maggie

I really did like Mr. Quayle. Though I never finished high school, I always felt smarter than the Vice President. It was a good feeling. No one likes to feel condescended upon. I think that’s the reason why people voted for Bush Junior. Al Gore was the smart one. But people said he was too stiff or arrogant. They saw him and thought he thought he was better than the rest of us. The rest of the world thought we were all crazy. I do wonder if the Nobel was in part a consolation prize.



I too had a choice before I got married and like some Americans I chose the stupid one. The smart one, he's a corporate lawyer. He's now happily married with two daughters, living in a beach house in Malibu. I google him every now and then with my mother's computer. My classmates were all abuzz about the extravagant debutante balls he threw for his two girls. After I heard, I kissed Rose's soft cheeks while she slept. It's a lesson in heartache.

He was the one who figured out how to pick my locker open, leave little things for me to find like an iris wrapped in cellophane, a Georgia O'Keefe coffee table book and once, a fine porcelain tea cup with blue bells painted along the rim. The other one, well, he just looked good without his shirt on.

I waitress at a jungle themed chain restaurant where there are items on the menu like Lava Nachos or Chimi-Chimi-Cha-Cha. Where a house salad isn't just a house salad but a Paradise Chopped Salad and the Cobb is a Volcanic Cobb. We have a Rumble in the Jungle Turkey Wrap and a Tribal Salmon.

When a customer complains about service or the food, our manager will hand him or her a complimentary coupon. The card reads, "We're so sorry. We promise to do a better job next time. Please enjoy a free side of Nachos on us next time you visit. Because our mistakes are... Nach-yo problem."

We've only seen one customer use that card, a tired mom with three kids. There must be thirty floating out there probably in wastebaskets.

I've tried to get a new job. Waitressing wasn't a life choice I made. It was something I started doing when I was a teenager and got good tips for because of how I looked. One morning, I saw a job for an administrative assistant position in the newspaper. I guess they were paying by letter because they shortened the title to Administrative Ass. I got all ready that morning smeared on some lipstick which was dry and left spots of pigment on my lips and teeth. I took out my blouse and found Rose's bib clinging to it which ripped a small hole in the front near my right boob.

I went to put Rose in the car seat when she vomited down the back of my shirt and on my hair. I probably shouldn't have even bothered going to that interview.

My mom used to say that all that money she threw at pageant classes, those speech classes, and singing lessons were a waste of money. She thought I was beautiful for a reason not to become someone's marital mishap.

I was supposed to be the wife of a doctor, lawyer or politician. Instead, I got pregnant at seventeen. Rose came much later because I was stupid enough to stay with the man who gave me a baby I wasn't allowed to keep.

Did you know there's a fashion magazine called Seventeen? When I sat in the Planned Parenthood waiting room with my mom, I flipped through those glossy pages with those twiggy legged, porcelain girls. There's never a pregnant girl on any of those pages, not even an article about pregnancy. But there should be. What are they shying away from? Hundreds of girls out there like me. Actually, a million a year is what I heard. That's a marketing niche no one has tapped into.

Things that I've learned. Coffee will stain white porcelain china after a while. To get those stains out, dip it in Ajax and let it soak to bleach it back white again. Then take that delicate piece and put it back in the cupboard where it will collect dust and use a big ole chipped coffee cup instead. Life doesn't give you much room for delicate china but you're gonna need the coffee.

## CHAPTER FOUR - THE PARIAH

The whispers were so faint. Gregory could barely hear them but more than once he thought he heard his name. He turned to look except whoever was whispering would suddenly hush and avoid his gaze. As he passed the water cooler, two female paralegals were saying, "Did you hear?" "Yes, it's him. I'm sure of it," said the blonde. When he glanced in their direction, the brunette pretended to admire a potted fern and the blonde began making copies. Her face glowed ominously in the electric green light. The brunette stroked a fern leaf and exclaimed, "Oh, it *is* real!" Once behind him, the whispers resumed at a heightened pace.

His mind whirled with the possible scenarios. Did he overbill a client? No, that wasn't possible. He rarely made mistakes. Were they gossiping about his affair with Alice, the temp he fired last month? Guilt tinged his visage a rosy hue as he loosened his necktie. He left the law office to head to the mini-mart which he rarely did since he so often preferred to work right through lunch. He picked up a can of Red Bull and waited impatiently for the cashier, who chewed his lower lip as he watched the news on the small television set next to the cash register. The cashier, a young Hispanic man in his

mid-thirties, not much older than Gregory, finally noticed Gregory standing there and recoiled.

Bedecked in a frayed Redskins sweatshirt and cap, the cashier backed up against the wall with his hands held out. He said in an unfriendly tone, “It’s on the house, keep your money.” He then eyed the crisp twenty dollar bill Gregory had placed on the counter as though it was a weapon. What the hell? Did he think he was there for a handout? He pocketed the cash, left the Red Bull and turned to leave. The cashier hollered after him, “Get your goddamn can off my counter.” The other customers paused to stare at Gregory. So he snatched the soda then pointed at the profile of the feathered Indian emblazoned on the cashier’s chest and said, “Look buddy, it’s not my fault the Redskins lost... again. Don’t take it out on me.”

Outside, he threw his drink into a trashcan. Then slowly, he rubbed his left hand which began to tremble.

When he walked into the lobby of his office building, the silver elevator doors glinted in the afternoon sunlight as they closed. He rushed towards them and they glided open revealing the new HR assistant. He smiled slowly, admiring her long legs in a short black skirt. She grimaced, hastily took her hand off the button then left. Her steps rang out as she went pounding up the stairs. And his thoughts immediately went to Alice. Inter-office romances were strictly forbidden. He deeply regretted going home with her that one night.

In his office, Gregory rubbed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. Three co-workers furtively glanced at him as they rushed down the hallway. He threw the

deposition he was trying to read back on his desk. Though the deadline his boss assigned him was a frivolous one, he felt compelled to finish this particular project if only for the pure purpose of promptness. Above all else, he adored the simplistic beauty of punctuality. He often envisioned utopia as a world where everyone wore watches and lead tidy regimented lives.

Gregory stared out the window at the frozen bare branches. He always suspected that his boss instinctively disliked him. He came from hard-working blue-collar stock; his father was a mechanic and his mother, a secretary. He worked vigorously for everything he owned. Meanwhile, his boss from his place of privilege was taken aback when Gregory had chastised him for his frequent “client” meetings which involved long golf outings. Then the thought dawned on him: he was getting fired! That would explain why they were acting as if he had the plague.

He marched over to his boss’ office only to find Hampton Thompson III absent. However, Gregory had all afternoon to wait for him. He glanced around the spacious corner office; the oak desk with carved lion’s feet, jade lamps and brown bonded leather chairs. Furniture Gregory helped fund with all the hours he billed clients. He wasn’t going to make this easy. He was the most diligent and dedicated litigator in the whole firm. They needed him. Though after Gregory’s last lecture, his boss began giving him the more tedious clients. Settling into an armchair, he kept tugging at his tie then stopped and pressed his hands against the cool surface of the leather armrests.

A minute later, he got up, strode towards the window and stood there massaging his temple. The people below resembled little insects scurrying about as they crossed

streets, stopping off to buy coffee or rush home. Then something lying on the white window sill caught his attention. He leaned closer and noticed it was a large dead fly. The still body had an iridescent green sheen in the florescent light. And he wondered how long did it bump up against that glass plate before expiring of pure exhaustion? An unusual thought for Gregory on an unusual day. He normally didn't reflect on the sufferings of others.

His boss finally arrived and turned pale when he saw Gregory standing next to his desk. He started to turn around but froze when Gregory called out, "Hampton, a minute please. I'd really like to speak to you."

"Of course, Gregory," Hampton said and held the office door open as though there was a bad smell in the room. His forehead glistened with perspiration, and his steel rimmed glasses edged down the bridge of his nose. Gregory observed him curiously. He had never seen his boss this nervous. Then before he could say anything, Hampton spoke.

"Gregory, I wanted to commend you on what a fine job you're doing these days. And when I have more time, we'll talk about your raise and eventual partnership. Unfortunately, I'm quite busy at the moment." Hampton rushed out the last few words so quickly he practically squeaked.

Gregory smiled. He crossed the room, held out his hand to Hampton and said "Thank you." But his boss went rigid and pale.

“I’m so sorry Gregory. But my hand hurts. A polo injury, you see, and I simply can’t shake anyone’s hands these days. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really have to get going.”

Gregory watched his boss scurry away. He had never seen such timid behavior before. Shaking his head, he mumbled to himself, “I should have asked for a raise sooner.”

When he stepped out of his boss’ office, everyone was wearing blue surgical masks. He whirled around but no one made eye contact and behaved instead as though he was horribly disfigured. Hurrying to his desk, he tried to ignore them all, preferring to bury himself in the logistics of his client’s upcoming trial. Had everyone gone insane? He tried to still the panic rising up his throat. But he couldn’t look away from all those masked faces floating past his office. One middle aged woman in particular caught his attention. He didn’t believe she even worked at the law firm. She had bobbed black hair, wore a blue Oxford shirt that matched her mask and held a silver clipboard to her chest. Her hands were encased in white latex gloves.

He picked up his pages of notes and looked for a stapler but there wasn’t one in his office. So he used the one on the desk of his secretary who was out on maternity leave. That same black haired woman rushed over with a bottle of Clorox. She sprayed down the stapler and wiped off his fingerprints with a paper towel. She then took off her gloves and pumped disinfecting hand sanitizer gel – a bottle of which she kept strapped



to her belt like a gun - onto her fingers. Once she thoroughly rubbed her hands, she snapped her gloves back on.

Gregory backed away and left the room. He went to the bathroom and the mailroom clerk, Jeff, hastily zipped up his pants and ran out without even a hello. Gregory stared into the mirror to see if he looked different somehow. But he looked exactly the same. He pushed back his brown hair, rubbed his smooth cheeks and touched his aquiline nose to see what seemed to scare everyone. He splashed water on his face and hoped someone would walk in to tell him this was some practical joke. But their intense anxiety hung in the air like a thick fog. It was too palpable to be fake.

He went straight into his office to get his black wool coat. As he was leaving, his suit jacket caught the tip of a file protruding from the edge of the receptionist's desk and it fell, unleashing a large stack of sheets. He picked up the papers and placed them back on her desk. However Cathy, the receptionist, glanced at those pages as though a rat had crawled out of the sewer and walked across them. She covered her mouth and ran to the bathroom.

Sweat dripped down his nose and his white shirt was plastered to his back and armpits. The office was stifling hot and there seemed to be more people there than usual. Someone then opened a window and he felt immediate relief as a cold breeze hit his face when the realization dawned. Most certainly, someone opened the window because of his very presence.

“What is wrong with you people?” he yelled at the several masked faces staring at him but no one responded. Clusters of co-workers gathered as far away from him as possible and when he moved toward them, they scattered. He had to leave.

Because his hand shook and rattled the pages he was trying to read, he stored away the deposition in his briefcase. Instead, he surveyed his fellow passengers on the metro from DC to Arlington and was relieved to find that no one took notice of him. Under the yellow florescent lights, they read newspapers, books, listened to music or napped. His eyes flickered from face to face, the businessman, the nanny, the mom, the student, the secretary and the construction worker. They looked drawn and worn out from tedium of quotidian life. Sinking back into his seat, he closed his eyes.

He listened to the rumbling of the train, the incoherent speech of the conductor, the ding-ding of the door and the shuffling feet of passengers. He listened to the rhythm of life all around and the sounds soothed him. All would return to status quo on the morrow he hoped.

Suddenly, the jumbled words of the conductor jarred his reveries. When he opened his eyes, ice slithered through his veins. Across the aisle was a large man with a thick, rosy neck who stared at Gregory with intense loathing.

Though it was a cold January day, the man wore only a black t-shirt that displayed the many snake tattoos winding through his bulging biceps. And the skin on top of his head was so shiny it gleamed. Had he ever met this man before? Was he a former high school or college classmate? But the face did not trigger any memories.

Gregory was never particularly popular so he doubted this man was an acquaintance of anyone he knew. Relieved that his stop was next, he exited and turned around. The man was still glaring at him. Then as the train pulled away from the station, the man smiled sinisterly, held up his hand as though it was a gun pointed at Gregory, and with his middle finger, squeezed an imaginary trigger. Gregory took a shaky step back. The other passengers were oblivious to the exchange in their brightly lit car. They left him behind at that darkened station under dim yellow lights.

At home at last, he raked his fingers through his hair as he went over the bizarre events of that day. Then the telephone rang, practically screeching through the empty house. He jumped up to answer it and his mother's voice came through the static.

"Gregory! Is it true? What they're saying? I've been going out of my mind. Please, please tell me it's not true..." Her voice was cut off as his dad took the phone. He could hear his mom wailing in the background.

"Gregory, your mom is in hysterics. But we're calming her down. The doctors are giving her something right now." His mom stopped sobbing then moaned softly.

"Where is she? What is she talking about?"

"Her blood pressure is all out of whack. She can't think clearly. We're at the hospital."

"Which one? I'm coming over right now."

"Now son, don't do anything rash. She's doing just fine. The doctors are watching over her. Promise me, you won't come here. Just sit tight and wait at the

house. We'll be there soon to visit you. You're in serious trouble..." But his father's calm voice was suddenly cut off and the line went dead.

He picked up the phone to try to call the hospitals but there was no dial tone. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone but it was missing. He must have left it at the office. There was no way he was going back to retrieve it.

He was exhausted and drained. This couldn't be real. He went early to bed hoping that he'd wake up in the morning and realize it was all a nightmare. However, upon waking, he checked his phone line but it was still dead. The phone's silence felt cold and so callous. He checked his briefcase and the deposition he took home was still there. For the first time in ten years, he did not go to work. When he envisioned the relief on those masked faces, he felt even more depressed. So he stayed in bed until hunger pangs drove him out. The afternoon sun cast his sparse room a pinkish hue as he brushed his teeth. By the time he put on his coat, lengthening shadows had chased the sun across the sky, blotting out its light completely.

The few pedestrians he passed on the street seemed to recognize him when they saw his face in the orange glow of the streetlights. They balked then quickly crossed to the other side while he muttered angrily to himself.

He halted at a diner where he watched the lively scene of families and friends having dinner. He felt an aching loneliness as he thought of his empty house. His stomach growled again so he went in. The waitress saw him first. She froze and dropped

the tall glass of chocolate milk she was holding. The high school kids glanced at him grabbed their book bags and ran out the back door. Other patrons followed.

Pretty soon the diner was empty and he lost his appetite. Harry Nilsson sang from the jukebox, *“I can’t see their faces. Only the shadows of their eyes. I’m going where the sun keeps shining through the pouring rain...”*

He massaged his trembling hand, sat on a red stool and caught a glimpse of himself in the stainless steel countertop. Haggard, worn out and miserable, he barely recognized himself. Then he heard shuffling and the scraping of a fork against a plate. Following the noise, he headed to the back of the diner where an old Asian lady was sitting alone in a red booth, cutting up her meatloaf piece by piece. She smiled at him not unkindly.

“So you’re the one who chased them all out of here.”

“Why didn’t you leave too?”

Ignoring him, she cut her butter biscuit into tiny pieces and dipped them into gravy. Then she took a bite and chewed thoughtfully as though preparing to say something very wise.

“Can you be a doll and go get me a chocolate milkshake?”

“I don’t know how to make one,” he snapped.

“There’s one right up there on the counter. You see that silver canister? The waitress was just about to serve it to a bratty five year old. Then you walked in and I get a milkshake and my whole meal for free. Now isn’t that nice?”

He took a deep breath, fetched her milkshake and set it before her with a loud clatter. Then he slid into the booth and stared out the window. The streets were completely deserted as though everyone ran home to take shelter from him. He put his head in his hands.

“What’s going on?”

She lifted a fork to her mouth and took another bite of her meatloaf.

“Now the only advice I have is don’t give in to the violence like the others did.”

Her words wound their way into his heart and he gave a start. It was as though she glimpsed into his soul and felt the darkness there.

“Why aren’t you running away from me?”

She laughed and shook her head. “Nothing scares me anymore.”

She ate quietly for a moment before saying, “I was a little girl in Vietnam, hiding in the cupboards when Vietcong soldiers raided our house. From a small crack in the wood, I watched my whole family get executed. You think I’d be afraid of someone like you? No. I’ve seen evil. You’re just a scared rabbit. You don’t look like a killer to me.”

“So they’re saying I’m a killer? Well, that’s an easy fix.”

“Yeah, that’s what you think,” she said and sighed.

She took another sip of her milkshake then continued, “Remember the shooting fifteen years ago that made the headlines when a crazed Vietnamese man walked into an elementary school with a gun?”

“Yes, vaguely.”

“At the very moment it was occurring. My husband was home with me and was just about as shocked as I was when his face appeared on screen as the shooter.”

“What happened to him?” Gregory asked, squeezing the cloth napkin he was holding.

“I honestly don’t know. I haven’t seen him since he left the house to go to the police station and straighten out what he thought was a case of mistaken identity.”

“They said on the news he killed all those kids then shot himself.”

“Yes, and that story never changed.”

“Why didn’t you fight it?”

“I did.” She closed her eyes.

Her voice trembled as she continued, “I woke up in the psychiatric ward and was officially diagnosed a lunatic. Driven to insanity by grief is what they’ve been saying about me. Everyone else vilified me as the wife of the devil. I’ve been homeless for the last ten years.”

“You’ve had some seriously shitty luck.”

Her eyes fluttered open as she snorted. “Tell me about it.”

“For a long time after the shooting, the Vietnamese community was ostracized. You only need one face of fear but you can keep a whole ethnic group in check with it. Never underestimate fear. It’s a powerful weapon.”

“But why me?”

“You’re not Jewish?”

“No.”

“Well, this is new. You must have really pissed someone off.”

When the old woman had nothing more to say, he left the diner and rushed home to watch the news. He didn't even take off his coat but clicked on the TV on and sank into his armchair as the handsome anchorman reported on the stock market, the swine flu, and the mortgage crisis. A good-looking reporter interviewed an unattractive woman crying because she had to foreclose on her home. Suddenly, Gregory's unflattering passport photo flashed on screen. He sat up with his heart beating rapidly and turned up the volume. The anchorman announced, “Please stay clear of this man. He is very dangerous and is believed to be infected with a highly contagious disease. If you do happen to see him, you are to call the police or CDC immediately. Now to the weather report.”

Gregory switched channels searching for more news about himself but found nothing. He turned off the TV in disgust and threw the remote across the room where it knocked a large frame off the mantle. It was his law school graduation photo. He stood smiling in a cap and gown, proudly holding his diploma.

Worried about his parents, he left his house and headed to the nearest hospital wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap, scarf and trench coat. He was able to escape notice for the most part but when he got to the hospital the woman at the concierge desk eyed him suspiciously.



“I’m here to see Mrs. Virginia Hunter,” he said stiffly, barely able to breath. The sterile smell of bleach and alcohol burned through his nostrils. Oh how he hated hospitals.

“And who are you?” the woman asked.

“Her son,” Gregory snapped before realizing what a stupid mistake that was.

The woman froze then he saw her hand inch towards a button beneath her desk.

“Sir, please wait right here.” she finally said. Gregory took a few quick paces back and glanced down the hallway. The elevator doors dinged and two large men wearing surgical masks stepped off. So he turned and ran. They stopped chasing him as soon as he left the hospital perimeters but Gregory didn’t take any chances. He didn’t stop running until he saw it – the wall.

It was right next to the metro station. His eyes were drawn to the wall of a brick warehouse ten stories tall. He stepped back, startled. There were posters plastered from top to bottom. All the posters were exactly the same. They held an enlarged passport photo of Gregory with the word written in bold red on top, “BEWARE.” It was a photo of him taken on a bad day. He had a slight grimace because the photographer in the Photo Shop took his time as he fiddled with his equipment. As Gregory stared at that poster, he noticed that he was slowly losing his grasp of the English language. Once the star of the courtroom, he didn’t know if he could articulate what was happening to him. It was too bizarre.

A week later, those posters were popping up everywhere. His grimacing mug hung from every telephone pole, mailbox, tree, fence and metro station. It seemed as though the grimace in the photo was becoming more and more pronounced each time he passed by it in his cap, sunglasses and scarf. He barely ate anymore. In the bathroom, after washing his face, he inadvertently looked up at the mirror and jumped. He took a closer look at himself to figure out why he looked so menacing.

Overall, he was harmless. He never hurt anyone in his life, not physically at least. But he began avoiding mirrors from then on. He flinched whenever he saw his reflection. He began putting away the photos of himself lining the hallway that his mom had once hung up. All he could think of whenever he saw his face were the large red letters that spelt the word “BEWARE!”

That week on the news, Gregory watched in shock as photos of his former co-workers flashed on screen with quoted blurbs underneath such as his boss saying, “Gregory often lost his temper over the minutest infractions...” The television reporter, a beautiful blonde, was stationed near Capitol Hill. Behind her was a mob of people. The reporter reported that Gregory was the prime suspect of a terrorist plot and was infected with a highly contagious deadly disease with the potential to wipe out the whole Washington DC metro area. Three people were reportedly dead from this disease after coming into contact with him. The hospitals were overrun with others who had possible contact with him and were reporting various symptoms such as dizziness, weakness,

nausea, lethargy and a general sense of malaise causing some doctors to name this epidemic the Sloth Flu.

“Though the number one symptom everyone seems to be feeling is fear,” said the attractive anchorwoman with a Cheshire Cat grin back in the studio.

“That’s right Joy and here’s the spokesperson from the police department to make an official statement.” And the image cut to the scene at Capitol Hill.

“Gregory Hunter is a person of interest. But as of right now, no charges have been formally made.”

“That’s because he’s a white man!” a woman cried out. “If he was black, he would have been arrested a long time ago.”

A chorus of “Mm-hmm” followed, punctuated with a “That’s right!” as several mob members nodded. The camera panned the angry crowd and then focused on the reporter who held a large fuzzy microphone that read FOX News in front of Gregory’s secretary, Tasha.

“That man is a BLEEP... a... BLEEP BLEEP. He has no consideration for other people’s feelings. Do you know that in all the years I worked for that man, not even once did he ask me how my weekend was? Or how I was doing?”

Gregory stood up. He wished to God he could defend himself. He was being tried and convicted without even a trial. What happened to innocent before proven guilty? A reputation that took him years to build was being shattered in seconds.

“I’ve been on maternity leave and when I had my sweet baby girl.... Hi baby girl! It’s Mamma! Mamma’s on TV. You see Mamma on TV? Aren’t you proud of

her?” Tasha waved her plump arms at the camera and smiled broadly. Then she dug into her humongous black purse and furnished the reporter with pictures of her daughter.

“That’s my baby girl!” She flashed the picture at the camera, a baby with a startled expression, dressed in a pink tutu took up the screen, momentarily blocking out Tasha and the reporter.

“That’s my baby!” said Tasha. A look of annoyance flickered over the features of the reporter before she interrupted with, “About Gregory. You worked for him for how long?”

“Two years. Yes and when I had my baby, I said, “I’m bringing in my baby.” And you know what he said to me? He asked me, “Is your baby on the payroll?” I said, “No.” Then he said, “Well, then I’d suggest you leave it at home.”

“It? My baby is a GIRL! He didn’t even know that. He’s a cold mother BLEEP BLEEP.”

The reporter turned away from Tasha who went back to smiling and waving at the camera. Next to her was Alice, a very plain looking woman with wispy blond hair.

Alice smiled timidly. Gregory cringed while remembering his reaction upon hearing a rumor that her father worked in the CIA. He responded with, “Well, he can’t be very high up. After all, isn’t stupidity hereditary?”

“So Alice, you only worked for Gregory for a month and then he promptly fired you for no reason at all.”

“Yes,” she said and then smiled tremulously. “I work for a temping agency and I was sent to replace Tasha while she was out on maternity leave. I was supposed to work there for another three months but Mr. Hunter asked me to leave.”

“What did you think of Gregory?”

“Oh, he’s a very nice man.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, I liked him,” she said and smiled again.

“But he fired you and your co-workers say that he once made you cry.”

“Yes, but he didn’t mean it. He’s a very nice man. I’ve already forgiven him. Ever since he fired me, I found God and became a Born Again Christian. So you see, it was all part of God’s plan.”

The reporter turned away to face the camera.

“Well, there you have it. Two very different opinions of the same man. Alice, a self-described Born Again Christian who says she forgives Gregory Hunter for all the horrible things he’s done to her. And Tasha who calls him... well we can’t repeat that on air. So who is the real Gregory Hunter? You decide. Stay tuned. We will give you the latest coverage on these unfolding events in real time. We deliver you real news in real time. Before it even occurs, you’ll hear it from us. FOX News, keeping you safe. Now for a message from our paid sponsor.”

The scene changed to a woman staring listlessly out the window at the pouring rain and thunder.

“Fear and loathing in DC? Feeling paralyzed and trapped? For high anxiety, depression and other psychological disorders try Yipitor.”

The scene changed to the same women cavorting happily in the sun through a field of flowers.

“Put the Yip back in your day. Pending FDA approval. Some side effects may include explosive diarrhea, gas...”

Gregory turned off the TV and pulled his hair as he paced back and forth in the living room.

He still remembered where Alice lived from the one time he visited her. When he rang the bell, Alice opened the door and beamed up at him.

“Oh hello Mr. Hunter!” She said and smiled pleasantly, a rosy glow suffused her cheeks. He felt that old tug in his heart. It was her look of pure adoration he had succumbed to in the first place. That one fateful night, he invited her to his house on the pretext of having her help him with some files. And it wasn’t long afterwards that her attention towards him became less flattering and more taxing.

“I was just making a pot of tea, would you like a cup?” she asked and held up two hands covered in flowered pink pot holders. In her foyer were several framed posters of Pegasus with rainbow colored wings. One poster had Pegasus with a large muscular man seated on top, holding a gold sword in one hand and the head of Medusa in the other.

“No, thank you,” Gregory said and followed her to the living room which had a large painting of a very handsome loin-clothed Jesus with pale skin and absurdly

muscular arms outstretched toward the viewer. This movie star Jesus also had blindingly white teeth and the silky brown hair of a shampoo commercial. Gregory felt his sanity spiraling loose as he stared at that portrait.

“Please make yourself comfortable,” said Alice and he took a seat on her lace doily covered armchair. He felt ill. He was wasting his time. There wasn’t even the remotest possibility that she could coordinate a scheme this huge. Alice disappeared into the kitchen and he could hear her singing out of tune. He covered his face. When he looked up, movie star Jesus was staring at him. Then Alice appeared with a plate of pinwheel cookies.

“Would you like one?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine,” he said and swallowed. She sat down on the sofa across from him under her portrait of Jesus. He’s been struggling more and more with speaking, words darted around his mind like many flying insects that he could not catch hold of.

“So... I see you like horses... uh, flying ones.” He splayed out his hands. Alice was completely socially awkward and yet, she was the only person in the country who willingly let him into her house.

She smiled and nodded. “They’re very pretty.”

“Alice,” he said and leaned forward.

“Mmm?” she murmured after taking a sip of her tea then placing the cup on the coffee table where the spoon rattled against the porcelain. She cast him a sidelong glance and flushed a deep red.

Desperation loosened his tongue and he finally asked, “Why did you let me in? Aren’t you afraid?”

“Oh I never listen to the news. My dad once told me that they never report the truth.”

Gregory sprang up from his seat and asked, “Is it true that he works for the CIA?”

“NSA...” she said then her hand flew to her mouth. His heart seized at the tattered edges of hope. He quickly went and sat next to her on the sofa while she twisted the fabric of her dress in her hands.

“What does he do there?” Gregory asked gently, gathering her hands in his. The lines on her face softened as her body relaxed against his.

“Oh, I don’t know. He never talks about his work. He only once mentioned that he was a social experimenter of sorts,” she said.

“Is there any way I can meet him? I need to speak to him,” he said very slowly. She shook her head sadly.

“Even I can’t talk to him. I rarely see him. Maybe once a year.”

“You must be able to send him a message?”

“Sometimes he calls me,” she said.

Gregory leaned so close that tendrils of her hair brushed up against his nose. He then said, “Please tell your father that I am so sorry for what I did to you. I am so... very... sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t do anything wrong,” she said, squeezing his hands tightly, “That was the most wonderful night of my entire life.”



Her face glowed and her eyes grew radiant. He slowly untangled his hands from hers, patted them on her lap and stepped away. He crossed the room and raked his fingers through his hair. After a moment or two of silence, he turned to her and said, “But if *he* thinks I did. Can you tell him I’m sorry?”

“Of course!”

“Do you think he’ll believe me?”

She shrugged her thin shoulders.

“He’s very stubborn. He never listens to me.”

When he went back to Alice’s apartment the next day, he found the door unlocked. He wandered from room to room, all the pictures were gone and his footsteps against the parquetted floor echoed throughout the empty space. It was as though she had never lived there.

That night, the news focused on Ahmed, Gregory’s close friend from college who was now a neurosurgeon.

“It is believed that Ahmed, who is from Afghanistan, was Gregory’s link to a terrorist group. He is a doctor and is believed to be the one who infected Gregory with the deadly virus.”

Gregory covered his face with his hands. He could only imagine what he and his family must be going through right now.

He remembered a recent conversation he had with Ahmed, under the dim glow of an expensive restaurant. His friend leaned forward and told him how he was pulled over by the cops shortly after 9-11.

“I’m a fucking doctor, I wanted to say. Born and raised in the US. I’ve never even been to the Middle East. He pulled me over with my kids in the backseat of my fucking Mercedes! The cop was rude as hell and asked me to open my trunk like I had some nuclear weapon in there.” He said he’d walk down the street and people in West Virginia would look at him like he had a bomb strapped to his chest.

“It was a nightmare.” Ahmed said, shook his head then downed his martini. Gregory nodded grimly but was also secretly relieved he didn’t have to deal with that kind of crap. And he knows he’s not the only one to think that way.

After the Virginia Tech incident, he walked past two middle-aged women chatting on the street. One turned to the other and said, “When I heard the news, I prayed, “Lord, please don’t let that shooter be black. Please Lord! Don’t let that shooter be black.” You know, my boy’s going to college next year. He don’t need no lynch mob knocking on his door.”

At home, he turned on the news and watched as the anchorman reported that Gregory was now in hiding and that authorities were unable to locate him. Gregory finished his beer and threw the empty can at the TV. Then the anchorman reported that several young men, at least five in the area, had been beaten to death. The men looked strikingly similar to Gregory.

He stayed home that month. Fortunately, his mother always kept his house well stocked. He wondered why they didn't broadcast where he lived, why no one approached him at his house. He did notice that his neighborhood was eerily quiet. He hadn't seen a single neighbor coming or leaving. Maybe they thought he kept his house stockpiled with weapons. Or maybe Alice's father was playing this elaborate game of cat and mouse, preferring to release his address sometime in the future when it would crush Gregory the most. He had only questions. He continued to watch the evening news while finishing off a bottle of bourbon. And his hand would not stop trembling.

It had been so many days since he talked to a single soul. Alice was the last person he conversed with and interacting with her always felt like an acid trip which didn't help his already fragile mental state. His tongue felt like a block of brick and his mouth felt as though it was stuffed with pebbles.

One afternoon, when he was running low on groceries, Gregory put on a disguise, grabbed his bags and decided to head to the store. He was about twenty blocks away when he turned the corner and saw them, the group of thugs. They were spray painting the word "Homo" onto a car in red. He recognized one of the members as the son of his parent's neighbor. He stopped. They eyed him carefully. His eye began to twitch and he could feel the sweat dripping down his back. For a second, he wondered if they could hear his heart thundering like he could. They seemed finely tuned to his every movement.

He made as if he was going to continue to walk past them, then dropped his bags and turned to run. But they descended upon him like a pack of dogs. They ripped off his cap, scarf and kicked his sunglasses into the street. One grabbed his arms so the other could punch him in the gut then one grabbed his head by his hair so they could punch him in the face. Someone else hit the back of his head with the spray can and dropped him onto the sidewalk where he coiled up in pain. The neighbor's son kicked him in the face several times. After each took turns kicking him, someone called out something he couldn't hear and they all ran off. He squirmed in pain and clutched his stomach. He curled up his legs into a fetal position as he coughed. Nearby was a pile of garbage and the scent of rotten meat hung in the air. He felt several loose teeth in his mouth and spit them out along with what felt like a pint of blood.

He was so dizzy, he was about to pass out but he knew if he did, he would be dead once the others found him so he got up and limped home. His left eye was swelling shut so he had to peer out of the other one. He felt the blood drip down his cheek from his cut eyebrow. Then he heard something rustle. Shading his eyes from the golden afternoon light, he looked out onto the deserted streets.

He had an uneasy feeling of being watched. Suddenly, something whistled past his ear. It took only a second before he realized it was a bullet and he hit the ground. His jaw made contact with the concrete and he blinked back the pain. At the crack of the next shot, he took off running. A bullet whizzed past and hit the car window beside him. Following the shattering of glass, the car alarm screamed. His feet pounded against the

pavement as the blood rushed through his ears. He felt as though his legs were on fire and his head was about to explode. He never ran that fast in his entire life.

At the sound of the next bullet, he pretended to get hit. He rolled doubled over onto the ground, clutching his leg and heard a distant celebratory shout. Glancing up, he saw the sniper on the rooftop of the building across the street, pumping his fist in the air and pounding his chest. Then he waited until the man put down his rifle before running again, weaving until he turned the corner and disappeared down the street.

When he got home, he locked the door and all the windows. He turned off all the lights. He picked up the phone and was relieved when he heard the dial tone. Finally, the phone company reconnected his service. But his head hurt so badly he could hardly form a coherent sentence. His mind was an unraveling tapestry and he felt as though he was pulling on strings to find the picture rapidly disappearing. Comprehension was a fast, elusive dream.

Those last few days, he mumbled sentences to himself. As each day went by, those sentences became fragmentary phrases then the phrases condensed into two words then those two words became monosyllabic utterances, mere grunts here and there. He dialed 911 because at that point, prison was safer than his house.

When the woman asked, “What’s your emergency?”

He cried out, “Aaarrgghh.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ugh, ugh, ugh.” He hung up then covered his face with his hands as he sobbed.

That night, as he held a bag of ice to his bruised eye, he turned on the TV and saw that he was no longer America's most dangerous threat. The anchorman reported that after an extended investigation, it was found that Gregory was not infected with a disease after all and all who have been in contact with him were clear to go home. The next day, the posters of Gregory disappeared. He ran out onto the streets and cackled when he noticed no one was running away from him anymore. A few days later, the streets filled with people once again. According to the news reports, there was a new Pariah who lived somewhere in Iowa. There was nothing to fear in Washington D.C anymore. The cherry blossom trees were budding with new leaves all along the Tidal Basin.

One early evening, Gregory passed a trio of young women leaving the mini-mart. They were dressed in tight pink and gold dresses, tugging at hemlines that barely grazed the bottom swell of their derrieres. Ready for a night of dancing, they were out to celebrate their beauty and youth. The setting sun cast a pink hue across all the earth and their sequined dresses caught the light like many sparks of flame. He stared at their dresses, mesmerized. Then he tried following bits of their conversation but none of it made any sense to him.

“I so agree. That's totally not sick. That's so not cool.”

“Right? Like, OMG, so I was like how can you say that to me? Like that's really rude. And he was like LOL TTYL. So I was whatever like WTF.”

They stopped their incoherency and gave him a fearful look but did not run away. His right eye was a mottled swollen mass of purple. He didn't know if he could ever

open it again. His lip was badly cut. His cheeks and chin were covered in dark bruises. He gave them a hideous smile with his mouth stretched wide open like a dark cave exposing the large gaps of missing teeth. He was pleased with their reactions, the way they huddled together like skittish deer. He was about to walk past them without incident. But at the last second, he changed his mind. Angered by their incomprehensible language, he lunged towards them with his arms raised. The girls screamed and ran toward the metro. He laughed maniacally as he watched their disjointed run, as they hobbled away in their stiletto heels. Then he gave a shriek and disappeared into the lengthening shadows.

When he got to his house, the moon appeared. So he stood still for a moment, staring up at that fabled full moon of lunatics and metamorphoses. It hung low and swollen over the horizon.

In his bathroom, he filled the tub with scalding hot water and stood naked in front of the steamed mirror. Then he smeared away the condensation from the glass, and peered into the mirror with his one good eye. He touched his cheeks, tenderly stroked the scabs there and the scars along his jawline and felt the immensity of all he lost. His good eye glistened as he clutched the sides of the porcelain white sink. Before he even understood why, he wept as he gazed into the mirror. The tears coursed down his face in little rivulets. They fell onto the white tiled floor and mingled with the splashing water overflowing from the tub, pooling at his damaged feet. Wading through the hot water, he neither flinched nor acknowledged the heat as he reached over and turned off the faucet. Then he turned back to the mirror, rubbed the glass once again. His face appeared

startled and distorted before him between the wet streaks. Comprehension slowly dawned as he stared at the monstrosity he had become.



## CHAPTER FIVE – THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN DESIRE

I used to be a dog. Now, there are some unfeeling women out there who may snicker if they saw my bearded, scraggly visage in person and snidely ask, “Well, aren’t *you* all?” They intend to insult men but essentially they’re insulting dogs. Little known to humans is how noble dogs truly are. We may arch our backs in an indecorous manner in order to “poop” on the side of the road but that’s only due to the inconsideration of humans who never thought to build us our own private sanitation fixture. But think of how well-mannered we are to refrain from urinating or excreting on your carpets until you get home from work. And if one of us (poor soul) failed in this endeavor, how pitifully we will greet you at the door while you reprimand or worse beat us. We are an unfortunate lot.

Though I love her, my adoptive mother was a nervous woman who consumed an excessive amount of coffee and prunes. When one morning I transformed from furry dog to a hairy man, she screamed bloody murder though she did not even witness the actual transformation. She only woke one morning to find me as I found myself, a naked man lying on her floor where her beloved golden retriever Harry once was. I had to run out the door while she called the police. All dogs know where those officers take you, to the pound where you never return. Fortunately, I had the foresight to grab her former lover’s black bag next to the front door full of his clothing. Thusly, I was thrust out into the cold

world completely unequipped to handle the vagaries of your society. I learned to not cross the street until a little blinking white man poised in a running position appeared in a yellow box otherwise I would be trampled on by one of your large metal boxes on wheels. And I had to run from officers if I attempted to urinate on what you humans call a fire hydrant. Mostly I had to learn to wear your clothing which is that odd fabric hanging from your body. Though I had watched my mother get dressed a million times, I still felt like a fool that first time attempting to find in a sweater the correct hole out of the three which I was supposed to pull over my head. The other two holes attempted to suffocate me. I was a rather small golden retriever which roughly translated to becoming a small man. My adoptive mother's lover was a tall man therefore his clothes caused me to stumble since his pants traveled well past my feet. I learned to roll them up as I've observed small children do. And this is how I arrived at the only place outdoors which lent a level of comfort to me in my frazzled state, the dog park. My friend, Max was there and I desperately wanted to speak to him but so was another beauty, Tinkerbelle. (I know, what a ridiculous name for a beautiful Cocker Spaniel.) I have never spoken a single word to her. And though I have wanted to mount her for many months I resisted the urge when my adoptive mother once threatened to have my genitals snipped.

On that day, Tinkerbelle's glossy coat was being ruffled by the wind as she paused to lift her delicate snout to sniff the crisp autumn air. The sunlight cast her fur in shimmering gold tones and I longed to press myself against her soft luscious body. There in Central Park, right outside the gates of my former paradise where all my former friends frolicked and pranced, I stood in the throes of erotic desires battling fear. Fear of those

officers who will take me to the pound if I make one fatal faux pas. And though my human appendage seemed to rise to the occasion, I could not utilize it.

You human beings are a strange species I find with each passing day. You manage to resist urges of murder or lust simply through the threat of imprisonment and you impose those fears onto your perceived inferiors. Fear seems to be the motivating factor for so many of the things that humans do or do not do. Fear of failure, fear of imprisonment, fear of being ostracized, outcast, fear of eternal damnation and thus you behave in a very odd framework of acceptable social behavior. It is okay to lewdly insinuate as one tourist did within my hearing that skyscrapers represent something more than an architectural feat of mankind. But if you urinate on your beloved in order to mark them, someone will likely call the police on you. This very fear operated on me at that moment. I had no wish to visit the pound for an untimely death. So I harkened back to when I feared castration and reinforced that incredible self-control I've developed over years. And I ran from the park, my body convulsing as I knew not how to deal with the erotic longings of a human body. I found some dark alley where I hid behind a garbage pail seeking solace. I thumped my right foot repeatedly in order to alleviate some of this distinct discomfort. It did nothing for me. No, at the time, I did not have the idea to use my hands. I was raised by a lady, a rather prudish librarian and remember, I never had a pair of hands before. Instead, out of complete exhaustion, I fell into a fitful sleep and dreamt of submarines, rockets and exploding canons, all of which I have seen on TV. And I awoke an hour later in a pool of semen.

## A KNIGHT IN TIN ARMOR

### CHAPTER 1

*January 2009*

Life was better when she was in the wheelchair. Now it sat in our living room gathering a film of dust. In the weak morning light, her clothes scattered across the bedroom floor flashed like fools gold in a prospector's pan. Her high heels formed Xs across the foyer where she slipped them off while stumbling towards the bed. That winter, her skin never looked so pale before next to my light brown arms. Black mascara was smudged across her thin blue veined lids and her long, wavy hair was tangled into an incomprehensible mess. Her arm flung across the pillow above her head looked as though she was posing for a music video.

I got up, nudged her over to her right side and swung my legs over. For a petite woman, she took up a lot of space. Across the room was my grandmother's cherry wood double bureau and I opened the drawer where I had tightly packed all my stuff to make room for her over six months ago. Pulling my jeans over my boxers, I changed into a black vintage Ramones t-shirt, a gift from my ex, Georgia. Running my hand over my short spikey dreads, I stared at the scuffed beige wood floor and resisted the urge to pick

up her lacy underwear, stockings or her glittery dresses now cold like dead embers.

Instead, I opened the three empty drawers to my left, stacking them like a staircase so she can easily see where her clothes were supposed to go. Then I turned and watched her thin ribcage rise and fall with each snore. She didn't even stir with all the racket I made.

Her cell phone was an old beat up Blackberry with bits of the burgundy veneer chipped off. It was sitting on the nightstand and I ignored the impulse to check her battery and plug it in the charger the way I used to. Walking past it, I headed to the kitchen where I fried four strips of bacon then some eggs in a cast iron skillet. There was a stack of dirty dishes back in the sink even though I had carefully washed and put away all the dishes yesterday before I left for band practice. Bringing my plate to the dining table, I sighed. Piled on top were her bills, junk mail, catalogs and her rumpled up sweaters. It was an old sea blue rickety Formica table with rusted steel tubular legs that we found at a dumpster near the park, the day she was able to walk again after all those months of physical therapy.

I stacked about five of her glossy magazines together and placed them on the chair next to me so I would have a place to put down my plate. Grabbing a fork, I ate as I flipped through my weather beaten copy of Moby Dick. She joined me about twenty minutes later, rubbing her forehead and squinting in the blinding sunlight that broke through the clouds. The strap of her black satin bra slid off her shoulder and her matching black satin underwear was riding low on her slender hip. She turned to me and smiled, still a stunning beauty even as disheveled as she was. I hung my arm over the back of my chair, put my book down and stared at her.

She picked up a strip of bacon off my plate, chewed as she sat on the table right on top of the classified ad I left for her the other day. With a red pen, I had circled several jobs in hopes that she'd start pitching in for the rent one day. She was sitting right on one of the ads from some company in search of an Administrative Ass.

"Ugh. I'm starving," she finally said. But I said nothing because that's all I had against her those days; just my silence. She yawned like a cat, stretched her long thin arms overhead and jumped off the table to shuffle into the kitchen. Bringing back a plate of my left overs, she shoved the pile of magazines I carefully compiled off the chair and sat down. I finished up quickly and took my empty plate to the sink where I placed it gingerly on top of all of the dirty dishes she accumulated there. Then I put on my leather jacket and pocketed my keys. On second thought, I grabbed my P-Bass Fender and strapped it across my back. It was a college graduation gift from my dad and I couldn't tolerate the idea of leaving it there where her presence filled my apartment like some toxic fume.

"Where are you going?" I heard her plaintively whine behind me but I was already gone. The door slammed shut behind me.

I took the train to Coney Island beach where I kicked empty soda cans across the frigid sand. The wind was blowing fiercely, whipping up debris in circles and the tips of my ears felt like icicles. A white plastic bag ballooned by the wind, somersaulted over the sprays of sand. The words "Thank You" above a yellow smiling happy face and below "Have a Nice Day!" swirled through the air then skidded into the ocean where the bag deflated as it touched the water. It was soon joined by a crushed white Styrofoam

cup and a sparkly pink plastic container that once held a child's brand new doll. The waves crashed against a shore littered with a few broken beer bottles and white shards of shells.

I once knew a guy who lived on the streets right near the entrance to Prospect Park. At three or four in the morning, he'd go into the empty streets and sweep up the trash. I was homeless too at the time, crashing on the sofas of my friend's apartments. When one of those friends brought home a girlfriend, I went out and roamed the streets. That's when I happened upon Rick who was sweeping up a six pack of broken beer bottles.

He looked up and saw me.

"Them college kids," he muttered. "A whole group of them just drove on by. One of them threw this empty six pack out of his window and smashed it on the ground. Someone's gonna drive right over this thing and get a flat tire."

No one was paying him to clean the streets but there he was with his straw bristle broom and green metal dustpan, sweeping up someone else's mess. It's guys like him who are the true heroes of the world. They are the ones who willingly and quietly clean up the messes of others.

My cheeks felt chafed and raw as they always got in the dead of winter. But it also felt good to get out of my apartment and be away from her. The icy breeze coming off the ocean felt cleansing like it was purging me of my misery. Already thoughts of my girlfriend were slipping away. Then about an hour later when I was about to collapse

from the cold my cell phone buzzed and I pulled it out of my pocket to read a text Mike sent me.

“Where the hell are you? We’re at Todd’s. Get your ass over here.”

I forgot that they were meeting up today so I rode the F to the L train back towards Williamsburg, riding up the creaky elevator to Todd’s loft in an old abandoned sewing machine factory. The boys were sitting in a brown cross sectional we hauled out of a garbage dump. Passing around a bong, they smiled when they saw me.

“Yo,” I said with a nod as I dropped off my P bass at the door. Then I rubbed my hands together, warming them up in front of Todd’s orange glowing space heater near the sofa. The warmth seeped through my jeans and even my sneakers, toasting my toes in a delectable way.

“Jimmy. Meet Roger, he used to be a drummer for The Violators,” Mike said, a trail of smoke leaving his lips as he pointed to the slender red headed guy sitting next to him.

“Oh yeah?” I said, raising my eyebrows. That band was doing pretty well until Frank, threw his guitar at the lead singer, Ron. I heard Ron ended up in the hospital and quit the music business. He also didn’t have insurance and had to find a job that would pay the hospital bills.

“Jimmy Stern is our star bassist,” Mike said.

“So I’ve heard,” said Roger and got up to shake my hand. He had a good firm grip. Already I liked the guy.



“I’ve had three bands try to steal him but he’s all ours. You’ve got to hear him play,” Mike added.

“Looking forward to it,” Roger said.

“Just for the record, all three bands were Larry’s bands. They kept changing their name,” I said. Larry was Chloe’s older brother by five years. When she started singing for us, he often came to support our shows and also to steal our bandmates or songs. I stopped lending him equipment because we never got anything back.

“They finally settled on a name now – The Lost World,” I added. Roger raised his eyebrows and said, “Oh yeah, I’ve heard of them. They played a couple of weeks ago at the Mercury Lounge. They were pretty good.” Mike looked unhappy so I changed the subject. “How’s Ron doing these days?”

“Last I heard he was working for a construction company.” I nodded.

“And Frank?”

“He’s in rehab.” Figures.

“Larry’s a bit of a loose screw too, eh? After the gig, he started hollering on and on about the shitty service at the bar,” Roger said, took another swig of his beer after glancing over to me.

“He’s alright. You just have to know to avoid him when he’s in one of his moods. And watch what you say. Front men are often divas underneath.”

“Yeah, that’s a fact,” chimed in Todd who then took the bong from Mike. A few seconds later he started coughing after sucking a little too long on it. Getting up, he went

to hand me that tinted circular glass pipe where swirling inside was all that mind numbing smoke but I shook my head and he passed it to Roger.

“So on Saturday,” said Mike and tapped his finger against the old oak coffee table in front of him, “they want us to do the Op Ivy “Take Warning” cover.”

Todd pointed to me with his amber colored beer bottle and said, “We’re also doing the Rancid cover.”

I nodded.

“Time Bomb?” I asked and took the bottle of beer that Mike handed me from a blue cooler filled with ice next to him.

“Yeah and “Ruby Soho.” And then we get to do some of our own stuff. I’m thinking we follow with “Hot for Her” and then “Cold Tuesday” closing with “Brooklyn Girls,” said Mike. Just the feel of the cold bottle in my hand, the warmth radiating from the heater and hearing Zeppelin’s “The Lemon Song” flowing from the stereo was doing wonders for my mood.

“Where’s Chloe?” I asked as I twisted open the bottle. I took a swig then glanced affectionately around the loft with its walls of faded peeling green paint and large exposed sections of plaster and support beams. Crushed empty beer cans, cigarette butts, candy wrappers and flyers littered the corners, remnants of various parties we had. Todd fashioned an odd bunk bed and desk out of concrete blocks in the corner so the rest of the space would be big enough for the whole band to practice in.

“Late as usual,” Todd sniped.

“On her way,” Mike said while rubbing his forehead.

I turned to Mike and asked, “So what’s this about Vera doing our press pack?”

“Yeah, apparently she’s some kind of marketing guru,” Mike replied.

“Marketing guru? I’ve only heard about her other... uh-hem... skills.” Todd smirked then added, “Hey! I’ve always wanted a fellatio expert *on my staff*.” Roger snorted.

Mike leaned forward and gave Todd a look. “Now, no fucking around. If we hire her, you stay way. I’m so sick of the drama.”

“It was just a joke. Sheesh. Relax.” Todd held up his hands and sat back.

“Right,” Mike said and fidgeted with his jacket zipper. He was getting a little intense these days and maybe the pot wasn’t helping. He seemed to be sliding toward that paranoid state, the reason I stopped smoking. There was always that tipping point. A little could make you mellow; a little too much can put you right over the edge. He wanted to land the Mercury Lounge gig so badly it almost hurt watching him try so hard. Mike was our lead guitarist. Todd was our rhythm guitarist and was also our back-up vocalist when he wasn’t forgetting the lyrics. We’ve all known each other for fifteen years since start of middle school. And Chloe, we met a few years ago when we put out an ad in the Village Voice for a female lead singer to join us on our ska punk revival quest. She was the only person to respond.

The elevator doors squeaked open.

“Hey Jimmy,” Chloe purred from behind as she rubbed up against my arm. The divine smell of baked mozzarella, basil and marinara greeted us all.

“Brought you boys a present,” she said as she placed the white cardboard box on the coffee table, knocking over an ashtray.

“Chloe, this is Roger,” Mike said, regarding her carefully. We all did. This was sort of Roger’s test run with us. If all went well, he’d be our new drummer. According to Mike, Roger was damn good plus his bonus trait was that he was kind of unattractive.

“Hey,” Roger said and nodded towards Chloe.

“Hey,” she replied, giving him the once over then shortly lost interest in him. Mike was noticeably relaxed afterwards.

“How’s that baby girl of yours?” Chloe asked me in that tone of hers.

“She’s twenty-three, only three years younger than me. Quit trying to make me feel like a pedophile,” I said and finished off my beer before helping myself to a slice. Taking a bite, I swung open the cooler and grabbed another beer.

“Whatever, she acts like she’s five,” she said then she mimicked Crystal’s whine, “Oh baby, I wanna go home. Can we go home?”

I made the mistake of bringing her to band practice last week and Chloe still cannot let that go. The two took an instant dislike to each other.

“I mean seriously, we’re all wondering what’s wrong with that girl?” she said to Todd who nodded a little too heartily. Pointing to him with my beer bottle, I asked, “You agree?”

“I’m not one to comment on your love life...” said Todd, finishing his pizza and wiping his greasy hands on his jeans before picking up his beer.

“Except now,” I snapped.

“Okay well then I’m gonna be honest. I *don’t* get why you’re dating that chick.”

Todd shook his head.

I then glanced at Mike. He wasn’t meeting my eyes. “You feel the same way?”

He finally looked up and said, “Please let the jury note that in this rare occurrence, I actually agree with Chloe.”

“So the tribe has spoken. You’re voting my girlfriend off the island,” I said.

“No, do whatever the hell you want. Just don’t bring her to practice again. Ever,” said Mike with a stern glint in his eye. During practice, Crystal said that one of our songs sounded like “garbage.” It was a song Mike wrote. I tried explaining that she meant the *band* Garbage but no one was buying it. When we got home that day she told me that she only wanted to see me play and that the rest of the band was just background noise to her. “Jimmy, even the songs you write are so much better than the shit Mike comes up with. Don’t let them hold you back,” she said, curling up in my lap.

“Deal. I’m not inviting her to anymore practices or shows,” I said and took a bite of the piping hot cheese sliding off my pizza.

Chloe pushed back her blue hair which had fallen over her eyes then she waved her hand emphatically and said, “That’s not enough. I vote that you dump her. *In fact*, you never should have gone out with her in the first place. Next time, please listen to me. I swear I feel like you were just dating her only because you felt sorry for her when you saw her in that wheelchair.”

Roger turned to me with his eyebrows raised and asked, “You’re dating a paraplegic?”

Todd leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees and replied, "So get this. We have this gig on Amsterdam Ave. and this girl in a wheelchair keeps giving him the eye. Next thing we know, Jimmy's buying her a drink..."

"Coz he suffers from the Damsel in Distress Disease," Chloe interrupted with her usual rapid fire way of talking. "Except she was never really in distress," she explained to Roger. "She landed herself in the hospital after getting into the car with her drunk-ass friend who flipped the car over going eighty up the FDR drive ramp. Idiot."

"Harsh Chloe. Real harsh. And how many times do I have to tell you, I knew her before the accident," I said and grabbed another beer from the cooler. Crystal was the lead singer for the Idols, a pop rock band which disbanded long ago and I met her at a party. The other guys never even heard of the band but I've also always been out hearing more bands than them. Yeah, it was true I didn't know her that well but at least it wasn't like I was only out to date her because of the wheelchair. But that seemed to be the only thing they could focus on. They weren't there for Crystal's whole recuperation so there was little sympathy. It was really something to witness - Crystal's determination to walk again. She never missed a single physical therapy session and did every exercise the doctors asked of her even if it made her break down crying because of the pain. It has only been three weeks since she started walking again but she was hell bent on enjoying her freedom along with her grand goal to become someone famous.

"Jimmy you know what your problem is? It's that whole complex you suffer from. You're always trying to be this knight in... in... tin armor. Yeah, tin coz you can't afford the real shit." Chloe took a long drag of her cigarette while watching me.

“Thanks Doc. Let me know what I owe you.” Some of the “benefits” of Chloe starting her therapy sessions were these moments of free psychoanalysis.

“Oh, I’ll let you know alright.” Chloe smiled seductively and gave me a wink which I pretended not to notice.

I took a long draft of beer then sat on a nearby wooden chair which creaked in protest.

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about breaking up with Crystal...” I trailed off; suddenly I had everyone’s attention. Mike gave me an appreciative look.

“Good for you,” he said.

“He’s finally growing a pair,” said Todd. I smiled wryly and flipped him the bird.

“She still clubbing all night with her friends?” Mike asked. I scratched my head and nodded.

“Ten bucks says Jimmy’s not gonna break up with his idiot girlfriend,” said Chloe then draped her long legs across Todd’s lap.

“You’re on,” Todd said and shook hands with her.

“Guys, come on. Have some faith in me.”

“No, she’s right. You need serious coaching. And I’m the man to help you,” said Todd. He pushed Chloe’s legs off of him and got up to put his arm on my shoulders. He then roughly massaged them like I was a boxer about to get in the ring.

“Now that you’re no longer wearing those rose colored beer goggles, you’ve got to just give it to her straight. This is easy. You go home and say, “Pack up your shit and get the fuck out.”

“Hey, I like that.” He turned to Mike and swirling his finger through the air he said, “Put a good jazz beat to it and it can go in our next song.”

Mike scratched the stubble on his chin and stared up at the ceiling while counting out the beats.

Then he picked up his guitar and sang, “Pack up your shit, get the fuck out of here.” And he even tried it in B minor chord, crooning in a heartbroken ballad style. Roger started grooving and tapping away on the coffee table with his stick.

Todd smiled broadly and sat back down next to Chloe leaving some significant space between them. She straightened up and leaned away from him, slightly miffed. Then she got up and left to go to the bathroom.

Roger turned to Mike and said, “Hey, remember Georgia? Penny Lancaster’s friend? I heard she’s back in town.”

I was about to put down my empty beer bottle when that tidbit stilled me. The news burned my ears with a certain latent intensity caught on fire. So I turned around to face Roger.

From my periphery, I caught Todd raising his hand, making vigorous slicing motions through his neck. Roger glanced at him and fell silent. I appreciated the gesture but it just wasn’t necessary.

“Georgia’s back from Phoenix?” I asked and it was like I could hear my voice coming from a different distant place, it was so calm.

“Yeah,” Roger said non-committedly, avoiding my gaze.



“Where is she staying?” I turned to Todd. He shrugged and pretended to get real interested in the beer he was holding, even reading the label on it as if he gave a fuck how many calories it had. Mike picked up an old issue of Rolling Stone magazine from off the coffee table.

“Come on guys. How many times do I gotta tell you that I’m over her?” I said, pulling on my dreads, twisting them between my fingertips.

“What time is the Tornado gig?” Todd asked Mike.

“They have the 8 o’clock set.”

“Real smooth guys,” I quipped but they all ignored me.

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We ended up meeting some friends in a dive bar in Alphabet city where we spent the rest of the afternoon. And I took the F train home in a tolerable buzz and watched the swollen full moon rise over the Brooklyn Bridge while the train thumped over the railings.

*Georgia was back.* From Phoenix, and the thought spread through me like that mythical bird rising up from the fire and ash. Feeling my mood lighten considerably, I found myself saying it out loud to the whole car, “Hey Everybody, Georgia’s back.” I tugged at my dreads. Nobody but a little old lady looked my way. That’s New York City for you. I smiled and nodded at the little old lady who harrumphed and gruffly opened her newspaper.

I shook my head which made the world tilt sideways. Then the train suddenly stopped midway on the Manhattan Bridge and I almost fell off my seat. I glanced around

the car in admiration. New Yorkers have amazing balance when they're not drunk. The rest of the passengers swayed as the train halted and kept on reading their books and newspapers. Loud static broke through as the conductor came on and announced in some garbled foreign sounding tongue that quite possibly meant that there was a back-up at the next station.

I pulled out my cell phone to call Todd and tell him there was nothing to worry about. The train jerked forward and we started moving again. I could prove to everyone that I could handle being just friends with Georgia. No more drunken crying jags this time. Except when I dialed his number I got nothing. There was no service. We just entered the black tunnel.

CHAPTER 2  
GEORGIA AT FIRST SIGHT  
*YEAR 2006*

New York is a funny place in that there are over eight million people living in that city and yet you tend to run into the same set of people again and again. When I was living in Brooklyn and taking the train into Manhattan, I always saw the same folks standing at the station every Monday thru Friday, waiting for the train. We never spoke to each other but we'd take our usual places and we'd sit or stand in comfortable silence. I even served mostly the same people from the bar as they came in before work or during lunch breaks or on their way home. Then you shift your routine slightly and you find yourself amongst a whole new set of people. There was a different world that walked the streets of Manhattan during the hours when everyone else worked.

When the Daily Grind where I was a barista closed down because of the busy Starbucks that opened up across the street, I didn't know what to do with myself the next morning. So I ate a leisurely breakfast of eggs and toast trying to find the sunny side of unemployment and tried not to think about my dwindling bank account. Soon breakfast was over. I washed and dried my plates then spent another thirty minutes tidying up the place. When I finished, I hopped on the train and decided to take a stroll around that city of concrete and steel.

And that's how I met Georgia. Maybe met isn't the correct word. I saw her for the first time.

I got off at Union Square which has a good selection of coffee shops and bookstores and headed for Trevi Deli where you can get a savory platter of Cuban roast pork with yellow rice and red beans for only four bucks and fifty cents. But I never quite made it there.

I heard Georgia's voice before I ever saw her face. It was on the corner of Union Square West and East Sixteenth Street, right in front of the Blue Water Grill. A place I'd been inside of once when Mike's dad took the whole band out for dinner a few months ago. He ordered lobster and raw oysters named after the harbors they were harvested from which was a kind of an odd choice for three college grads who were more used to eating mac and cheese out of a box. Well, except for Mike.

Georgia was walking close behind me and talking into her cell phone. Her voice carried through the cold, autumn air. I heard the click of her high heels against cement. She then murmured something and laughed a child-like gurgle of irrepressible joy. There was something very gentle in her tone. She mentioned going out of town for the weekend to see her parents. Her mother wasn't feeling well and she was going home to check on her. We walked almost together for about two blocks. The wind whipped a loose sheet of newspaper onto the street and I watched it dance past the yellow blur of cabs. I wanted to turn around and see who she was. It would have been so simple, just a turn of my head. But I was embarrassed. She would have seen me and known that I was listening to her conversation. So I tucked my chin into the old ratty trench coat I was wearing and turned the collars up. The frosty, winter wind whipped my unshaven cheeks and chapped lips raw.

Pretty soon, we were near the end of the block and that glowing red electric hand of the “Don’t Walk” sign. The clouds were rolling in above with a low rumble, heavy with precipitation. Staring down at my tasseled, faded leather shoes, I strained to hear her voice. She had stopped talking. Her heels were still clicking away behind me but were soon drowned out by the cars speeding past and the blare of a police siren. A crowd of pedestrians gathered at the curb as the last of the cars swished past when I heard her voice start up again then fade away behind me. I looked up to see her disappearing down the side street. Her head cocked to one side as she held her phone in one slender hand. Her long, pin straight, black hair gently swayed as the wind blew. I couldn’t see her face, not even a glimpse of her profile only the back of her red plaid wool jacket, belted around a tiny waist, black skirt, shapely legs in black stockings, and shiny red patent leather shoes. Then she was gone, disappearing behind a flock of tourists disbanding from a parked tour bus.

I shoved my fists into my pockets and felt my shoulders sag. Jostled by the crowds, I was elbowed by an old man who pushed his way past me. I had to resist the urge to run after that mysterious woman just to catch a glimpse of her face. Trudging forward, I was soon swept up by the wave of rush hour madness. Everyone was rushing home or wherever they had to go. I shivered as I tried to figure out where to go and what to do. I had three hours to idle away before band practice. As I felt the first few fat drops of rain on my nose and lashes, I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head. That was when I noticed the green awning of the Barnes and Nobles a few stores away. At least my feet knew to take me to the nearest bookstore.

In college, a girlfriend once accused me of being a "pseudo-intellectual" because I had a bookshelf full of classics that I never actually read. My older brother Robert, who got into both Princeton and Yale, always lorded his intellect over us and read every book of the canon. At least, the classics are cheap because there's an overflow of them at the beginning of the school year and at the end of each semester when they're sold back to the used bookstores year after year by students. Reading those books has been on my New Year's resolution list year after year.

I headed over to the fiction aisle, found the F section for Flaubert and picked up '*A Sentimental Education*.' Another book I never finished reading but will read passages of each time I'm at the bookstore. Robert used to go on and on about what a genius Flaubert was. I tried to remember what page I was on as I flipped through it. Then suddenly, I saw the name Marie Arnoux and remembered that Frederic was invited to her dinner party. His very tight, white glove ripped at the seam as he was walking up the stairs to her apartment. For some reason, that image stayed with me out of all the other scenes in that novel and I wanted to reread it. I held the book tightly in my hand as I searched for an empty table at the café. There was only one left. The others were occupied by solitary souls just like me finding solace from the daily drudgery in a book or magazine. Taking the table by the window, I pushed aside the discarded heap of newspapers. The rain lashed against the glass panes. I watched the poor hapless souls outside with hands splayed over bent heads, rushing to take cover under the green awning.

A young, harried mother in a grey sweatshirt and sweatpants with a little girl stopped at a magazine rack near my table. She picked up a glossy *US Weekly* magazine with a photo of a famous couple in the midst of a divorce and she was soon absorbed in one of the articles. The girl tugged at her mother's hand, whispered something then pointed to the table with stuffed rabbits sitting next to a stack of Beatrix Potter books. She stood in stark contrast to her disheveled mother. Her hair was carefully curled and clipped up at the sides with big pink bows which matched her white dress embroidered with delicate pink rose buds that were peeking out beneath her black wool coat. The young girl, who must have been three or four, caught me staring at her. She looked up at me coyly then rubbed her nose and hid behind her mother's leg but I could still see the edge of her coat and her little foot in a black patent-leather shoe.

The little girl finally peeked out from behind her mother's leg and cast me a curious look. I smiled but she looked away with an upturned nose. As I turned my attention back to my book, I noticed a splash of red coming in from the front door in my peripheral vision.

Distracted, I turned to look. It was her! The red plaid coat was unmistakable. She was shaking out her umbrella as she walked in. I strained to see her face but her hair tumbled forward like a heavy, black curtain veiling her profile as she continued to shake her umbrella. Then she made a sudden left turn and all I could see was her back again disappearing behind some shelves. I sipped my coffee and waited to see if she'd reappear. It wasn't until a full fifteen minutes later when she emerged from the shelves carrying a plastic bag that I had a clear view of her face.

A heart-shaped face with perfect skin, high cheekbones and a petite nose paired with wide, voluptuous berry colored lips. Her lips were slightly parted to reveal a small overbite. Wide, almond shaped hazel eyes scanned past me, her brow furrowing as she searched for an available table. It was perfect. I was even carrying a book that would make me look smart. I hastily stood and gestured toward the empty seat across from me but she was already turning. Little shards of crushed hope stabbed at my heart as I watched her walk away once again.

That would have been the end of my little story if fate hadn't intervened on my behalf. It was a series of events beginning with losing my job that placed me in Georgia's path once again. After I was evicted for not having enough to pay the rent, I was hopping from apartment to apartment, crashing on the sofas of various friends for months when Mike took pity on me and set me up with a friend of his who needed someone to look after his apartment. An old friend of Mike's family, Clarence, decided he wanted to move to Morocco to study some pottery technique for a year and needed someone to water his potted cyclamen and orchids. Mike signed me up and I got to live in a loft for a year in Dumbo, Brooklyn rent free.

A few months after I settled in, Georgia moved in next door. I was locking my door when I recognized the lilting voice that rose up from the stairwell.

Sunlight streamed in through the open red front doors, as movers drenched in sweat carried a baby grand piano up two flights of stairs to the apartment next to mine. She followed apologizing, as she directed them to a sunlit corner of her apartment that



had a most perfect view of the Brooklyn Bridge. I paused in her doorway, stunned to see her again, my eyes taking in her lithe, lovely figure in a thin yellow sundress. There was such vibrancy in the way she moved. Then she turned and caught me staring. I felt my cheeks growing hot like an idiot. She smiled and reached out her hand, saying, “Hi, I’m Georgia. You must be my new neighbor.”

I shook her soft hand and glanced sharply at the huge diamond rock on her finger. It felt like it took me forever to finally say, “I’m Jimmy.” Then I just stood there. When I couldn’t think of a single thing to say, I left.

It had been a few months since I had been in a relationship and that was probably a good thing because Todd and Mike complained that whenever I got involved with a girl, I practiced less and stopped writing. So I was determined to push out thoughts of Georgia. Besides, I had to focus on writing new songs for our next set. We were trying to land more gigs. We only had a few and they were the late night ones past one in the morning, a time when the crowds mostly fizzled out. At our last gig, there was only one member in the audience. And he was the drummer of the band who played before us. He only stuck around because we borrowed his drum sticks.

I’ve learned to write music anywhere. A song might come to me while I’m sitting in a park, getting coffee, crossing the street or hearing a phone ring. I’m not kidding, the ideas, the inspirations for my songs are everywhere. In the back pocket of my jeans, I always carried a notepad with a thick black rubber band wrapped around it to hold in place my pen. It’s where I’d jot down verses, chorus lines or refrains whenever they hit me. Sometimes it would be a few hastily scrawled notes on a bar napkin coaster that

would end up being the bridge of a song I'd later write. Once an idea hits you and you don't take it down, there's a good chance it's never coming back.

I've had that happen to me. When I was still working for the Daily Grind, I once woke up with a fully formed song in my head. In my dream, I saw the lyrics laid out before me, on a sheet of paper. I woke up, reached for my pad but it wasn't on my night stand. It was three in the morning and I didn't feel like getting up to fetch it from the living room table. So I just lay in bed thinking of the song, playing it over and over again in my head. I told myself, I'd write it down later. Then the song lulled me back to sleep. When my alarm clock later rang, I glanced at it then realized I was late for work. I raced to brush my teeth, put my pants on, and grab my bag. By the time my feet hit the cold concrete the song was long gone.

As I neared the park where old men played chess and kids giggled as they ran through spray fountains, I kept picturing that huge diamond rock on Georgia's finger and had to shake that image out of my head. Then I sat on a bench trying to summon the muse and jotted down the words or notes that came to me. Sometimes hearing the beat of water spraying or the thump of wheels against the tar or even the way music blaring out of a car window fades out as the driver speeds away will give me an idea for a riff or verse. I liked writing outdoors so I could feel that mystical sensation of the words springing to life by a pen that was touched by a passing zephyr.

When I felt inspired enough for a sit down session with my acoustic guitar, I headed back home. I walked up through the unsettled dust on the staircase lit up by shafts of orange light streaming in from the transom behind me. The hallway was mostly silent except for the occasional shuffle of boxes and the unwrapping of newspapers, all muted by my new neighbor's closed door. Feeling refreshed, I entered my empty apartment. My keys jingled as they hit the kitchen table. Then I tossed my notepad on my bed as I unbuttoned my shirt. Through the walls, I could hear Georgia's fiancé call out "Where did you put my mug/tie/glasses?" Then someone turned on the stereo and the lone, mournful violin of Mozart's concerto number three in G minor rose through the static and drifted towards me. My dad made sure that I learned the full range of music which meant I knew the repertoires of classical composers as well as those of famous rock bands.

As the rest of my building started preparing for dinner, I switched on my recorder and strummed away a few chords until I hit the right notes to start me off on a song. The light from the setting sun filled the loft with a rich, golden light. Immersing myself in my music was always a way I lost track of the rest of the world. There were times after a good song writing session that I'd come out of my apartment surprised that there were other people living in my building.

I guess that's how Georgia kept startling me. She appeared in front of me at odd hours of the day, the times I'd either be heading out for practice or coming home from gigs. Once I was coming home at four in the morning when she appeared in the dimly lit hallway, holding a large plastic bag, swollen full of garbage. Cartons of Chinese take-out

containers strained against the white plastic. At first, she didn't notice me coming up the stairs and so I stopped at this vision of her in a pair of navy, boxer shorts and a tight, white tank top. I found my eyes resting on the swell of her firm breasts. Her eyes widened in surprise when she noticed me. With flushed cheeks, she darted to the garbage compacter room down the hall. I listened to the sound of the door creaking open and closing behind her. Pausing for a moment, I slowly tucked my keys into my pocket, hoping for another glimpse of her. But then I realized how ridiculous I looked just standing there in the hallway so I unlocked my door and headed inside.

Burning with that vision of her, I wondered if I could think of some reason to knock on her door that didn't seem too obvious. But I didn't want to look like a fool. Lying in bed, as the shadows of trees were cast across my ceiling by passing headlights, I listened acutely for any movement from her apartment that came through the walls. The television was on but I could only hear the rumble it and not what channel it was on. I pictured her in that white tank top and shorts brushing her teeth, drinking a glass of water and walking around barefoot in her room until I couldn't hear much else.

### CHAPTER 3 - MOVING INTO DUMBO

The day I moved into Clarence's pad, my parents drove down from New Jersey in the old blue minivan to help. They both stood silently in the foyer taking in the sight; the wall to ceiling glass windows with a sunlit view of the Brooklyn Bridge, the exposed brick walls and the newly refinished marble and granite kitchen. Clarence, the owner, also bought the condo above and converted the two into one huge loft. There was a winding metal staircase leading up to a spacious bedroom.

We all sensed it, that stark contrast. The part of Brooklyn I grew up in was the kind of neighborhood where if you heard a loud bang in the middle of the night, it wasn't some backfire exploding out of the exhaust system of an old truck. In the morning, there was usually fluttering yellow plastic strips cordoning off a chalk drawing on the sidewalk.

My dad let out a low whistle as he walked around the living room.

"So let me get this right, Clarence is letting you stay here rent-free so you can water his flowers?"

"Yeah."

"What does he want from you?" was his next question.

"Nothing Dad. He just wants me to take care of his place. It's only for a year."

"Honey, we just entered a whole different world," my mother said in a hushed voice.

“No kidding. Someone who doesn’t have to worry about mortgage payments for a whole year,” scoffed my dad.

“Where do you want your grandma’s dresser,” my mom asked.

“Up against that wall would be great.”

“You and I are carrying it up here because your dad has strict orders to not do any heavy lifting.”

“What happened?”

“Rose, it’s no big deal.”

“No big deal?” She gave him a stern look then turned to me and said, “Your father is minutes away from a heart attack. All those years of smoking ain’t helped him much either.”

Seeing the look on my face, she softened her tone, “Don’t worry honey, I have him on a very strict diet which the doctor gave me. He’ll be just fine.”

My dad was made to rest on the sofa while my mom and I carted up the bureau. It was the only piece of furniture I had. Being homeless for a couple of months meant I had been living out of a duffel bag, knapsack and suitcase. When I landed Clarence’s pad, I found that he had left all his clothes were still in his bureau and closets so there wasn’t much room for my stuff. I told my mom that I put the Ikea furniture she bought for me in storage. She didn’t know I lost my last apartment and that I sold all my furniture for about a week’s worth of meals.

After we carried in the chest, my dad stood up and looked around the place once more. Then he placed his hand on my shoulder, smiled and said, “You know Jimmy, one day you too can own a place like this.”

He was always saying stuff like that. He had more faith in my musical talent than I did. When you had about five people come to your shows night after night, you start losing hope. But my dad never lost hope. He was also the one who inspired me to get into music. He always said that anyone can get better with enough practice but few are born with a gift. Geniuses are just born that way. They start out painting, playing music, playing ball or writing on a higher plane than everyone else. He said I was one of those geniuses. But he was the one who was the real genius.

Only a few people knew how talented my dad was. He was like a hidden gem in an abandoned coal mine. He could listen to any tune on the radio and strum it out on the guitar without missing a note. We’ve listened to him play the banjo, guitar, bass, violin and even a viola like he was Labrador slick wet in a stream, chasing down a bird. But if you passed him on the street, you never would have guessed.

One spring day, my second oldest brother Mick brought home his friend’s cello for my dad to try. The way my dad studied that thing reminded me of a mechanic peering into the hood of a shiny Mercedes. He plucked at the strings here and there then the next thing we knew, he was holding the bow and that cello was making a deep, throaty, mournful noise, singing to us of what a hard day it had. My mom stopped washing the dishes, wiped her wet hands on a towel and watched my dad, her eyes glowing. Then that cello whipped up a little jig and us boys laughed along, dancing on

grandma's moth ball scented carpet. Only my oldest brother Robert, always a stickler, wouldn't join in on the fun. He stood in the doorway, arms folded and declared that my dad was lacking proper technique.

Robert, the oldest, aced all his classes and Mick was a star basketball player, played baseball and was popular with the ladies. By the time I came along, I found the field to be crowded. At least my brothers were never all that into the music. They sort of rebelled against my dad's rigid approach to it. Especially when he tried to get them to practice guitar all the time and listen to all sorts of music which was about the time they gave up. Robert was more into his schoolwork and books and the others into their sports. I wasn't all that into sports and I didn't get very good grades at school except for English composition. Music was where I found my passion. With my dad's guitar in my hand, none of that stuff really mattered anymore. And that's where my brothers got jealous of me. When my dad watched me play, his face glowed with a pride that outdid any of his former praise of them.

That glow of pride was what kept me going everyday as I practiced riffs and later on arpeggios. He had me playing everything from classical guitar to jazz before letting me attempt rock. He said I had to build a foundation first and appreciate the history of music.

Unfortunately, that rigidity of his didn't apply to just the music. He took a whole lotta things real seriously. If my mom asked me to take out the trash, and I said, "I'll do it later." Sure enough, about two hours later there'd be a knock at my door and my dad would be standing there saying, "It's *now* later." And if I made a mess out of anything,



he'd make sure I cleaned it up. If I was going somewhere he insisted I be there fifteen minutes early. If I told a friend that I'd bring something by the next day like a comic book, my dad would be checking up on me about it. He said I had to keep my word. He never cut me any slack. I started becoming more secretive soon afterwards, making sure he was out of hearing distance if I made plans with friends on the telephone. Sometimes when my dad complained about me not doing my homework, my mom would step in and defend my God-given natural talent for procrastination. She said maybe it was linked to my creative mind.

“Honey, don't turn him into some OCD nutcase like your cousin Betty,” she said one night in their bedroom as I was sneaking past to go meet a friend to go skateboarding.

Later, I asked Robert what OCD was and he happily explained, loving any excuse to show off that big fat brain of his. So to grant some validity to my mother's argument, I began obsessively locking the door ten to fifteen times when I was sure my dad would notice. I'd even get up during dinner and check the stove at least three times to make sure it was turned off. I also volunteered to clean the table afterwards. When I spent at least twenty minutes making sure that the table was spotless, flicking off crumbs and picking up to inspect imaginary hair, my dad began laying off on me.

“Son, why don't you go play some guitar?” he said, taking the rag out of my hand. It was then that I learned about the power of a good performance. Whatever persona you took on you had to make people believe that you were who you pretended to be.

My dad was in a blues band in his younger years. My mom had the photo of his band framed and hung it up in the basement. There he was with Uncle Tommy and Uncle George and some other guy, a long-haired shaggy looking dude. One night I asked him, “Why didn’t you guys keep playing?”

“We had jobs, wives then kids and then we just didn’t have the time anymore.”

I kept pestering him about his old band until one day he announced that they were all coming over one night for a revival practice. Uncle Tommy arrived with his bass strapped across his back and Uncle George carted in his drums. The only band member missing was the shaggy looking pianist from the photos. No one knew what happened to him.

Uncle Tommy and Uncle George have visited us plenty enough but none of us boys ever saw them jam together. So I was surprised when my dad locked me out of the basement. He said they were all rusty around the edges and he didn’t want to make my ears bleed. That didn’t seem to bother Mick and Robert all that much. They said they couldn’t care less about hearing a bunch of old farts playing old fart music.

But me? During dinner, I whined and bitched about being locked out. I barely touched my ham and peas and used the tines of my forks to sculpt a volcano out of my mashed potatoes.

“Hey Picasso, will you eat that already?” demanded my mama as she snapped her fingers in front of my eyes. She then handed me some corn bread which I tore up into tiny pieces and sprinkled over my green pea spewing volcano.

“These ashes represent the rain of my despair,” I intoned which caused Mick to chuckle because I sounded just like Robert.

“Oh hush Jimmy, sometimes you just need to give your dad some space,” said Mama who then got up to put away the dishes. That wasn’t much of a persuasive argument for a seven year old. Instead, I had an idea. I raced upstairs, dug into my toy chest and found the little detective kit in a faux leather case that Mick got me for Christmas. While Mama clattered away some pots and pans in the kitchen, I picked open the lock on the basement door. I closed the door and crept down those steps real careful not to step on the part of the wood that creaked. Then I sat on the third step so that anyone glancing up couldn’t see me except for maybe the outline of my sneakers in the dark. Sitting there I learned the real reason why my dad locked the door on me.

The heavy cigarette and cigar smoke burned my nostrils so that I had to hold my breath or I would have coughed. I buried my nose in my blue t-shirt sleeve and craned my neck to peer down at the group below.

Uncle Tommy was a tall, thin, all sharp angles kind of guy with shoulders perpetually stooped as though he needed protecting from the chill of summer. He started in on how his wife was haranguing him about all the time he spends at the pub. Uncle George was nodding along as he drank his beer. He had long straggly grey hair and a figure that spoke to his attachment to beer. Out of them all, only my dad struck the imposing figure with his aviator sunglasses, brown leather bomber jacket and ramrod posture he got from the Marine Corps.

“My neighbor is growing hops again,” Uncle George said when Tommy finally got tired of talking about his wife. Uncle George taught me what hops were. For my fifth grade science fair project, he had me brew beer using different strains of yeast which nearly got me expelled when I started handing out little cups to anyone who visited my table.

“Oh yeah?” said Tommy.

“He’s got a whole bunch in his backyard and we’re aiming to brew them up in a big batch this fall.”

“How’s that going?”

“Last year, he got one of his batches up to ten percent.”

“Pretty impressive,” remarked my dad as he rolled himself another cigarette.

“I said to him, “Now that’s a sipping beer!”

Then Uncle Tommy changed the topic to, “So I think it’s getting time to replace the old Chevy. The engine’s just about to give out.”

When they started in on work, their boring office jobs in grey moldy cubicles, it took all my self-control to not run down there screaming, “Shut up and play something!” It was enough to make someone want to go kill himself. If they weren’t going to play then they should at least be *talking* about music. I mean that was about the time I learned that almost every pop song out there used the same four chords, D major, A major, B minor and G major in the same progression. They could have been talking about fascinating stuff like that.

Just then something distracted me. There was a line of ants crawling up the cracked basement wall headed to that crack underneath the basement door where they were planning to raid the kitchen. So I took out my frustration on those ants, squishing them as they tried to get past me.

My dad hated ants. My mama loved to tell the story how he got stuck on the Amtrak one time next to some guy who would not stop grousing about his alimony payments to his ex-wife. Finally my dad interrupted the guy with, “Hey buddy, you think you’ve got problems? Well, let me tell you. I’ve got ants in my house.”

He’s tried everything short of napalm trying to kill off those ants. We nearly choked on the fumes of the insecticides he’d spray all over the house. And they still came back year after year.

I didn’t hate ants but I sure didn’t understand them either. One summer, my dad took us all out for a barbeque in the park on a Saturday. We were sitting at one of those green picnic tables when we noticed this poor little shlub of an ant carrying one of Mick’s crumbs. It carried that thing all across the table and when it finally got from one end to the next, Mick put a leaf in front of it and carried it back to the end of the table where it had to start its journey all over again. Robert put down the book he was reading to regard us. He pushed up the glasses sliding down his glistening nose then said, “You know, that ant crossing this table is like you walking across Giant Stadium with a bolder on your back.”

“I don’t ever want to be an ant,” I announced, remembering that Aesop fable my mom used to read to me about the ants who worked all summer so they weren’t starving like the grasshoppers come winter. I hated that story.

“I’d much rather be a grasshopper. You get to play music all day long and not have to lift a thing.”

My dad flipped a burger, handed me one and said, “Yeah but son, just remember someone has to bring home the bread.”

When I killed the last of those marching ants, I felt into my pocket and pulled out the silver guitar pick my dad gave me. Even on that dark staircase, it managed to catch the refracting light from the halogen lamp next to my dad and sparkled. It was a guitar pick made out of pure soft silver not ever meant to be used, an ornamental thing. A guitar string would rip it to shreds over time. My dad tossed it to me when he was going through a box of his old stuff and said it wasn’t much use to him. If an object didn’t serve multiple purposes like a Swiss army knife, he didn’t want to hold on to it. But every time I touched it, it never failed to bring me luck. There was a slight indentation in the center from all the times I’ve rubbed my thumb across that shiny surface.

I glanced down the staircase and saw my dad finally pick up his guitar.

Uncle George took the cue and settled behind his drum set, holding a pair of wooden sticks. And Uncle Tommy put out his cigarette, pulled the strap of his bass over his head and onto his shoulder.

“What should we start with?” asked Tommy, looking up at my dad.

“Let’s do a couple of those Robert Johnson covers. Start with Kind Hearted Woman, Sweet Home Chicago and then Ramblin on my mind,” my dad said, positioning his fingers over the fifth fret of his acoustic guitar. Robert Johnson was heavy on the thumb work and so my dad had his poised over the sound hole, not a pick in sight. Then like a greyhound pawing at the starting box, he immediately lunged into the key of A chord startling both Tommy and George into hustling up and joining him. Soon George was banging along on the kick drum, providing a steady back beat and Tommy was playing a three note base line as my dad crooned, “I got a kind hearted woman... do anything in the world for me....”

My dad’s rich mellow voice reached me and I felt the hairs on my arm rise. It was like having your very own private B.B. King concert in your basement. I watched his fingers move up and down that fret board into four five progressions then those diminished seventh chords. With all that complex maneuvering, his fingers flying up and down that guitar, he didn’t strike a bad note. Even Tommy with his three note deal, could barely keep up and I cringed when he hit a sour note. Then there was Uncle George who was growing lazy on the hi-hat cymbals. No one surpassed my dad.

They jammed for a few more songs and then broke off. Tommy was the first to say something like, “Sorry guys but I gotta run home to Tina.” Then George got up and said, “Yeah, I have a long day ahead of me at the office tomorrow.”

The silver pick grew slippery from my perspiring fingers. As I slid my thumb across that glimmering surface, it slipped and the pick went flying through the darkness landing somewhere on the wooden steps below me with a plink. I didn’t have time to go

searching for it because Uncle George and Uncle Tommy were then headed towards the stairs. So I crept back up and locked the basement door behind me and scrambled up to the living room where I pretended to read a magazine.

As my dad said his goodbyes to Uncle George and Uncle Tommy at the front door, I sauntered over to the staircase leading up to our bedrooms on the second floor and sat on the steps. Those men patted my dad's back and thanked him for the beers. A warm summer breeze drifted through the doorway and I could hear the crickets and the cicadas conducting their little orchestras outside. But I bet those guys were oblivious to the harmonies of nature surrounding them since their minds were so full of dissonant thoughts of work, decaying cars and their decaying lives.

My dad stood there for a moment watching his band mates start up their cars, with a forlorn expression on his face. He then slowly closed the door and locked it. Turning around, he saw me sitting there on the stairs. He rubbed his chin then reached into his pocket, pulled out my silver guitar pick and handed it to me. My cheeks reddened as I took the bright metal from his calloused fingers and shoved it back in my pocket. Then he smiled, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Come on Jimmy, go grab my Fenders and let's jam."



## **BIOGRAPHY**

Janet Myoung Ha Poirot was born in New York City and grew up in Brooklyn. She received her Bachelor's degree in English from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and worked in New York for several years as a fixed-income financial analyst for J.P. Morgan and BlackRock before moving to Virginia. Janet teaches at George Mason University in the BIS program where she's also an academic advisor. She is an intermediate French speaker, loves French food and travels to France once a year to visit relatives. She lives in Virginia with her two young children, husband, a dog and two cats.